



Case Studies

A Presentation: a preferred route for assessment in Counsellor Training

DI BROTHERS

University of Bristol, UK

Assessing students on Counselling Training programmes is complex (Johns, 1998). Our postgraduate Diploma in Counselling attracts students aged from 23 to 79, with widely diverse backgrounds and cultural and educational experiences. This provides us with a rich student group with some intrinsic challenges; this is especially evident within the writing of assignments.

As a practice-based training programme that provides the training element for professional counsellors, we aim to pay attention to theory, ability to practise and personal development, and consequently must include these three elements as key components within all the assessed pieces of work. In the case of students whose formal education has been limited, writing assignments that encompass all of these requirements has proved to be daunting and, in some cases, paralysing, as described beautifully by Maybank in 'An academic invalid in a world of academic excellence' (Johns, 1998).

An additional complication is that as trainers we aim to model what we teach and this is evident in our very student-centred approach to teaching and learning. We aim to pay full attention to each student's personal struggles to reach their potential and in this we reflect the core conditions of person-centred practice (Rogers, 1961). Through our teaching we provide many different and creative ways of learning, all of which are transferable into students' counselling practice. We expect our students to transfer *their* learning into their practice and yet it became obvious that we were excluding a wide range of potential methods of creative assessment from our assignments and that our emphasis on 'the written word' was disadvantaging a proportion of our less confident students. Feedback from the students and External Examiner echoed this point and so for these reasons we devised a new practical assessment to replace one essay.

Students are now asked to give a presentation on the theory of an area of life-span development that

has particular relevance for them and link this with their application to practice and personal experiences. They work in groups of three for the planning and the presentation and we encourage them to be as creative as they wish to be.

The presentations are delivered to the whole student group plus all tutors and there is an opportunity for feedback from the audience. The tutors meet separately and assess each presentation and detailed collaborative feedback is written. We do not assess presentation skills as this is not an area covered by our syllabus.

This assignment seems to give sufficient flexibility for all students to find their strengths so those of an academic frame of mind produce standard didactic pieces, whilst those who find creativity a route into learning have provided some amazing experiences whilst still retaining the necessary elements of theory, practice and self. A good example of the latter was a Sikh woman who rarely spoke in the group, taking the challenge and exploring through (and about) her veils the cultural transitions that she had had to make and the implications and complications of these transitions in our multicultural society for herself and her clients.

By working in small groups there is often some cross-fertilization so that the 'standard' presenter finds some small movement towards the creative and those with a creative mind find some more discipline. This too seems like additional personal learning.

One of our struggles was about the external examination of this assignment and because of regulations we had, finally, to include a request for students to write a brief personal reflection on their experience. This would also offer the opportunity to include any elements that were missed during the presentation (e.g. through mismanaging their time) and thus provide a safety net and, more importantly, would model the self-reflective writing that counsellors may use after seeing their clients.

The outcomes of this have been surprising. Feedback shows that it is the students' most powerful learning experience of the whole course and they appreciate the opportunity for their personal and professional development to be seen and valued by the group. The group itself becomes a safer learning environment and the quieter and less confident group members become more active. As tutors, we find that the live evaluation of this assignment mirrors our practice without losing any of the quality and we are always deeply moved by the courageous and personal presentations given by the majority of the students. We learn too.

Our mutual excitement about the success of this change of assessment method has widened our vision and deepened our experience. We plan to review other assignments to ensure that we offer a range of methods of assessment that are more inclusive and fit more comfortably with our broad cultural base.

References

- JOHNS, H. (ed) (1998) *Balancing Acts: studies in counsellor training*, London and New York: Routledge.
- ROGERS, C.R. (1961) *On Becoming a Person*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Keywords

Counsellor training, creative assessment

Biography

Di Brothers has been working as a counsellor and counsellor trainer since 1976 and has been a core trainer for the University of Bristol's post graduate Diploma in Counselling (BACP Accredited) since 1990.