Practitioner Development Through Self-direction: The South West London College Counselling Courses[1]

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SYNOPSIS

This paper looks at the nature of the South West London College self-directed counselling courses, which thrived particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. It describes working as a student and then as a tutor on the course. It shows the ways in which students negotiated their own learning contracts on which to base the curriculum. In order to do this, it encouraged students to explore the very nature and qualities embodied in the counselling relationship. On a course in which tutors did not take part in assessment apart from as mentors and guides, it asks how effective was the course in producing competent counsellors, and in devising systems which encouraged inclusion and creativity whilst maintaining standards.

No (one) can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge.

(*The Prophet*, by Kahlil Gibran)

Twenty years' experience of counselling education may make me no more of an expert than those colonials who spent 20 years in India and mistakenly thought they knew the country. However, I have explored this counselling country in different vehicles and over difficult terrain, and I now present my particular, subjective journey.

My association with the radical counselling courses which started at South West London College (SWLC) began in 1976 as a student. Later, I spent ten years on the courses as a tutor. More recently, I have worked as external examiner on other counselling courses and have supervised individuals and groups on diploma courses which have been awarded, or are applying for, accreditation.

SWLC Courses had a programme devised each year by the students on that course. Assessment was by a portfolio of work whose contents were negotiated within the student group and assessed by self and peer assessment. Tutors acted as a support and as a resource,

but did not assess. Workshop topics were suggested by students, and might be facilitated by tutors or students, or a combination of the two. External examiners validated the process and the general standards of the course.

There was always a battle in the large group between what I saw as 'Task' and 'Process' people. Task people wanted to get on with it. They got frustrated with group dynamics and wanted to concentrate on learning the appropriate skills. Process people wanted to pay attention to feelings in the group, to make sure difficulties were brought out into the open, to let strategies for devising the programme emerge.

As in most conflicts, both sides were expressing one whole, and each had vital qualities to contribute. Yet they were always at loggerheads. It seems to me that in recent years, the Task people have won the educational battle. There has been an educational backlash which concentrates on outcomes, at the expense of more subtle qualities, valued by Process people, such as intuitive understanding of another person, patience, unpretentiousness, and trust in the other's potential for wisdom. Qualities which counsellors need for the 'I–thou' communication at the heart of relationships. These attributes come from an openness to self-learning which is hard to convey in a course with primarily functional aims.

Even when courses value personal growth, the demands of the accreditation process put the emphasis on academic achievement in a way which can lead to a high drop-out rate for students' not from a conventional white, middle-class background. This is worrying because, as a Person-centred counsellor, I want to move towards inclusion rather than exclusion. The academic perspective is one useful aspect of learning, but in my experience as tutor and supervisor, it can reinforce feelings of stupidity in people who have not fared well in the school system. I myself was one of these people.

SWLC courses placed emphasis on the fact that we all have our own unique contribution to offer to the community as in the counselling model – it would be ludicrous for counsellors to value clients only for their academic achievements. SWLC attempted to encourage individuality, while also promoting communal responsibility – to celebrate our differences and also to see them as indispensable parts of the whole.

My Experience as a Student

I was a secondary school teacher when I heard about the South West London College Counselling Courses. I was feeling trapped. The system seemed to be imparting information from the notes of the teacher to the pens of the students without passing through the minds or hearts of either.

As a student, SWLC was a revelation to me. I kept waiting to feel the 'iron fist' hitting me with hidden rules and restrictions, but instead found that the 'velvet glove' had reality, leading me by the hand, helping me look for my own answers

The self-directing nature of the course was developed in the mid-1970s by Brigid Proctor, influenced by John Heron's Human Potential Resources Project at Guildford, and by Gaie Houston and Tom Osborn from the self-directing Diploma in Applied Behavioural Science at the then Polytechnic of North London. When I joined the course, Brigid and Gaie were the tutors, together with Pat Milner, whose ideas have been influential in the Person-centred movement. It was not a diploma course at the time, and there was a heated group discussion about the possible effects of a diploma on the course. Would it make us too keen to get the qualification and forget about qualities of inner learning? Would an academic assessment destroy the fluid and creative nature of the course?

