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What Do Adolescents Learn From Counselling? Measuring Learning Outcomes

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This paper describes the development of two mechanisms that can be used to measure the learning outcomes of counselling. It is particularly important to encourage clients and adolescents who have participated in a counselling experience to reflect on what they have learned and how the experience has affected them. Adolescents over the age of 13 years have the metacognitive skills to be able to reflect on their learnings and should be encouraged to engage in such activity. This approach contrasts the dominant outcome paradigm of assessing behaviour and attitude changes over time by analysing group data using statistics and meta-analytic techniques. This paper expands the ideas reported by Burnett (1999), Burnett and Van Dorssen (2000), and Burnett and Meacham (2002).

Burnett (1999) noted that most counsellors would agree on the vital role that learning new skills and attitudes has for the process of behaviour change. However, counselling outcome research and the evaluations of specific interventions have tended to ignore the assessment of what clients report that they have learned as a result of participating in a counselling experience. The widely used 'outcome research' paradigm has focused on measuring behaviour change across time using a test-retest methodology, and on assessing the impact of counselling strategies, techniques and interventions by analysing the data using sophisticated statistical and meta-analytic techniques. In the main the results of the many thousands of individual and meta-analytic studies have been positive and attest to the significant impact that counselling has on helping people.

Burnett (1999) noted the limitations of the dominant statistical paradigm and postulated the notion that counselling outcome research should also be considered within a qualitative learning framework. The learning theories of Biggs and Collis (1982, 1989) were used to investigate the veracity of a learning assessment mechanism in evaluating the structure used by clients to describe and record what they have learned

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from counselling. The Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes (SOLO) taxonomy was found to have some utility for assessing the level of client learning emerging from the counselling experience. Burnett (1999, p. 578) noted that 'the findings of this exploratory study are tentative but suggest that an expanded SOLO offers a promising and exciting way to view the outcomes of counselling within a learning framework'.

Burnett (1999) expanded the original five levels of the SOLO taxonomy into eight levels:

- prestructural — nothing learned and no benefits gained from counselling
- unistructural — only one relevant learning described
- multistructural (weak) — more than one learning described but limited in number and scope
- multistructural (sound) — several independent learnings are outlined
- multistructural (strong) — several independent learnings are developed through elaboration and examples, which results in a 'chunking' structure
- relational (weak) — learnings are mostly integrated around a relating concept or theme but some points are discussed that digress from the structure
- relational (strong) — learnings are integrated into a relating concept/theme with a strong robust structure
- extended abstract — learnings are transferred into more abstract situations. A personal theory for living in a society or community may be explained.

The results of this study suggested that clients tended not to integrate what they had learned into a unifying theme or to apply what they had learned to more abstract higher-order constructs. Integrating learnings around a unifying theme is critical if clients are to benefit maximally from the counselling experience.

In an endeavour to enhance the learning outcomes from counselling, adolescents and adult clients can be encouraged to write about what they have learned on a regular basis. The following reflective questioning strategies may be used when processing their writings in order to promote meaningful learning and higher-level learning outcomes in terms of the modified SOLO taxonomy described above.

Prestructural to Unistructural Response

Encourage reflection in relation to one specific issue by asking the following questions: What did you learn? How does this connect with what you already knew about yourself, others? Why is this important to you? What do you need to learn next?

Unistructural to Multistructural Response

In order to facilitate a multistructural response, clients would be encouraged to reflect on several issues over a period of time using the same reflective questions for each separate issue. What did you learn? How does this connect with what you already knew about yourself, others? Why is this important to you? What do you need to learn next?

Multistructural to Relational

In order to promote relational thinking it would be important to encourage clients to reflect on the many things they have learned with a view to considering the big picture or an overarching concept or theme. What similarities are there in all of the separate issues you have described? What would you say is an idea that connects all of this information in some way? How does this connect with what you already knew about yourself and others? Why is this important to you? How do you feel about this? What do you need to learn next?

