



# Assessment: Part I

If training is the 'Cinderella subject' within the fields of counselling and psychotherapy (Crago, 2011), *assessment* is the Cinderella subject within training—the one that nobody seems to want to discuss or debate. Why? Partly, I think, because issues of assessment run into the same attitude that bedevils selection for the profession—the belief that training programs ought to reflect the same values as counselling itself, and therefore, all should pass, and nobody should be left feeling inadequate or 'less than' others.

Indeed, in the not too distant past, some would have argued for no written assessment at all—just the trainers' sense that students either 'got it' or didn't (as was the case when I first trained with Marriage Guidance in NSW in the mid-1970s). Now that counselling training is carried out either in universities or in private institutions that are required to demonstrate similar practices and standards, a formal system of assessment, usually graded, has become the norm rather than the exception. As with most changes, I am not convinced we have gained from this shift, but like it or not, it is here to stay. Our best option is to make it work for us—and this demands careful thinking from trainers about what skills, capacities and knowledge we are attempting to foster in students, and how we can come up with assessment tasks that test these meaningfully, while also ensuring our students *learn* from carrying out those tasks. In this latter sense, assessable items should always be an integral part of the curriculum, not something 'tacked on'. Even if we set an examination (which, in my old-fashioned way, I still do, although it counts for no more than 20% of the total marks), it should produce learning as well as demonstrating knowledge and skills.

While some types of assessment task are now well-established and have justified their inclusion in training programs, there remains some uncertainty as to exactly what types of assignment are best suited to counselling training, and what criteria should be employed in evaluating them. I don't think there has been enough clear thinking about this, and the skill of writing imaginative, practice-relevant and assessable assignments is not one that counsellors-turned-trainers necessarily possess. For example, some institutions have conceived of assignments as 'busy-work', asking students to collect a portfolio of 'resources' (like lists of services provided in their local communities), with the best marks going to the biggest collection—a concept of assessment reminiscent of primary school. As I mentioned in my first column in this series (Crago, 2011), many trainers revert to asking students to complete the same assignments they themselves completed as students. Others adapt standard social science essay formats, often poorly suited to the counselling curriculum, e.g., 'Select two models of counselling presented in this unit, and compare their philosophies of change'. Higher education practices often require that a unit outline with curriculum rationale, content, lecture topics, and type of assessment items be written and vetted by committees well in advance of the teaching of the unit in question. When that unit is then farmed out to part-time or sessional lecturers to teach, the result is uneasy, to say the least, with assessment tasks that fail to address the 'unit content', and are out of touch with the realities of what students should be expected to demonstrate at that particular stage of their training.

Overall, our thinking about the assessment of practical counselling skills is better developed than our thinking about the two other vital

areas of the curriculum—theoretical concepts and frameworks, and personal development. It is well accepted that skills should be evaluated via submission of sample counselling sessions with volunteer or real clients talking about genuine issues (some programs still cling to role played simulations, where the 'client' improvises around a set scenario, but hopefully this is becoming rarer, since the dynamics of role-played interviews can be muddy). Meaningful and assessable skills assignments should involve audio or video recording and transcribing of at least a segment of the session, and a full commentary on the segment: what the trainee thought was happening between herself and the client (process), analysis of the trainee's interventions (how appropriate and useful they were, with substantiating evidence), and what the trainee could have done differently.

Provision of a recorded session enables the marker to make his or her own evaluation of the session and then check this against the student's. Normally, more competent students are able to identify most of the same problems as I am, and to articulate these in their commentary. Equally, they are able to spot most of the places where they responded in a useful way to their client, and can show how the client's reaction substantiated the usefulness of what they did. To many people from traditional higher education disciplines, this may sound both subjective and circular, yet highly personal though counselling is, it is perfectly possible for someone with experience, listening to a session (or even hearing about a session), to identify what is going right in the interaction, and to feel confident that the client feels understood and safe enough to move ahead—or not, as the case may be. This is, after all, the basis on which the counselling/psychotherapy field believes in the usefulness of *supervision*, and trusts its value even though the supervisor is only one person, and not present at the session that is being assessed or discussed.