These concerns now seem far from today's emphasis on standards and accountability. But in them we were detecting the move towards professionalization. What we were questioning was whether a diploma would mean that the outcome of the course would determine its content, rather than this being open to negotiation based on our learning needs. I appreciated the arguments about values, and I knew I needed a recognized proof of my competence so that I might get a job in counselling and escape the classroom grind. The group consensus was to go for the diploma. We invited an Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) inspector to meet us, so that, together with the tutors, we were instrumental in making ours the first diploma year of the course.

In those heady days, of the late 1970s, we were very well-funded. Course fees were low and free individual supervision was included. We only had to name a model we wished to learn about, and a top figure from this field would be engaged for a six-week workshop. These were the days of ILEA, of experimentation, of creativity.

We Were All Inventing the Course Together
I had a degree in Education, and I had loved academic study, but this course showed me a very different way of learning. As a secondary school 'failure', leaving school at 15 with no qualifications, I had thrived on interest and encouragement from tutors in my life as an adult student.

To feel I could be trusted to define my own educational goals and standards by tutors I respected was a surprise, a delight, and a challenge. Sometimes, it's true, I yearned to be told what to do, to be given marked essays, to place myself in a hierarchy with the other students. To have my image of myself defined by others.

But I felt alive and excited, and I adopted the course philosophy with gusto. I was never forced to read a book or produce an essay, although when I asked about essays, I was told it was fine for me to submit them, and the tutors would give me feedback if I did.

I Learned through My Experience

I learned that education could be fun. I remember a Gestalt workshop where we role-played being our five-year-old selves on our first day at school. Several of the men, usually very respectable professionals, behaved in a way which got quite out of hand. In their 'boy' roles they threw everybody's shoes out of the first-floor window, actually breaking a pane of glass. The community had a meeting about this to decide what should be done, and I recall being in a delegation to appease the manager of the site so that we should not be evicted. This is an extreme example, but it also shows the communal feeling of responsibility for the actions of individuals.

I had always seen myself as a writer, but had never written unless directed to do so. Now, poetry poured out of me like lava from a volcano. I once wrote 14 poems on the tube home, each about a student on the course. This ability has never deserted me, and I am now a performance poet, a playwright and novelist as well as a counsellor.

I learned not to impose limits on my life, that I had a right to happiness and personal fulfilment, that there is always more to learn. I learned that life is very serious and you can always get a good laugh out of it.

Through triad work and group discussion I learned the Person-centred approach. I began to recognize my intolerance of people who were defensive and not open, as I believed I was. In a course which questions conventional attitudes, those with traditional opinions can find themselves isolated and feel misunderstood. Traditional power structures were turned on their heads.

The Person-centred approach became my grounding, my 'counselling backbone'. It was new to me, and it contradicted my previous psychodynamic model. I also became a bit of a zealot of non-directiveness. We were the 'non-directive mafia' fighting the Freudian baddies for the rights of clients. We shared anecdotes about analysts who knitted, slept or wrote shopping-lists behind the recumbent backs of patients on couches.

As the first Diploma year, we had to devise our own assessment system. In fact, each course in later years devised their own system. I recall finding it daunting – we had to get down to the bones of what counselling values are, and try to work out how to assess skills and what makes them good enough, bearing in mind the welfare of future clients. We set up Portfolio Groups – of up to five people, giving each other support and feedback on our written work and on counselling skills.

When it came to portfolio time, I got into the normal state of total resistant terror. I used Gestalt to help me, and wrote a piece called 'Gestalt Voices', which began, 'I feel my knot of fear...' and in this way got it all out of my system until I began to think clearly. I included these murky thoughts in the portfolio as well as lots of my new-found poetry. And I also produced three essays on TA, Gestalt and the Person-centred approach, which the external examiners asked to use as teaching aids on other courses.

I did this after at last embarking on extensive reading and then deciding that I would talk about what each of these models meant to me. It seemed more in keeping with the course philosophy than 'sitting at the feet' of Berne, Perls or Rogers, and merely regurgitating their words. The fact that I would be writing about my experience of these models freed me from the despairing 'I know nothing' syndrome. Because I did know about my experiences, successful or otherwise. And I could describe them if I meditated on that which 'lies half asleep in the dawning of (my) knowledge'.

Drawing out that 'half asleep knowledge' is the kernel of the Person-centred way of teaching, and the kernel of the counselling process itself. I appreciated having to write a portfolio. Because of my fear of not being good enough, I produced a portfolio which surpassed my expectations.

