



Assessment: Part II

As I mentioned in my last column on this subject, many trainers are uncomfortable with the whole issue of assessment. They do not really want to be in the position of making a judgement on whether or not a student has 'met course requirements', especially if, by implication, this means that she or he is not ready to be a counsellor. It sounds far too much like 'being judgemental' in response to something a client has said or done. The blurring of the boundary between counselling a client and training a student to be a counsellor is only one factor involved here. We must also grapple with the fact that over the last forty years educational practice has come increasingly to resemble therapy (perhaps an oversimplification of the Rogerian idea of unconditional positive regard), to the extent that responding with consistent praise to students' efforts is considered more important than maintaining standards.

Only last year, members of a class I was teaching complained that I should not use the word 'fail', and that my use of students' first names in written comments (as in 'Lynn, you seem to be contradicting yourself here') was 'inappropriately' personal and infantilising. From past experience, I have found that these kinds of complaints are likely to arise when students have been used to receiving much higher marks than those that I typically award, and hence experience an intense disappointment when they find that they have 'only got a pass' (or even 'only a distinction'!) In an era when students have been encouraged to protest if they do not 'get the results they deserve', such disappointment often takes the form of righteous anger directed at a marker who has 'behaved unprofessionally'.

Even in universities, today's pass is often yesterday's fail, today's credit is yesterday's pass, and so on. One former Head of School winked broadly at me when I mentioned falling standards, and observed, "Well, it's pretty much impossible to fail anyone these days!" (The implication was that if I wanted the same rewards the new-look system had bestowed upon him, I had better drop my objections). In one tertiary institution I briefly tutored for, I was told that although my marking was 'exemplary', my marks were 'too low'. I should (I was advised) be giving most students 'a distinction or a high distinction' because the institution's educational philosophy was that of 'encouragement'. In the same institution, students were (at the time) allowed no fewer than three chances to resubmit a failed assessment task. This might be justified in primary school—but in a tertiary program supposedly training adults to become professional counsellors? Would anybody be happy with a system in which doctors got three chances to get their diagnosis right? Where pilots were given a pass 'for encouragement' even though they had handled their plane dangerously during flying trials? Surely not. Yet it is somehow easier for counsellor trainers to argue that students should graduate because 'they've tried so hard' or 'they really want to help people'. Such attitudes materially contribute to the low status of our profession, and to the belief that what we do isn't really going to make much difference to our clients anyway.

So let me reiterate: counsellor training is not the same thing as counselling. Nor is it the same thing as 'personal development' or 'painless personal therapy'. Yes, students enter counselling training courses out of an unconscious wish for self-healing, and should ideally gain much self-knowledge from their training experiences, but

the purpose of the program is to prepare future counsellors who will practise competently, ethically and wisely. Our job is to set a standard that is appropriate for beginning professionals—not an impossible standard (since so much in counselling and psychotherapy can only be learned through clinical experience) but a standard signalling that graduates have the fundamental capacities they will need to reflect on their work both in and out of formal supervision, that they can conceptualise clients realistically, and so on.

'Hard work' is praiseworthy, but hard work alone is not a reason for passing a course. Nor is a 'passion for helping people', if the latter blinds the student to key deficiencies in the helping interview she/he has just conducted. Most important of all, if a student does not, even towards the end of a course, prove able to distinguish process from content, and cannot pick up what is happening at a process level in a video demonstration, then that student should not be graduating from an accredited counselling training program, and proceeding to work towards professional registration.

Just as students often confuse a critical comment on an assignment with a 'personal put-down' by a teacher or lecturer, so many lecturers confuse failing a student with 'responding judgementally' to a client. They are not the same thing, and the extent to which they are often confused speaks volumes about how weakly-held is our sense of self, our ability to distinguish a person from his or her behaviour ('I like you, but I don't like the way you're acting right now').

Of course, a 'fail' result is not necessarily forever. In a number of cases over the past half dozen years, my colleagues and I have failed a student at the end of their first year (usually due to inadequate skills development) and recommended that she or he not proceed to the second year and its associated agency placement. But we have also strongly urged the student to undertake a year of personal therapy, and apply for re-admission to the course.

This particular recommendation is one we often make because the most common reason why students fail a final skills-related assignment (recorded session, transcribed segment, and detailed process commentary) is that they lack sufficient self-awareness to be able to recognise what is happening for themselves in the session, and to 'read' their client's behaviour accurately. As I have said before in these columns, personal awareness and skills development go hand in hand during training. You cannot expect one to develop without the other.

This brings us directly to what is probably the most controversial aspect of assessment within counselling training programs: the question of whether it is appropriate, or even possible, to assess personal development components of a program. As one former colleague chuckled, "Well, you can't really fail group therapy, can you?" Here again, she was applying standards derived from counselling and psychotherapy practice to training practice, and perhaps the answer was not as clear-cut as her comment implied.