Relational to Extended Abstract

Clients are encouraged to think about how the big picture (overarching theme) that has emerged can be applied to broader, more abstract, contexts, such as society, culture, humanity, world issues, political issues. How can what you have learned be extended? How can what you have learned be used to help others, or society? How can what you have learned be used to make life better for yourself and others? How does this connect with what you already knew about yourself and others?

■ What Did I Learn From Counselling?

The Burnett (1999) study focused on assessing the structure used by clients to report and document what they had learned from counselling. However, the SOLO taxonomy does not evaluate the content of what clients report they have learned. Burnett and Van Dorssen (2000) addressed this shortfall when they analysed the transcripts of documented client learnings using a content analysis approach. Thirty-five clients wrote a letter to a friend describing in as much detail as possible what they had learned from counselling. The analysis of these transcripts yielded three major areas of learnings, namely learnings about self, learnings about relations with others and learnings about the process of change. The statements that were allocated to each of these three areas were then classified using the theoretical frameworks developed by Saljo (1979) and Marton, Dall'Alba and Beaty (1993) to form hierarchical taxonomies for the learnings in each of the areas.

The hierarchies from lowest level of learning to highest level of learning for each of the three major areas were as follows:

Learnings About Self:

- SL1 — Survival and basic coping
- SL2 — Self-awareness and self-acceptance
- SL3 — Personal change and improvement
- SL4 — Personal growth and development
- SL5 — Personal world view

Learnings About Relations With Others:

- RL1 — Awareness and acceptance of others
- RL2 — Insights into relationships
- RL3 — Self as responsive but not responsible for others
- RL4 — Change and growth in relations

Learnings About the Process of Change:

- PL1 — Insight into the nature of change
- PL2 — Knowledge and skills that facilitate change
- PL3 — The self as change agent
- PL4 — Generalisation of the change process

In their paper Burnett and Van Dorssen (2000) provided learning statements derived from the clients' interview transcripts as exemplars for each of the hypothesised levels of the three taxonomies. These statements have been used to develop the What Did I Learn From Counselling? scale presented in Appendix 1. This scale now needs to be administered with adolescent and adult clients and psychometrically evaluated to determine its reliability and validity and to test the veracity of the taxonomies developed on the basis of the transcripts from the letters to friends.

■ Learning Journals

Burnett and Meacham (2002) further extended the link between learning and counselling further in a paper published in the *Journal of Counseling and Development* titled 'Learning journals as a counseling strategy'. The paper explored the use of learning journals as a counselling strategy that can be used to complement a counsellor's therapeutic orientation. Burnett and Meacham noted that the writing of learning journals has been used in education to promote reflection and they argued a prima facie case for their use in counselling. They noted that 'of most relevance to counsellors is the type of journal that provides a means to systematically document learning and promotes self-analysis, reflection and positive action on the part of the client (pp. 411–412).

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Burnett and Meacham (2002) highlighted the critical importance of preparing clients to write a learning journal. They described 10 instructional dimensions and provided exemplars as to how the counsellor could address each one. These 10 dimensions are introduction, usage, competence, perspective, structure, genre, routine, power relations, feedback and privacy. A written statement addressing each of these might look like this: 'I'd like to ask you to write a learning journal that is a kind of diary. You should use it to write down what you are learning from counselling and how you feel about it. Keeping this journal will help you understand the way you think and feel and views things. There are no right or wrong answers and when you are writing in your journal it is a good idea to have a theme to focus your thoughts. Some writers put descriptions of what is happening in their lives on the left hand side and their thoughts about these events on the right. It is important that you write things in your own natural way and it's a good idea to complete your journal on a regular basis by making some quiet time to record things and think about what they mean. What you write should assist you to understand what you are learning and how it can be used to help you. It would be helpful to see your journal on a regular basis so we can work through it together. Unless you wish to discuss your journal with someone else, no-one other than us will see it.'