The course ended with a residential assessment weekend. Several students were referred. One repeated the final year. Does this mean we were astringent enough as self and peer assessors? Who were the people who did not pass? Was it easier to confront vulnerable students than those with more personal power on the course? Can tutors handle the process any better than peers? Can you devise a purely objective assessment procedure when counselling skills depend so much on sensitivity and self-awareness? How can you measure such phenomena except subjectively, in which case how can you not be biased in your assessment?

I know that the assessment weekend was a peak experience for me, and the next day I went for an interview

as a school counsellor in a boys' comprehensive and, in the heat of achievement, did remarkably well and got the first job in my life which I actually enjoyed.

My Experience as a Tutor on SWLC Counselling Courses

Three years after qualifying I was appointed as tutor during a self-directed interview. This was an experiment in which we, as twelve applicants, had to devise a method of being interviewed for five vacancies. This was hard, as interviews are by nature competitive and do not lend themselves well to co-operation. The experiment was not repeated in that form.

The Residential Planning Weekend
As the courses developed, core structures were added, such as a counselling skills module, a video to be self and peer assessed at the end of each year, and access was given to current students to look at past students' programmes and portfolios. It was always a question as to whether to constantly get students to 'invent the wheel', or if we gave too much information, would we inhibit them from inventing new, unique structures?

During the early years, the programme was entirely open to student planning. Each year started with a residential planning weekend where the main object was to enable each student to make a learning contract and to plan the first term.

Each student year group would develop a very individual group personality. These early stages were like a birth, and the skilfulness with which the delivery was handled determined the ensuing healthy (or otherwise) character of the group as it developed over its three years of life. The staff team needed to be balanced between being able to nurture to create safety and having the ability to energize in order to encourage and motivate students to risk planning their programme creatively.

There was a staff/student ratio of 1:12, and student groups varied in size from 35 to 50. One year on the residential weekend, students were divided into two groups of 35. Was it a mistake to invite both groups to the same residential venue? Students began to get suspicious about why they had been put into a particular group. Meetings were held, and I remember 20 groups of three/ four dispersed over the sun-dappled lawns in intense discussion.

Thinking about it now, I try to recall our role as staff that weekend. Did we challenge students about issues of boundary testing, rebellion against parental figures,

power struggles? And if we had, would that have been a manipulative ploy? As a staff group we came from diverse backgrounds, from psychodynamic, Person-centred, family systems, Gestalt. But we were all in our way committed to self-direction. We answered practical questions and let the group throw up its natural leaders, who suggested structures to aid discussion and decision making. At length, the group decided that they would join into one large community. We as staff joined into a six-strong staff group with a community group of 70 students. It felt like a risk, but this group was so successful that the staff decided to repeat the experiment, making the next intake also comprise 70 students. However, this time, the group found it hard to gel.

The missing factor was student choice. How important it is for each of us to feel listened to and heard, and our wishes acted upon. What a stimulus for self-motivated learning this is.

And it is not as simple as that. Students and staff had chosen to join this course knowing its central philosophy of self-direction. This commitment provided the opportunity for an underlying element of goodwill, which usually got us through the sticky moments. Students came on this course expecting to be self-directing, sometimes fearing this, but also on the lookout, as I had been, for the iron fist of hidden rules.

Staff set up structures to enable students to work out their learning contracts and course programme. This might all go according to plan, or it might be changed by issues which arose from the community. This is because our Task was to produce a course design, but the process was to give students a taste of self-direction and to help them see how they functioned in a community group.

In fact, detailed plans made on the weekend were often scrapped by students on the first week of term and a new design formulated. As if the supposed task was secondary to the community and individual learning. As if the experience of negotiating, challenging, experiencing fear, anger, discomfort and joy was where the real learning lay.

I noticed that devising this new programme was often very fast, very clear and co-operative. Once the underlying issues had been faced and dealt with, carrying out the task became a simple matter.

Course Self-design
The Life Map
On the planning weekend, staff would provide group experiences to help focus on individual learning needs. One such was a Life Map. After drawing a map of key

life experiences, they were asked to list resources they brought to the course – for example, looking after young children at home, or running a small business, entails management skills and patience. The map could also cover the future and ask the questions:

- Where do you see your life going?
- What does this mean about what you want to learn?
- What topics might you want included as a participant in a workshop?
- What might you want to teach...
    - > in an ongoing workshop?
    - > in a one-off community workshop?
    - > on your own?
    - > with fellow students?
    - > with staff?
    - > with a mixed staff/student group?

