



# Training: The Cinderella subject

Training is not an area that commands much excitement among counsellors and therapists. In fact, many readers of *Psychotherapy in Australia* will already have skipped this column! People go through their training, and then they practise. If asked, they might tell you that they enjoyed their course, but looking back, all that theory didn't prepare them for the reality of doing therapy or they might complain about *'those dreadful groups we were forced to do, where everyone sat around and spilled their guts'*. Less often, they might talk about how exciting their training was, adding that after it was over they felt left on their own with the hard work of getting a job, or making a practice viable.

A few, of course, go on to become trainers in their turn, but even they are not usually keen to talk about what they do (except among themselves). Books about training are rare, and publishers are quick to explain that they 'don't sell', whereas books on purportedly new approaches to psychotherapy and counselling do sell, even if they are simply the same old stuff, dressed up in language that promises up-to-the-minute techniques, or dramatic results with 'difficult' client groups. Even in journals, trainers seem reluctant to publish, perhaps feeling that they have nothing of interest to offer their colleagues. When I was co-editor of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, we had little success in soliciting descriptions of training programs for publication. Some of the trainers we wrote to never even replied, others indicated interest, but the promised contribution never eventuated.

Most first-time students of counselling and therapy idealise their trainers (at least at the beginning), which is very pleasant for the trainers. Trainers seem wise beyond belief: they know everything, have experienced every client situation, remain calm in the face of any level of anxiety, and (mostly) seem gentle and encouraging. For those trainees who haven't experienced personal therapy, a training program may be their first experience of what a therapeutic environment is like: a place where you can feel safe, allow yourself to be vulnerable, are taken seriously, and can voice your real feelings. In return, trainees show their trainers respect, admiration—even adoration. Their eyes shine when the trainer talks. Few trainers are proof against such gratification, although of course all but the most flamboyant keep their gratification out of sight.

In common with all teachers, trainers of counsellors and therapists can receive rapturous reception year after year, even though they present the same concepts, tell the same anecdotes about famous therapists they have known, show the same DVDs, and set the same readings. They grow older, but their students stay young (by which I mean 'young in attitude', not young chronologically). If you start your career as a trainer at a comparatively youthful age, you may be seen as an 'older sister or brother' by your students, later, you become a respected 'parent', and eventually, a beloved 'grandparent', whose forgetfulness and muddle are readily forgiven. You aren't likely to be challenged much, or questioned much. All of which, I suspect, encourages many trainers to continue doing what they have always done. Students like it, so why change it? In my experience, most students rate their original training highly, even if (by outside standards) it has been relatively poor. Why wouldn't they? They have nothing to compare it with!

To a surprising degree, trainers replicate their own training. If they, as trainees, experienced a kind of 'hazing ritual'—were critiqued, questioned and confronted—then that is what they will do to their own students (just as boarding school boys do to their juniors, and RSMs to their raw recruits—remember *'An Officer and a Gentleman'*?) If trainers themselves experienced a gentle, supportive course in which everyone was assured they were 'doing really well' (regardless of whether or not this was accurate) then this is the kind of training they will probably offer to others in their turn. If they were educated in a course where 'theory' and 'practice' were taught separately, as distinct subjects (modules, units) then most of them will fail to question that division, despite the fact that ours is a discipline in which theory really makes little sense without concurrent experiential training.

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I have worked alongside trainers who even set the same textbook that they themselves were set as students, decades earlier (not that a book is necessarily less useful just because it is 'old', I hasten to add; in fact, earlier editions of some widely-used texts actually seem to me superior to their more recent revisions. I shall have more to say in a future column about why so many counselling texts have become bland and safe). But students usually claim they like the text their trainers have set—once again, they have little to compare it with! The same tendency to replicate holds true for experiential exercises. They are repeated from 'generation to generation', without substantial modification. Rarely do we hear of trainers incorporating new exercises into their classroom routines, or altering ones they already use, so that new learning dimensions may emerge. I am sure some trainers do modify their exercises, but they rarely report, via publication, on the effect of the changes they make.

If all of this gives the impression that I'm urging trainers to abandon the tried and true in favour of trendy new 'cutting edge' practices, then let me hasten to say that this is not my intention at all. Many training practices have stood the test of time, and in an age where everything is rapidly becoming digitalised, face-to-face mini-sessions, with student counsellors, student clients and student observers, remain a core item in the preparation of professionals. Of course they are not enough, and I'm not sure how well we have bridged the gap between simulated sessions with student peers, and supervised practice with real clients in a clinical placement. More of this in a later column.

The really hard questions in relation to training are rarely asked in public, or in print. Who is suitable to enter the counselling or therapy professions, and who should decide the criteria? Should we be training bright young men and women who are quite certain that they 'want to help people' but have not a clue as to their actual motivation, no idea of their own buried pain, and little experience of life or

relationships to supplement their textbook knowledge of the *DSM*? Or should we, on the other hand, be training mature-age 'wounded healers', who have survived trauma, abuse, marriage breakdown, mental illness or addiction, and are now quite sure that they know exactly how to help those who have had the 'same experience' (which, they will later come to realise, is not the 'same' experience at all)? Is the possession of 'emotional intelligence' sufficient to make someone a good counsellor or therapist, or is the other kind of intelligence important too? Is it better for students to have a 'J' at the end of their MBTI profile, or a 'P'? An 'N' in the middle, or an 'S'? Can an Enneagram Three or Eight become a good therapist? Does it matter if you're mad, or is it more a matter of how you handle your madness? (Jung and Kay Redfield Jamison, among others, would be in real trouble if we automatically excluded everyone with a diagnosable 'mental illness'!)

Should we start our students with a 'firm foundation of theory' (as academic wisdom has long dictated) and then proceed to the 'practical' subjects later, or should they embark on seeing clients in a clinic from the very beginning of their training (much as some teacher education programs require first semester students to go out on prac?) What are the competencies we expect them to demonstrate, and how will we actually know whether they have demonstrated them? What type of writing should our trainees produce in their assignments—standardised, third-person social science report-writing, with its appeal to the authority of bracketed references (none of them more than five years old, naturally!) or anything-goes narratives of personal experience, devoid of reference to theory or evidence? Clearly, the answer should be neither—but rather, something in between. Yet how many trainers are sure exactly what that 'in-between' kind of writing is, or how to assess it meaningfully? Is every reflective journal worthy of a good mark, simply because the student has 'reflected'? Or should we be abandoning written forms of assessment, and finding relational ways of assessing understanding, like asking students to explain the rationale for their interventions at intervals throughout the playing of a recorded session?

Should we take the attitude that training to be a therapist or counsellor is essentially a personal growth experience, likely to be beneficial to just about everyone who undertakes it, even if they are manifestly poorly suited to being therapists? Should we accept such students, and graduate them from our programs, on the grounds that it is the responsibility of the marketplace (that is, of potential employers) to ensure that the 'right' graduates get the jobs, and the unsuitable ones don't? Or should we risk 'sitting in judgement' on our students—withholding internship placements until they are 'ready' (which may of course be 'never') or failing them at the end of their training, on the grounds that they have not demonstrated sufficient capacity to sit with clients, and may do real damage through imposing unexamined agendas of their own on those they work with?

In this series of short opinion pieces, I intend to tackle some of these vexed questions, and others like them. I will offer readers information about what has worked for me as a trainer, over nearly twenty years. I am sure that some of my views will seem controversial; they may even offend. Fortunately, I am now close to the end of my time as a university teacher of counselling, and can thus name some of the 'unspeakable truths' and difficult paradoxes inherent in training for our complex, contradictory, ambiguous, yet incredibly worthwhile profession.



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