



Theory before practice? Well...No!

In university tradition, 'pure' disciplines were distinguished from 'applied' ones. Thus applied maths dealt with 'applications' of mathematical principles and operations to practical endeavours like engineering. 'Applied psychology' makes some sense insofar as psychology is, by its own claim, a science, which becomes an applied one (in the clinical, sporting or organisational context) when evidence-based behavioural and cognitive interventions are employed. However, counselling and psychotherapy programmes have now begun to brand themselves as 'applied', and this to me makes very little sense at all. Psychotherapy is, by definition, an 'applied' discipline—few people study it other than in the hope of becoming psychotherapists! Similarly, with counselling and the recent addition of the adjective 'clinical', we might reasonably claim that all counselling is 'clinical', although I suppose it could be argued that in genetic counselling, AIDS counselling, and the like, information-provision is much more central than it is in 'counselling' as it would be understood by this Journal.

But obviously, counselling and psychotherapy training is not immune from the ever-increasing pressure to advertise itself in whatever words will make it most appealing to would-be consumers, and the terms 'applied' and 'clinical' offer a perceived competitive edge in an increasingly crowded market. After all, few lay people really understand what 'counselling' is anyway, and 'clinical counselling' sounds pretty impressive. Thinking carefully about the words we use, choosing the 'right' word, and condemning 'loose' or misleading uses of words was once a hallmark of university training in general. It seems to me that the contemporary university, squeezed desperately by pressures to justify its existence in a corporatised world—thinly justified by the principles of economic rationalism—is perilously close to abandoning this disciplined use of language. Academics are now almost as governed by 'spin' as politicians—and not just in the areas of counselling and therapy, but across the board.

Consistent with the precedence given to pure disciplines over applied ones, in the minds of older-generation academics at least, university curricula traditionally have been constructed so that theory precedes practice. After all, it is reasoned, a student must thoroughly understand the principles and assumptions of a discipline before attempting to 'apply' them to some specific field of work, particularly if that field involves human beings. In fact, this doesn't fit all that well for 'applied' disciplines like medicine, which arguably developed their body of knowledge more by 'rough-and-ready' experimenting with practical interventions than by applying abstract principles (many of which—Galen's for instance—would later prove to be incorrect). As long as practical disciplines like nursing and teaching were taught in specialised institutions (teaching hospitals, teachers' colleges) a workable mix of hands-on skills development and 'theory' (of variable degrees of abstraction) could be offered. But, as professional training has gradually come to inhabit universities rather than workplaces or specialised training institutions, the 'theory-before-practice' paradigm has become dominant. University programmes in education, social work and nursing certainly contain blocks of practical experience, but students are rarely set loose on 'prac' until they have learned at least some 'theory'. Counselling-inclined students of psychology must study

their science for four years, and practice only the skills of the scientist, before they are permitted to start learning the clinical skills they will need in their intended careers as practitioners. In all of these 'applied' disciplines, the overwhelming student complaint continues to be that entry-level study is 'not practical enough'. Of course, students would probably say this however much practical experience and training they were given, but on balance, it has to be admitted that their criticism is not that wide of the mark.

It is simply a waste of time to teach too much of the theory of counselling and therapy without concurrent practical experiences that will help elucidate these theories for students.

Unfortunately, those responsible for curriculum design in the counselling programmes that have sprung up in our universities have mostly followed the 'theory first' model, and not only insisted on theoretical subjects preceding practical ones, but on theory subjects outnumbering practice-based ones in the overall programme. Once again, I think we can see here the old hierarchy, in which theory is viewed as more dignified, more 'learned' than 'mere' practical skills. I was recently dismayed to find a two-year full-time programme where a single, one-semester unit of dedicated skills training was considered sufficient for the preparation for first-year students who would then embark on a substantial internship or placement experience in their second year. For those who had entered such a programme with existing counselling experience and a good level of skills competence, this might be sufficient, but in common with many programmes, this one felt pressured to admit a wide range of students, many of whom had little existing skills competence, albeit a high level of enthusiasm for gaining a qualification in counselling!

The fact that any course designer could imagine one semester of dedicated skills training a sufficient introduction for the majority of students beggars belief. I can only guess that such curricula must have been designed by people who had little hands-on knowledge of what counselling actually involves, or of how long it can take for many students to learn even 'basic' skills like empathic reflecting, let alone more 'advanced' ones like immediacy or confrontation! Then again, I have, in the not too distant past, experienced a Masters curriculum in which the (single) skills-related unit contained mostly techniques derived from N.L.P., and was delivered to a class that included several students from non-Western cultural backgrounds, whose understanding of counselling was very different from those of the rest of the class. I hesitate to imagine what their experience of the unit was like, or what, if anything, they may have 'learned' from it!