These issues would be aired with partners, in groups of three and four and more and in the big group. Over the first few weeks of the course, this map would be used to write the individual learning contract. This would be the basis of assessment for the portfolio of work to be assessed at the end of the course.

Chinese Procession

After a short meditation on what sort of workshop might best meet an individual's learning needs, each student would write their preference on a large sheet of paper. For example, someone might write 'Person-centred' on a sheet, another might write 'Disabilities'. Each would hold up their sheet and parade around the room, looking at others' sheets to find similarities, talking to students or staff they hoped might facilitate, and ending up with several viable groups.

There were various issues which might make the choosing of workshops difficult. First, there was the issue of whether tutors would declare their specialization. The thinking went like this: If I declare my specialization, students will be attracted through their anxiety to choose this rather than devise a workshop more suited to their needs, say on cultural diversity or how differing theories of counselling hang together. They may also hold back from offering workshops of their own or supporting other students to offer workshops.

Then there was the individualistic trap. In the offer of self-direction is the hidden promise that at last we can all get what we want and not have to bother about anyone else. So if only one person wanted a workshop on work with adolescents and nobody else did, that person could hold up the proceedings in great disappointment that her/

his needs were not being met. Negotiation could assist – they could join a similar group, engage in private study in workshop time, or make a bid at the next planning session. But the underlying cause might be a feeling of betrayal – 'The course said it would meet my needs!' I remember finding this confusing. Because we were rejecting martyred selflessness, would we just be totally selfish and inconsiderate? I now think of the words of Rabbi Hillel, written in the sixth century:

If I am not for myself, then who is for me?
And if I am only for myself, then what am I?
And if not now, when then?

In the age of self-assertion, the first line is a revelatory contradiction to childhood oppression, but without the second line, community and society collapses.

The Programme

Two aspects of the course which had to be decided were, first, the structure of the day, and, secondly, the content of the programme. We met on one day a week for five hours.

There was often a similarity in programmes over different years. It was usual for there to be a community group for one hour at the beginning and a support group at the end for an hour. This could also vary; and sometimes a time for free study might be built in. Or one-off student workshops might take place. The differences were important. It was the fact of choice which created energy, excitement and motivation.

During the day there would be one or two workshops. Later, there was an obligatory workshop on counselling skills. Students would then chose workshops, usually based on a particular model. Sometimes, in the first year, there might be 'taster' workshops which introduced different models to enable students to make choices about more in-depth study. This was before the rise of other similarly Integrative courses. When counsellors have practised for some time they do tend to become more eclectic. Students from SWLC often went on to study a model in more depth after leaving the course, but they also had a fairly sophisticated background knowledge of various counselling techniques. I went on to train in Psychosynthesis, as it seemed to me to pull diverse strands of counselling together within a framework that included spirituality.

Decision-making

So in this oasis of negotiation, how were community decisions made? How can you make decisions if you have no strategy for doing so? A straightforward majority

vote meant that a minority of people would be overruled. One system which worked well was to take a 'straw poll' and then to ask those who'd 'lost' to give their views. The majority would then adapt the decision to allow for these reservations. Another system involved going to different parts of the room according to your opinion and conducting a discussion between each section.

A 'fish bowl' might be suggested, in which four or five protagonists sat in an inner circle for a public discussion, with empty cushions for members of the larger community to temporarily join in with comments before returning to their seats. The staff group might sit in the middle to muse on what they were experiencing and thinking about the process, while students could comment from the empty cushions. Sometimes we would stop the discussion and go round the group, with each person sharing their current feelings to see what might be getting in the way.

If discussions become contentious it is likely that this is caused by underlying issues of power and competition. I noticed in my interview for the job of tutor on the course, that I was somewhat loath to endorse another's idea because that could feel like giving up power. Decisions about assessment procedures provoked much anxiety and regression and if that was acted out but not directly expressed then we would sit in the group for hours feeling stale and stuck – the worse it got the harder it was to move.

The Role of the Tutors – Sharing Leadership
As tutors, we were invested with a lot of power by students. If we made any suggestion it tended to be immediately taken up, as opposed to the arguing which went on about the ideas of fellow students.