Burnett and Meacham (2002, p. 414) do not suggest that 'journal-based learning strategies that focus on reflection should be the prime counselling strategy but rather that learning enhancement should be considered for all suitable clients and take its place as a mechanism for facilitating counselling based on constructivist learning principles'. They note that future research is needed to determine the best approach to using learning journals with clients and to determine the best procedure for instructing and motivating adolescent clients to produce journals that allow for a qualitative analysis of their learning.

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Appendix 1:

What did I learn from Counselling?

We are interested in finding what you learned and how you gained from attending counselling. The following statements describe possible learnings and outcomes. Please respond to each item using the following:

Σ1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree

STATEMENTS	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
1. I learned how to feel normal again. SL1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
2. I learned that I will survive. SL1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
3. I learned that I can cope with life circumstances. SL	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
4. I learned that there is hope for the future. SL1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
5. I learned how to regain the basic necessities of life. SL1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
6. I learned about new aspects of myself. SL2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
7. I learned more about my feelings, thoughts, and behaviours. SL2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
8. I learned to accept myself for what I am. SL2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
9. I learned that I can change. SL3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
10. I learned how to improve areas of personal weakness. SL3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
11. I learned how to decrease the negatives in my life. SL3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
12. I learned specific ways of coping better and improving myself. SL3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
13. I learned to understand myself better. SL3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
14. I learned to clarify my personal values. SL4	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
15. I learned how to be a better person. SL4	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
16. I learned how to develop personal strength. SL4	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
17. I grew and gained as a person. SL4	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
18. I developed a sense of personal growth and enrichment. SL4	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
19. I gained greater self-confidence and higher self-esteem. SL4	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
20. I found my place in the world. SL5	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
21. I learned about what went out of life. SL5	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
22. I learned that I am in control and responsible for my choices and life direction. SL5	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
23. I learned to accept others' points of view. RL1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4

STATEMENTS	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
24. I learned to accept others for who they are. RL1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
25. I learned to be aware of others' thoughts, behaviours, and feelings. RL	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
26. I learned to forgive others for their actions. RL1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
27. Learned to accept that others have strengths and weaknesses. RL1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
28. Learned that each person in a relationship must commit to the relationship. RL2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
29. Learned that I have to work to maintain relationships. RL2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
30. I became aware of the impact of my behaviour on my relationships with others. RL2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
31. I learned the importance of relationships with others. RL2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
32. I learned that I am not solely responsible for relationship problems and difficulties. RL2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
33. I learned how others and I interact and react. RL2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
34. I learned that I can't control others. RL3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
35. I learned that I am not responsible for other people's behaviour, thoughts, or feelings. RL3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
36. I learned that I can support and encourage others. RL3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
37. I learned how to be responsive to others in a positive way. RL3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
38. I learned how to enhance my relationships with others. RL4	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
39. I learned new ways of responding to others. RL4	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
40. I learned that the world would be a better place if people got on better. RL4	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
41. I learned that change is gradual and step-like. PL1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
42. I learned that some changes may be immediate but others take longer. PL1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
43. I learned that continued effort is required to maintain change. PL1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
44. I learned that the extent of change is related to the amount of effort. PL1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
45. I learned to accept that not everything can be changed. PL1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
46. I learned that seeking help and support is necessary at times. PL2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4

STATEMENTS	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
47. I learned that I need to confront problems and deal with them. PL2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
48. I learned how to identify and put problems in perspective. PL2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
49. I learned the importance of setting goals. PL2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
50. I learned that the answers to my problems come from within. PL3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
51. I learned that I must help myself. PL3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
52. I learned that I am responsible for the choices I make. PL3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
53. I learned that self-evaluation is more important than others' evaluation. PL3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
54. I learned that others do not have the answers; I do. PL3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
55. I learned to apply change processes to other problems that I experience or will experience. PL4	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4
56. I learned to be confident when approaching future problems. PL4	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4