So our problem is now compounded: not only is theory considered superior to practical skill, and theory units dominate the curriculum at the expense of skills-related ones, but those who construct unit templates seem unsure of exactly what skills units should contain, and how long it actually takes most students to acquire the skills that are listed in the unit objectives. These are subjects on which I may have more to say in future columns, but let me put them to one side now, in order to focus on something that, to my mind, is even more important, and yet hardly ever talked about (at least in print).

There is, I believe, a fundamental misunderstanding of how students master the theory of counselling and psychotherapy. In our field (as in many other 'applied' disciplines) theory and practice cannot be separated into hermetically-sealed compartments. They only make sense when taught together, in a way that deliberately encourages students to move backwards and forwards between the two. I would argue that the vast majority of students learn theoretical concepts by experiencing them in practice—in the role of client, counsellor, or (for preference) both—and by linking the experience with what they have read or heard. Often, it will be a trainer, or a fellow-student, who will point out the link; sometimes the student him/herself will make it. Think of some of the theoretical concepts that have long been central to our understanding of counselling and psychotherapy: transference; resistance; 'process' and 'content'; 'scapegoating'; 'felt sense'; being 'triangled in'; projective identification. How many of these really make sense unless you have experienced them in a one-to-one or group therapeutic interaction, or rather, 'knowingly' experienced them—since many of us will have experienced them without having realised it?

Of course, students can learn a definition of a concept from a lecture or a book, and replicate it in an examination or an essay, but that is not the same as having an experiential understanding of that concept, and it is an experiential understanding that the student will need to become an effective practitioner. It is simply a waste of time to teach too much of the theory of counselling and therapy without concurrent practical experiences that will help elucidate these theories for students. Such experiences do not necessarily have to be confined to formal skills training, of course. Observation of others (in class, or outside of it), reflection on the student's own interactions with intimates, including family of origin; and, even viewing and discussion of videotapes and films—all can be both relevant and useful (and of course, many existing programmes of study draw on all of these methods).

Consider the practice of teaching the major theoretical approaches to counselling and therapy (psychodynamic, person-centred, systemic, cognitive, and constructivist) relatively early in the curriculum. Students who, at best, have had one semester of basic skills training, and who are still, in most cases, engaged in mastering how to sit with a distressed person, how to refrain from offering advice that is neither requested nor valued, and how to bridge the gap between their own world and the client's—these students are being asked to get their heads around (the colloquial expression actually does convey something of the challenge involved!) three, four or five 'theoretical models' or 'therapeutic modalities', all of which offer apparently very different (and sometimes mutually contradictory) conceptions of how interpersonal helping occurs, have distinctive terminology (often mystifying), arise out of very different world views, and make claims to success and universal applicability. Can 'comparing and contrasting' two or more approaches (a common essay topic in such units) really be a very fruitful exercise for students, most of whom have never experienced any of the models at first hand, as clients?

Even given a best-case scenario, where several classes are devoted to each model, and students are shown two or three different examples of experienced practitioners working within each (with ample time for discussion and analysis) it is hard to believe that the average student will come out of the exercise much the wiser. Often, and certainly in programmes I have taught in the past, each model has been taught in just one class (two to three hours) and, at best, they witness part of one single session featuring one practitioner and one client as a demonstration of the approach in practice.

When I have experimented with testing students' ability to distinguish one model from another, using previously unseen video examples, the majority easily became confused by all but the most obvious distinctions (CBT is clearly distinguishable from Psychodynamic or Person-centred, for example, but the latter two are far harder to distinguish from one another in practice, though in theory they sound poles apart). And what such units typically 'teach' is not only confusing, it's misleading—in that the focus tends to be on how models differ, whereas in practice, as an experienced therapist knows, what happens in the room with a client, particularly in longer-term work, may not appear all that different, regardless of what model the therapist in question 'theoretically' adheres to!

To my mind, there is little point in teaching an introduction to a range of particular models in the first year of the training programme. Better by far to tackle it later—for example, in the third and final year of a three year Masters programme—after students have some substantial clinical experience under their belts, have begun to feel some mastery of the model they have been taught, and are starting to look 'around the edges' of what they have learned to do, in search of something that matches the way they personally like to work. Once again, appreciation of theory depends on students having had particular practical experiences.

Ideally, students would be engaged continuously in skills development throughout the whole of their first year of study and, throughout the second year, be enrolled in an agency placement with real clients at least one day a week. Such a structure would give them a better chance of integrating theory and practice, and ensure that if they fail to 'get' a particular concept in first semester of first year they will have opportunities to do so in second semester, before they commence seeing agency clients.



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