I stayed on the courses for ten years, because they were continually surprising, enlivening and challenging. Each year had a different personality and would draw from me my own new resources and learning. In spite of this, the role of the tutor could be confusing at times. Because of the students' eagerness to adopt our ideas, I often held back on my own spontaneous leadership in order to leave space for them to take power. But the tutors also acted as models of group behaviour, so was I modelling passivity – or presenting a blank screen and encouraging transference? When students chose which tutor-led workshops to attend, I felt some pressure to sell my wares to the populace. It was hard not to feel competitive with other tutors.

I suspected that students could sense these things,

unconsciously – or perhaps it was obvious. When there are uneasy issues which do not feel safe enough to confront, they prevent clear group decisions being made.

Although we wanted to celebrate difference, counselling in this country has tended to be a well-meaning white, middle-class profession. In later years I came to realize that it is not enough to expect all groups to fit into the expectations of this 'mainstream'. People of colour, for example, who felt subtly excluded, could protest – to the confusion of the 'well-intentioned' whites. Since then, in Re-evaluation Co-counselling, I have realized the value of working on esteeming our own identities and working on our own feeling of being oppressed. It is from this hurt place inside us that we hurt and oppress and exclude others.

When difficult issues were being faced in the community, staff teams could be a useful source of support for tutors. When we worked well together as staff, it could feel like being allowed to play with your best friends all day long. Sometimes, especially when there were questions of cutting back on staffing, or issues of inequality, our fears could exacerbate rivalries between us. We as a staff group were also trying to evolve as a co-operative team. Outside pressures affected us in the same way that cutbacks and 'the market' act against co-operative learning today, and can lead to rigidity and insistence on rules and standards at the expense of personal growth.

Self and Peer Assessment
The method by which assessment is made in any educational setting determines the content and learning environment of the course of study being assessed.

The SWLC courses were putting forward a model of counselling education which mirrored the humanistic counselling process. In this model, counselling is a way of helping clients to come to their own wise decisions, based on a concept of inner wisdom and inner resources which we as counsellors respect and encourage.

Humanistic counsellors are discouraged from evaluating their clients, and are urged to encourage clients to evaluate their own lives and choose courses of action. If tutors had been responsible for the final evaluation, this knowledge would be present throughout the course, and the power-sharing dynamic of negotiation and course ownership by students would have been undermined.

In 1985, an action group on assessment was set up, chaired by a tutor, Liz Noyes, with student members Joy Davies, Heather Longhurst and Gillian Thurlby. This group

set out information about the experience of previous course years in the area of assessment. It was available to later courses to use as a starting-point for devising their own assessment procedures.

There were advantages of having a system devised and assessed by students. First, it led to an intense level of debate about the first principles of counselling; to discussions on equal opportunities and how they were affected by counselling methods and approaches. The desire to enable fellow students to gain a diploma was weighed against the need to ensure the safety of future clients.

Underlying this, it faced students with taking responsibility for their community, and taking time and effort to act ethically and with care to enable the learning of others and, in so doing, extend and deepen their own learning.

It was also important to recognize the anxieties brought up around assessment, and how this could get in the way of clear group decision-making. How it could lead to avoidance and prevarication and endless argument. To recognize that in co-operative learning, we have to own our feelings of competition and rivalry, and fear and contempt of others, repeatedly discharge them and find ways of choosing to act in a way that furthers the best interests of ourselves and our community.

Did the System Produce Competent Counsellors?

What Are the Attributes of a Competent Counsellor?
The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines 'competence' as: 'Suitable, fit, proper.... Answering the requirements of the case.' I like this definition because it implies that to be competent is to be flexible and responsive to the needs of differing clients. Each client will have had a different experience of early infant care. So there will be variations in the sort of counselling relationship which each client needs in order to feel safe enough to build trust. Clients from groups which have been oppressed in this society may want to know where a counsellor stands on issues of racism or homophobia, and know that they have permission to challenge the counsellor if they do experience assumptions or prejudices. Counsellors need to have developed sensitivity, empathy and the courage to take appropriate risks.

Another 'requirement' is that counsellors are able to accept and emotionally 'hold' clients, especially when they are distressed, so that they do not feel abandoned

to their feelings of shame, despair or rage. This means that counsellors will have needed to face their own uncomfortable feelings, and recognize how hard it is to develop a sense of compassion towards one's own vulnerability.