Group therapy as part of a training program in counselling is not identical with group therapy undertaken purely for personal therapeutic gain. In the latter activity, the group operates on the assumption that each client will take from the group what she or he can. Some will gain valuable insight and may learn to change

aspects of their ways of interacting with others; some will drop out of the group because it is too confronting, or because they feel unable to participate in an appropriate way. We can only encourage individuals to do what they can, and (sometimes) to push a little beyond their personal comfort zone. We cannot require them make themselves vulnerable against their will, and we cannot prevent their withdrawing (even if we may consider their withdrawal premature and unnecessary).

By contrast, a personal development group that is part of a training course for counsellors is conducted on the expectation that trainees will not only participate in the group, but also record an ongoing, disciplined reflective response to their experiences. It is that latter aspect—the written record of the student's expectations, thoughts, feelings, confusions, conflicts, catharses and realisations—that will be assessed, not the student's 'personal growth' or 'worth as a person'. And such reflective journals, or assignments based upon them, can be assessed in very much the same way as any other assignment.

How much insight does the student show into her/his own process? How accurately does she/he seem to perceive others in the group? How rich and detailed are the students' observations (or, conversely, how vague, predictable and lacking in specificity are those observations?) How prepared is the student to consider feedback offered to him or her by others in the group, or by the group leader? How able is the student to 'read' the behaviour of the group as a whole ('mass group process') as opposed to viewing the group simply as a collection of individuals? And so on.

Some of these questions cannot be evaluated adequately by a marker who has not also been the group leader. Many programs that include a group interaction component take great pains to ensure that the roles of 'leader/facilitator' and 'marker/evaluator' be held by two different staff members, with the group leaders privy to the actual process of the group, and able to hold confidential material in safety, uncontaminated by the need to evaluate.

I respect this approach, and understand the reasoning behind it. Yet I do not entirely agree, in part because in the group model I believe most suited to counsellor training, the 'here and now' model (Yalom & Leszc, 2005), the focus of the group work is not on the disclosing of 'there and then' information by group members, but on the disclosing of participants' reactions to one another in 'here and now' interaction. The possibility of confidential information about an individual prejudicing a marker's ability to objectively assess that individual's group reports is weaker in this model (though not absent), and it becomes doubly important for the staff member assessing to possess firsthand information about the actual process of the group, as opposed to the fantasies and projections that a particular student might express in his or her reports.

Here again (see my last column) what appears impossibly subjective to an educationalist who is unaware of the nature of the counselling process is, in practice, much more possible than one might expect. Groups can, of course, become deluded and distorted in their thinking and behaviour (as when group members may collude to scapegoat one member) but in my experience, the marker's perceptions, along with the whole range of perceptions offered by other group members, usually provide a corrective to the distorted perceptions of any one individual member.

The same students who prove able to 'stand back from themselves', to see themselves (at least to some degree) as others might see them, to reveal the depths of their own perceptions and emotions as evoked by others, are nearly always the same students

who can view their clients fairly and realistically, be honest about their own biases and blind spots, and rapidly pick up what has happened between them and a client at the level of process.

By contrast, the students who describe in great detail what happens in the group ('He said, she said') but who fail to report what those interactions meant to them, or who 'analyse' or 'interpret' the behaviour of others as a way of keeping themselves safe, are also the students who are likely to do the same with their clients.

Some of the same principles apply to personal therapy undertaken as a constituent of a training course in counselling. Needless to say, we cannot directly evaluate the 'quality' of the student's personal engagement in the therapy (necessarily conducted by someone completely independent of the training institution) nor should we expect to. But we can certainly ask students to talk with us in depth about their experience of that therapy. We can ask them to give examples when they talk in generalisations. We can ask them about how they would gauge the impact of their therapy on their relationships or work lives, and then listen carefully to the degree of detail, the credibility, with which they answer these questions.

Finally, if a student's personal therapy has been effective, we surely ought to be able to see evidence of that in her subsequent client work. If her pattern of client interaction remains unchanged, if his ability to reflect honestly and in depth on those interactions has not matured, then surely we are entitled to ask whether the therapy has made much difference, no matter how reputable the professional they've seen.

In sum, I believe that a counselling training program worth its salt should be prepared to fail students if necessary. By failing to fail them, we fail to protect their future clients. If we select our trainees rigorously in the first place, we should not need to fail more than a small number, and some of those can reasonably be offered a second chance, not via 'resubmitted' assignments, but via a 'gap year' in which they undertake sustained personal work. In order to fail appropriately, trainers need to be able to separate assessment from personal likes and dislikes, to be clear that they are assessing the student's capacity to demonstrate core competencies required for effective counselling, not 'judging their personality' or assessing their 'worth as a person'.

Can the power to fail be abused by trainers? Absolutely. Is that a reason for avoiding it? I don't think so! But we need to be mindful of this issue when we interview and appoint new trainers. Empathy alone is not enough! 'Good authority'—which includes the capacity to 'hold a line' and maintain a standard, in a calm and non-punitive way—is vital too (see Pitt-Aikens & Thomas Ellis, 1989).

References

Pitt-Aikens, T. & Thomas Ellis, A. (1989). *Loss of the good authority: The cause of delinquency*. London: Viking.



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