By contrast, weaker students often flail around, trying to find something to critique in their own work, but having little sense of where it is good or bad. Typically, they focus on inessential matters of 'technique' (as they see it) which make little real difference to the counsellor-client relationship ('*I should have used more minimal encouragers*'), or on things they know their lecturers have emphasised ('*I asked a question but it would have been better if I'd given a paraphrase*'). In this latter case, the student is intent on following a rule rather than judging the appropriateness of that rule situationally—by how *this* client responds to *this* intervention. Maybe it didn't matter whether the counsellor questioned or paraphrased (whereas in other situations, or with a different client, it may have mattered quite a bit).

An accurate and useful assessment of a session has to be based on the session as a whole, not simply on how 'successfully' the student has demonstrated particular skills. When I started teaching in one university counselling program, I was astonished to find that students were only required to tabulate a client statement and their own response to it, to assess how 'well' they had demonstrated micro-skills. There was no requirement that the client's *response* to their intervention be transcribed or discussed. This enabled any student capable of parroting textbook formulas like, '*What I hear you saying is ...*' or '*But Mary what are you feeling right now?*' to pass with flying colours—how appropriate the counsellor responses were to the context, and how enthusiastically or not the client received

them, simply did not figure in the assessment. This was getting on for twenty years ago, and I doubt any training program worth its salt would now be so crude, counsellor-centred and mechanical. But that experience showed me how vital it was to train students from the beginning that the minimal unit on which any counselling interaction could be assessed would comprise at least three segments: an initial client statement, a counsellor response, and the client statement following that response. Even minimal units can be misleading, but at least they taught students that 'interventions' take place in interpersonal contexts, not in splendid isolation!

Hence, paying close attention even to a ten or fifteen minute passage of counsellor/client interaction is only part of what needs to be assessed. Students who appear to have done poorly in the transcribed segment come out better in the wider perspective provided by the session as a whole. Conversely, students who produce an impressive-looking set of 'skills' for ten minutes may look considerably less 'on the ball' when the session as a whole shows that their ability to stay with the client is only hit and miss. By implication, following the line I have explored in *A Tale of Two Hemispheres* in this issue, a meaningful and useful assessment task in the practical/skills area must require both the 'close up focus' of the left hemisphere and the broader, sweeping attention of the right hemisphere, with its instinctive sense that overall, this client and this counsellor are doing OK—or that something is not right, despite 'rulebook' interventions by the counsellor.

Of course, such assignments are not easy or quick to mark, which runs counter to the current educational philosophy of today's universities, where time considered sufficient for marking is determined by the number of words multiplied by the number of students—a formula that fails to engage with the time-consuming nature of marking for skills competency. It encourages the setting of less complex assignments in which it is easier for the marker to simply 'tick off the boxes' (*The student used three paraphrases, six minimal encouragers and eight open questions*), rather than have to bother with making an accurate global assessment of a fifty minute session! Unfortunately, the one-size-fits-all principles of instructional design currently in vogue would go for something pretty much like that. Here again, the close focus and rule-governed nature of the left hemisphere of the brain may have led us badly astray.

Above all, what we must look for in assessing practical skills is whether the student can distinguish process from content. Less competent students are, almost without exception, focused on *what* the client says (*'Now what exactly does she mean by that? I bet she means she's scared of losing her job!'*), and on *what* they themselves say in response (*'Have I followed the rules for being a good counsellor?'*), rather than on *how* they respond to their client (*'Why did I choose to ask that question? What was I experiencing that led me to do that?'*), and on *how* their client responds to them (*'She agreed, but she sounded unenthusiastic, and she moved back in her chair'*). Consistent content focus indicates the student is processing almost wholly with the left hemisphere, whereas it is the right hemisphere (with its interest in how things relate to others, and in global, emotionally-gearred responsiveness) that is required for awareness of process. I would suggest, to go a step further, that lack of self-awareness and rigid defences are likely to produce this lack of right-hemisphere engagement—which is where the personal development aspect of the curriculum feeds directly into the skills development aspect. Students who can open themselves to significant learning about self and others via the personal development aspects

of a course, or via concomitant personal therapy, may be able to enhance their capacity to operate at a process level, and draw on right-hemisphere awareness as well as left-hemisphere analysis. Those unable to allow themselves to be vulnerable in this way, and to incorporate new (and sometimes disconcerting) areas of awareness into their self concept, will probably continue to operate at content level. They will be problematic recruits to the counselling profession and (dare I say it!) should probably fail. I consider how we can assess personal development components in my final column for this year.