The most important safeguard for competence is the ability to reflect honestly on one's practice, to face mistakes and difficulties, to see where one has done well, to accept where there is need for growth and change in oneself – to learn from supervision and to develop an internal supervisor. I have one who sits on my shoulder, noticing what's going on between me and my client; within me; making links, lightly noticing where I might have blocked a client's progress; checking out what might have made me do that; acting on that information.

Richard House, in his article 'Professional vs vocational training in practitioner development' (House, n.d.), writes about the capacity 'for intimacy and relating' which lies at the core of counselling. Behind this needs to be a sturdy framework of applied knowledge and skills. Theoretical models of counselling can fire our enthusiasm, help us make sense of what we are doing, enrich our intelligent understanding of ourselves and our world, and provide a structure to inform our thinking which makes us feel safer and more boundaried. But remember – each model was originated by a person having insights and intuitions based on his or her own preferred personal style. Their formation was often produced in rebellion against previous originators for whom they were disciples. Freud engendered many new theories in rebellion to his own – Jung, Perls, Rogers – I could go on. The model is not a religious tract: it is only useful to counsellors in practice if they can apply it to the benefit of their clients. In my experience and as already mentioned, competent counsellors become more integrative with time in the field. This stems from their ability to learn and grow in their practice. So I would want a requirement that there is an ability to integrate new knowledge.

How Did We Assess and Measure Such Attributes?
First, a community group would get together to devise a Community Contract for assessment. They would brainstorm a list of counsellor competencies to be assessed. Time boundaries were givens because of end-of-term dates, leaving time for appeals and the necessity of giving the external assessors a firm date. But the method chosen for demonstration of competency was left to individuals. It might include poetry, artwork, flow-diagrams, or be entirely on tape. The aim was to include

those for whom academic expression was not their prime ability although they might be excellent counsellors.

The action group mentioned previously defined three core aspects of assessment:

- *Monitoring* – Checking what is going on and reflecting on it, with a view to developing practice over time.
- *Evaluating* – Asking how good the work is. What are the good points? What could be better? According to what values do I evaluate?
- *Assessment* – Deciding in the light of evaluation whether a good-enough level has been reached.

Expectation of content would usually include a personal philosophy, knowledge of theories of counselling, evidence of counselling skills, evidence of self-evaluation and assessment, evidence of peer evaluation and assessment.

In later years in the course, audio and video tapes of counselling sessions would be included, in which the ability to accurately and honestly reflect on the session was more important than the display of skills shown. Each year's community group devised their own system of assessment. There were often groups monitoring and evaluating each aspect of portfolio written work, counselling skills, and personal growth in support groups. Assessment was usually in groups of three – possibly random, sometimes chosen or a mixture of the two. Tutors did not assess, but acted as facilitators of groups or as consultants.

I think the most difficult area was the definition of criteria for assessment. How good is good enough? Does one's knowledge of a person outside of their presentation of their portfolio influence your evaluation of them as a counsellor? Should it do so – is it appropriate, or might it reflect your own prejudices about how well you get on with them? These questions would be just as relevant for tutors assessing students, as for students peer-assessing their fellows.

Did the System Produce Competent Counsellors?
The aim of the system was to mirror the counselling process. My own success or otherwise with clients substantially depends on the client's willingness to engage, work on their obstacles and resistances, motivation to confront painful feelings, and ability to act on their new understanding. In SWLC, the same would apply to students. So some students would thrive in the creative, sometimes threatening, sometimes outrageously boring environment. People like myself, who

had previously felt stupid and incompetent in previous educational settings, could really use the opportunity to learn and grow, and develop skills and potential in counselling and in their lives. The lessened boundaries and lack of firm direction could at times feel difficult and confusing. There was a major emphasis on the need for personal growth on the course, and it was students who found this area difficult who might flounder.

How can I answer this question? Past students on the course have gone on to be leaders in the counselling field, to be honest and ethical counsellors, to be influential in the field of education and management, and to undertake further training. There was an emphasis on congruence, on ethical behaviour, on difficult though honest debate. There was engendered a belief in community and in the importance of giving mutual support, even while struggling to understand the dynamics of the large group and confronting one's feelings within it. The whole evaluation and assessment process rested on being able to give relevant feedback, and one of the main criteria of assessment was in the ability to receive, digest and learn from such feedback.

