

Practice-Focused Paper:

Getting the most out of your placement: The students' perspective

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This paper draws on the viewpoints of students in the Canterbury University counsellor education programme to identify 20 maxims for getting the best from placement experiences.

Introduction

Counsellor educators usually tend to focus in classroom discussions on teaching their trainees the skills, models, and ethics of sound professional practice. This tends to happen in spite of the educators' belief that the clinical placement (also called the practicum) is thought to be an essential component in counsellor training, that is, a time for students to put all of what has been learned into practice, and to do so under the supportive and guiding eye of a competent supervisor. By comparison, how counsellors should set up, begin and manage their placement experience is often given only cursory attention in classroom discussions, in spite of the fact that there is no reason to assume that students will either understand all of the factors involved, or be able to cope effectively with them. Perhaps this is because trainers overlook the fact that for students who are comparatively inexperienced as counsellors the process of selecting placements, entering those placements and working in them present them with self-doubts, challenges and difficult questions.

Currently, most New Zealand counsellor training courses have formal contracts or semi-formal sets of guidelines to help clarify the

placement responsibilities of the three parties involved: the trainee counsellor, the host agency and the training institution. These documents are no doubt useful and help to ensure that students on placement perform competently and benefit educationally. However, practical information and advice from the *point of view of a student* on how to get the most from their counselling placements is often sketchy or lacking entirely. Nevertheless, the sharing of this sort of informal student-to-student information and advice is very common in any professional training course, and counsellor training is no exception.

In order to address this lack, the following maxims were generated by asking two groups of counsellor trainees what *they thought was important for future students to know* about the counselling placement. Specifically, at the end of their placement experience the University of Canterbury's 1995 MED counsellor trainees were asked the following three questions:

1. *What learning about counselling practice and process will you "take away" with you from your supervised placement/practicum work?*
2. *What advice about counselling or handling clients would you now be prepared to give to other counsellors or counsellor trainees based on your supervised placement/practicum work?*
3. *What advice would you give to others about ensuring that their placement experience is useful?*

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Based on their answers, a set of guidelines were written and distributed to the 1996 and 1997 groups of trainees along with the other placement documents (that is, a list of potential placement agencies; a suggested protocol for contacting those agencies; and a formal, three-way placement contract). Because it was thought that they may have had different or additional advice to pass on to future trainees, the 1997 group of students was asked to answer the same three questions at the end of their placement year. Their answers have been combined with the 1995 responses and appear below as a list of maxims for getting the most out of your counselling placement¹. Each maxim is highlighted by a bullet point; comments that explain or extend a point follow in italics. The maxims are organised under the following topic headings:

- I Negotiating and securing a placement
- II Getting started
- III Working in the placement
- IV Working with clients
- V Supervision
- VI What you can hope to learn or achieve

Maxims about placements

I. Negotiating and securing a placement

- Begin by clearly identifying your training needs.
- Next, start looking for a counselling placement early in the year!
- Choose a placement that will fulfill as

many of your training needs as possible.

Find a placement which will provide you with a variety of client types and presenting issues, and a supervisor who has your professional interest and development at heart. Be prepared to challenge yourself—you should set goals that will extend yourself beyond what you already know and can do well.

- Before deciding on a placement, request a personal interview with someone from the placement setting.

Find out as much as possible about that agency and the person who will supervise your work. Try to get a good idea about whether you will feel comfortable working there or not.

- Try to negotiate a block of placement time rather than spreading your hours over several days.
- Find out how busy the supervisor/other 'involved' people are to see how much support will be available to you.

Ensure that someone in the agency can and will supervise your work.

This is usually a course or training requirement; it is also necessary to protect you and ensure that your clients receive effective, safe service. As early as possible you should discuss with the agency establishing a supervision 'contract' to cover this activity.

- Make explicit your placement needs (like course requirements, assignments, types of clients needed to work with, etc.).

Ask if the agency is aware of what is

¹ It should be noted that because the University of Canterbury's MEd counselling course teaches a solution-focused model of helping, some of the students' comments are specific to that model. However, their advice could be generalised to other models and techniques and readers are encouraged to do so.

expected for your University course. You may need to be assertive in expressing your wishes and needs.

II Getting started

- Try and find out as much as possible about your agency, its clientele and its procedures.
- It is important to build good working relationships with placement staff and to become, as much as you can, a part of the counselling agency.

Remember: you are a visitor in the agency and you need to work harmoniously with other staff. Also, you will need to be proactive in the placement: to meet as many staff as possible, liaise with them, network with them and communicate effectively with them. To do this try to attend extra meetings, workshops, etc, at the agency; to get involved in the agency's other activities and courses; to take advantage of every learning opportunity available. It is hard to feel part of the agency when you work there just once a week. Therefore, by being involved in as many things as possible you will get a better feel of the place.

- Ask if you can sit in and observe the counselling of other counsellors at the agency as early in your placement as possible.

Work alongside other counsellors as often as possible. Observe, co-counsel, co-facilitate groups. Do this with as many different counsellors as you can. Pick as

many brains as possible. Remember, you are there to learn.

- Most importantly, aim to enjoy the placement and your work there!

III Working in the placement

(a) General Comments

- Make good use of your colleagues and supervisor. Ask lots of questions, share your concerns, etc.

As soon as you can, find someone who is readily available to talk things over with you, even if it is only for a few minutes.

- If the agency fulfills a variety of roles, you must be clear about your role in each session of your work with clients; e.g., are you doing counselling? advocacy? social work? educating?

- Be sure to clarify the terms of your involvement with third party referral agencies; e.g., CYPS, Social Welfare.

Know the outside agencies your placement service uses and other services to which clients may be referred for specific help.

- Know the procedural and financial systems in your placement agency and follow them.