In the more 'theoretical' areas of study, lecturers too often still set variants of the standard social science essay. For example, 'Select

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two counselling models known to you, and compare their usefulness in dealing with anxiety disorders'. Assignments of this type might be thought to demonstrate how well the student has understood the essential features of the counselling models in question, but of course, 'understanding' can be simulated. Weaker students simply copy chunks of their textbook, an internet site, or some other resource, providing a 'perfect' answer that may, in fact, reflect very little real knowledge—but unless out-and-out plagiarism can be demonstrated, it is difficult to fail such assignments, especially when students adopt the now ubiquitous practice of 'creative paraphrase' (copying chunks, but altering a word or phrase here and there to avoid charges of copying). Part of the problem here, of course, lies in the fact that different theories of counselling ought not to be studied until students have acquired sufficient practical experience to make sense of the distinctions between them—as I have argued in a previous column (Crago, 2012). If we must have units devoted to a range of different theories and models in the first year of the program, at least let's insist that students write about those models *in their own words*. I have always found this reveals rapidly how much a student does understand—which is precisely why students unsure of their grasp of the material seize any opportunity to hide behind direct quotes and close paraphrases of 'experts'. They may not understand what the hell the author is talking about, but at least they sound as if they do!

My principle for assignments focused on theoretical concepts is: First, ask students to apply the concept or principle to their own personalities, or their own lives, e.g., ask students to consider the three principal attachment styles (A, B and C) in relation to their own memories of how they were parented, and an awareness of their current behaviour in an intimate relationship when under stress. Of course, this will not necessarily yield an accurate 'self diagnosis' of the student's attachment style—which in any case cannot be 'self assessed' in this way, as we always make clear—but at least each student will be applying a theoretical template to their own sense of themselves, both in the past and the present. The student's assignment will offer the marker useful pointers to 'gaps' or inconsistencies in the writer's own account, and will point to places where the student has failed to understand the theory fully, e.g., an

infant attachment style can be modified, but most of us do not go from 'C' to 'B' as the result of a single positive experience (getting on well with one's first school teacher!)

The second step, ideally, is to ask students to apply the same template or model to a realistic case example via a print description or a video clip. 'What attachment style do you think this client seems to be demonstrating, based on the information provided in the case study? In what ways do the dynamics of the client's interaction with the counsellor demonstrate, or fail to demonstrate, your impression of the client's attachment style?' Finally, the student is asked to apply the same concept to their work with a client in a skills assignment of the kind discussed above (of which I assume students will complete several, at intervals, over a two or three year program). My rationale is that counselling theory is by definition a body of knowledge designed to inform clinical practice. Given counselling and psychotherapy are 'relational arts' (Crago, 2011b) and self-awareness develops (in childhood and thereafter) in parallel with other-awareness, 'subjective' assessment tasks are not only useful, but vital, to the development of the competencies necessary for effective work with others.

I add a caveat at this point. While most of my students welcomed the task of applying the concept of attachment style to their early and more recent interpersonal experiences, one or two experienced it as invasive and threatening. One highly articulate student, who had graduated already in a health profession, made a formal complaint, alleging the assignment itself, and the way I commented on it, were inappropriate and would not meet the ethical standards of professions such as psychology or social work. Here is a striking example of how rigid personal defences, combined with an established professional identity that confirms those defences, can result in a profound misunderstanding of the nature of a counselling training program, and the central importance of self-awareness within such a program.

In my next column, I turn my attention to the hardest assessment issues of all: to what extent, if at all, can we assess the personal development aspect of a training program?; and if 'failure' is a permissible outcome of a graded training program (as I believe it should be) then who should fail, and on what grounds?

### References

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