The main criticism of the course from past students and staff I have contacted has been around the area of theoretical knowledge. The emphasis on the course was certainly on personal development, especially in regard to the capacity for intimacy and relating, and community-negotiated learning. The workshops were experiential, with varying amounts of didactic teaching depending on the style of the tutor. If you were a student who was well motivated to learn, there was a wide range of reading and expertise to learn from. But there was no coercion, and the theoretical aspect was not perhaps given its due weight. There could also have been more emphasis on counselling skills training.

I do feel that students received an education. They learned to be open to new knowledge, to be committed to their own personal and professional ongoing development, and their sense of community showed that it is necessary and acceptable to care for other people and thus to care for the well-being of their clients. SWLC was the beginning of their journey to being competent counsellors.

Messages for Counselling Education Today

What is important is that we need to take into account the philosophical and social effects of the procedures we adopt. At SWLC, the sheer challenge was that we actually

attempted on a daily basis to provide a course which would go against our hierarchical and often oppressive society.

Counselling education today has largely changed its emphasis. We wondered all those years ago whether adopting a diploma would change our values and aspirations. We were concerned that the gaining of a qualification would become an end in itself. Hierarchical learning can mean that power shifts from the students to the accrediting body who set the programme for the tutors, who in turn decide the programme for their students.

I always noticed a battle between those who favoured Task and those who favoured Process. It was hard to agree on a middle way. On some current courses I wonder whether an emphasis on theory and skills might overshadow process values such as personal growth, the capacity for intimacy and relating, and particularly the search for inner wisdom and creative potential. Surely this is what makes the counselling relationship work successfully for clients.

In SWLC, students were allowed to learn at their own pace. On the whole the community worked in a very responsible way. The feeling of being trusted and given the power to choose ways and topics of learning led to a vibrant, exuberant and expressive course – often the highlight of people's week, and a turning-point in their lives.

Knowledge and skills are obviously vital in counsellor training. This needs to be balanced by emphasis on personal development and choice. Perhaps we could ask ourselves, is it possible for there to be too much content, too many academic demands, too many hoops to jump through and not enough positive feedback and support? Let us hope that courses don't become an endurance test in which students learn to be martyrs who do not take enough care of their own well-being and happiness – a well-known ailment of the counselling profession!

SWLC was a course where I and many others felt alive and fulfilled. I hope its influence will live on to make ethics and love a factor in counsellor education and in society.[3] ⑤

Val Blomfield left grammar school at 15, and found to her surprise a more compassionate education at her commercial college. She went on to train as a teacher, and then studied counselling on the SW London College Counselling Course from 1974 to 1976, subsequently teaching on this course for ten eventful years from 1980 to 1990. She later trained at the Psychosynthesis & Education Trust. Val worked as a school counsellor in an Inner London boys' school, and then as a college counsellor. She now has a private therapy and supervision practice in Greenwich, London. Val has an MA in Creative Writing from Sussex University and is a published poet and dramatist. She is currently completing a novel, *Our Little Lives*, under her writing name, Valerie Witonska. She is an ordained Buddhist.

Notes and References

1 The original version of this article appeared as a chapter in the anthology *Implausible Professions: Arguments for Pluralism and Autonomy in Psychotherapy and Counselling*, eds Richard House and Nick Totton, PCCS Books, Ross-on-Wye, 1997, pp. 255–70 (2nd edition, 2011). Warm thanks are due to PCCS Books, to Val Blomfield and to the book's editors for permission to reproduce this important historical contribution in *Self & Society*. Although originally written almost two decades ago now, Val's piece raises questions that are as relevant today as they were 20, or even nearly 40, years ago (eds.).

2 I would like to thank the following past students and tutors of the course for their feedback and help in writing this chapter: Madelyn Brewer, Sheila Broderick, Claudio Calvi, Veronica Denby, Joy Davies, Isha Mckenzie-Mavinga, Martin Jelfs, Grazina Kowzun, Wendy Laird, Richard Lovegrove, Pat Milner, Brigid Proctor, Leisl Silverstone, Janet Stott, Gail Taylor and particularly Penny Travers.

3 We are sure that there will be readers of *S&S* who were either students or tutors on the SWLC course, and we would welcome letters from readers about the course whose memories are stirred by Val's article (eds).

House, R. (n.d.) 'Professional vs vocational training in practitioner development' (mimeo)

Osborn, T. (ed.) *South West London College Counselling Courses – Student Manual*