- Ask for a variety of clients.

Stretch yourself! Learn as much as you can by getting a variety of clients with a variety of presenting problems from many different settings.

- Be persistent and assertive in expressing your training needs.

If you are not getting the experiences you need, say so. If you are unhappy with your placement, say so. If the

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placement is not working out, discuss the matter with your trainer and/or supervisor.

- Finally, don't get neurotic about the placement hours you need to clock up. They will come!

(b) *Placements in Schools*

- If your placement is a school, try to spend an entire day there each week rather than just a half day.

This will give you a better overview of "a day in the life of a school counsellor". Also, a full day each week will enable you to participate in the guidance programme in a more meaningful way.. Finally, it may be useful to start the placement by being there one full week so you can become thoroughly familiar with the school and the staff.

- Try to find a placement school that has a spare office in which you can counsel without being interrupted; and try to arrange your placement day so that it falls on a day the school has its guidance department/unit meeting.
- Ask for as many self-referred students as possible.

IV Working with clients

(a) *General*

- Prepare yourself for your counselling: be rested, relaxed, resourceful and feeling confident.

Try to review your case notes (or the case file) before each session: know what happened last time and what might occur this time. Take a short

break between clients—avoid long runs of back-to-back appointments.

- You need to have good self-reflection skills and be prepared to be challenged on why you have used an intervention. Plus, be prepared and willing to ask for help when you are stuck.
- Be confident about your work and proud to be engaged in such a specialised activity.

As one student said, "I found I have something to offer 99.9% of my clients, even when I felt inadequate." And, relax! You don't have to be the 'perfect counsellor'.

- Keep your own natural abilities and people skills [during your training] but integrate them into the model [being taught in your programme].
- Ascertain if your client is seeing other counsellors (especially in the school setting); clients should be involved with only one counsellor.
- Sometimes it helps to have list of key, or useful, questions prepared beforehand that can function as a guide for what you need to explore in each counselling session.
- Remember, even though clients may come for counselling in a distressed state, they are still resourceful!
- Be prepared at times to [have to] handle things on your own.

Other agency staff will not always be available at a moment's notice.

- Fit your clients around *your* schedule. Your time is important, too!
- Finally, relax! It's only a placement!

(b) Working with specific types of clients

- Compliment clients who don't like counsellors for being willing to come anyway! [Reluctant or undecided clients]
- Working with families who are hesitant or reluctant can be very difficult, so you need to have a sense of humour and plenty of time to talk over issues with your co-therapist/supervisor.
- Adolescents can be open, direct, rewarding (usually) to work with!

(c) Applying the model of helping you are learning

- Use what you are taught/learning in your training!

It will increase your confidence and keep you focused on the process. At the same time, be prepared to try things out—clients are generally accepting and forgiving—and keep looking for the technique that will work with that client on that day.

- Since there are still relatively few counsellors around using a solution-focused model, you may find yourself having to explain, and in some cases having to teach others about your work.

Do so with clarity and tact.

- The S-F model works, so use it!

However, remember that there are a wealth of other models as well.

- Using S-FT to ask scaling questions, identify exceptions and clarify goals almost always elicits something useful.

V Supervision

- Get all the supervision you can and use it fully!

Use the wisdom of the other counsellors working in the agency. It is very important to have good supervision and supervisors at your placement who will understand your work and have experience with that particular client group and problems.

- Because it is so valuable, you need to be very independent and push for your supervision time.
- Check out with a student from a previous year what their supervisor was like and what their experience at the placement was like.

(You need to get on with your supervisor!)

- Take part in peer supervision if it is offered; but don't rely exclusively on it.

In peer supervision you tend to get lots of good ideas but not much real processing of your own counselling.

- Discuss professional policy issues with your supervisor to learn how the agency works.
- Ideally, it is best if your supervisor is familiar with S-FT [or the model of helping taught in your programme].

Ask your supervisor if they understand S-F Brief Therapy [or the model you are being taught] and if they are supportive of it.

- In your supervision be open to new learning and try to be flexible in your work.
- If you are worried about a client, talk to your supervisor.

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VI What you can hope to learn or achieve

- Clarity about your work and the ability to manage the counselling process calmly.
- The value of designing an effective ‘induction’ procedure that informs and relaxes your clients.
- The opportunity to observe first hand ethical counselling and professional practice.
- The realisation that there is no ‘one way’ or ‘right way’ to do counselling.

You will see that there is tremendous variety in the way individual counsellors and agencies go about the work of counselling.

- Some insight into being self-employed as a counsellor.
- Opportunities to try out your learning (theories, skills, practices, etc.); to see if it works and, if so, under what conditions.
- How important it is to have a structure in your work with clients.
- A clear understanding of how supervision is conducted and can benefit your work.
- A greater understanding, knowledge and appreciation of an agency’s systems and their clientele.

You also learn just how much your place of work affects your counselling, that is, how a system or organisation can impact your own work.

Conclusion

This list of student-generated maxims emphasizes the need for counselling trainees to be clear about their training programme’s requirements and their assessment of their own training needs. In addition, there is the clear

admonishment to be assertive, self-motivated and persistent in pursuing training opportunities that will meet those needs.

The list could be useful to other training programmes and counsellor trainees in several ways:

- 1) it may help trainees to get the best out of their placement experience(s);
- 2) it may prompt trainees to think more critically about their placement and to identify gaps in their experience;
- 3) it may help trainers to better prepare trainees for their placement experience;
- 4) it may encourage other trainers to carry out similar surveys so that a set of maxims specific to their programme’s placement settings can be developed;
- 5) finally, the questions used to generate these maxims could be altered to identify and explore what students saw as the critical learning experiences in their placements. This information would have immediate implications for structuring more effective training programmes.