

Forum

Philosophical counselling in an educational setting: a personal account

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I am a year tutor on the B.Ed Hons, which is one of the largest courses in the School of Education at the University where I work. I am a personal tutor for about twenty students. Both of these roles include a pastoral function. I am a school experience tutor for a number of students, and this is also a relationship which essentially involves supporting the student. One feature common to all these roles, however, is that they can involve an assessment or a disciplinary function as well as a supportive one.

I have had the basic training in Philosophical Counselling, and attended follow up workshops. Since September I have been enrolled on a one-year Foundation Course in Counselling Skills and Perspectives.

It should be recognised that all tutors in the University, whether or not they have had any kind of training in counselling skills, sometimes have to counsel students in an informal way, or direct them to where they can obtain appropriate help and support. Those of us who have pastoral roles do this rather more often. In fact, it was because I am in a job where I use counselling skills, albeit untrained, that I was able to be accepted onto a Counselling Skills course.

As far as the appropriateness goes of using philosophical skills with students, I am speaking only from my own experience. My roles, as suggested above, have in-built tensions. I frequently have to have quite difficult interviews with individual students. This can be either because they want to tell me something that it is very difficult for them to tell; or because I have to tell them something which will be difficult or painful for them to hear. I might roughly divide the kinds of interview into pastoral and disciplinary. (Some turn out to be both.) An example of the former kind would be the case of a student who needed to tell me about a whole series of traumatic events that made it impossible to face doing a forthcoming Teaching Practice; of the latter, having to tell a student exactly why a school would not allow any more visits, and to work out a strategy through which it might be possible successfully to complete the academic year.

To deal with such situations, I use the skills I have been learning in my counselling course, and my philosophical skills. What I find interesting is that it does not really seem to matter whether the focus is pastoral or disciplinary: the co-joined counselling skills seem to work equally well. My view of why they work equally well is that it is because in both situations the techniques on the one hand give the students plenty of space to tell their own stories and on the other hand enable them to clarify their own views of the situation. Also, in both situations if necessary (see below), I give very clear information about the University's requirements.

Sometimes, listening to a student is all that is needed. Recently a student who had very obviously had to screw up courage to tell me something that it was necessary for me to know thanked me for making it easy to tell. All I had done was to show by my body language that I was giving my full attention and that I was fully accepting what I was being told. No special skill was needed, but my

general Counselling training had both made it automatic for me to be practising "active listening" and to be aware of what I was doing. Often though, once a student has begun to tell me about a situation, I will need to ask questions. Both kinds of training have taught me to ask open and closed questions; questions which mirror or reflect back what I have already been told in a way which enables the student to tell me more; to paraphrase or summarise what has been said so far; and, where appropriate to challenge what has been said.

Where there is any kind of disciplinary focus to an interview, I find it particularly important to begin with an invitation to the student tell me about what has been happening from her or his own point of view. I may need to check this out later with others involved. When there are competing versions, I may need to look for evidence which would help to establish what has happened. But in order to have a possibility of a constructive outcome, I need to establish trust between me and the student, and to me that means, for the time being, taking what is being said to me on trust. I make clear to students if there are any academic or professional requirements of the course that they must meet. I also make clear any consequences of not meeting the requirements: these could be failing a unit or units and having to resit; having to withdraw temporarily from the course e.g. if there has been an illness or other difficult situation; or in the worst case, a requirement to leave the course for good. I put anything that has been required or agreed into writing and give a copy to student—usually at the time, but sometimes, if a complex letter needs to be written, a day or two later.

It is at the stage of asking questions that a philosophical focus sometimes develops. Of course, all tutors ask questions all the time to help students, (or colleagues, friends or partners) to clarify their thoughts and perhaps to help them to see their way through a problem. The difference, for me, in using the asking of questions as a philosophical counselling technique is in the way that a specific training automatically comes into play. Typical questions might be: "Can you tell me what you mean by that?" or "Do you think there is a conflict between this and what you said earlier?" This approach is particularly useful with students for the added reason that it would be out of order and crossing boundaries for me to attempt any emotionally based counselling with them. I do have to remember that whatever I may have in the way of counselling skills, with students I am a tutor and not a counsellor.

In my view, it is the automatically coming into play of specific skills, from both my trainings, together with a conscious awareness of what one is doing that makes me into a trained rather than an untrained person. The general counselling skills training has made me a good deal more effective than I was before. The philosophical skills add a valuable dimension of clarification. Untrained, I may have done a great deal of good work with students in the past. Indeed, I hope I have. Training enables me to reflect on my own practice; to analyse strengths and weaknesses; to identify growing points; to be clearer about when a situation is beyond my powers to deal with it; to challenge my own practice. Finally, it enables me to be accountable in ways I was not before, to the students, to myself and to anyone else who might have an interest.

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