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English language teacher development through counselling

The term ‘counselling’ is much used in English language teaching today and has come to be used as a blanket label covering a wide range of activities inside the classroom and out. The fact that it is used in such a general way leaves it open to the dangers of abuse, misconception, and the dilution of its true meaning, from a highly-developed skill that requires a great deal of training into any kind of advice-giving that might be needed.

In this article we should like to clarify some of the confusion surrounding the term and suggest that the introduction of counseling to teachers and teacher-trainers can be real benefit to institutions in our field. We shall be concerned not so much with language teaching methods based on counseling techniques (i.e. Counselling-learning, Community Language Learning) as with attempting to describe and illustrate how the acquisition of such skills can contribute to teacher development. More specifically, two vital areas in which they could have immediate application are, first, in teacher-training, getting the teacher to understand why things have gone wrong, accept responsibility for them and adjust his/her behavior in the future to avoid such situations recurring; and second, in the classroom, getting students to recognize realistic aims in terms of their time and ability, to accept the limitations of their individual aptitudes, and to understand their personal balance of strengths and weaknesses.

By counselling is meant putting counselees in touch with their true feelings so that they may be receptive to the kinds of insight that will enable them to work towards greater self-knowledge and an understanding of how the conduct of their lives causes their problems.

The ability to counsel is within every one of us, but before we can reach other people we have to be in touch with ourselves. We have to learn to recognize our own inhibitions and anxieties, ‘blocks’ and prejudices, ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’ areas, and how far we are prepared to listen to other people’s feelings. To do this we must first recognize our own motivations as teachers: “A teacher cannot make much headway in understanding others or in helping others to understand themselves unless he is endeavoring to understand himself. If he is not engaged in this endeavour, he will continue to see those whom he teaches through the bias and

distortion of his unrecognized needs, fears, desires, anxieties and hostile impulses [1,14]. Unfortunately however, no one of us can set about achieving this greater self-knowledge, which in turn can be used to facilitate insight in others, just by reading a couple of books by Stevick [2,3]. It is a long and often painful business, and requires the guidance of those trained in psychotherapy and the support of a group of similarly intentioned people over a period of time. This is what a good counseling course should provide.

The training of teachers has much to gain from observing the training of counselors, and one of the most essential areas which is rarely questioned in teacher-training is the basic 'operational philosophy' of the individual. How many of us in teaching have searchingly asked ourselves or are aware of the issues raised by the questions in this checklist of Carl Rogers:

The primary point of importance here is the attitude held by the counselor towards the worth and the significance of the individual. How do we look upon others? Do we see each person as having dignity in his own right? If we do hold this point of view at the verbal level, to what extent is it operationally evident at the behavioural level? Do we tend to treat individuals as persons of worth, or do we subtly devalue them by our attitudes and behaviour? Is our philosophy one in which respect for the individual is uppermost? Do we respect his right to self-direction, or do we basically believe that his life would best be guided by us? To what extent do we have a need and a desire to dominate others? Are we willing for the individual to select and choose his own values or are our actions guided by the conviction (usually unspoken) that he would be happiest if he permitted us to select for him his values and standards and goals?[4,20].

Part of the problem of being involved in education is that most of us have a desire to 'educate'; that is, to change or influence other people for what we believe to be the better. It tends and to make us dismissive of people who do not see things in the same way as ourselves. Our normal professional position is that of instructor, imparter of knowledge, priding ourselves on our ability and to control and to direct. Even if, to help us feel more at ease, we use more 'humanistic' terms to describe our activity (e.g. 'the knower', the 'learning facilitator', 'the guide'), we cannot disguise the fact that our work makes us anxious to influence, anxious to provide input.

We and our students have been conditioned to think that this is what teaching is about, and so it is to a certain extent. But these very skills and attributes which enable us to stand up in front of a class and 'perform' can block our way when the need arises to reach people (including ourselves) at a personal level.

It is important to understand that 'both counseling and teaching are deeply concerned with human relationships... learning and learning processes are the heart of counseling. It is therefore a particularly proper activity for a teacher, provided that he/she is able to allow pupils to learn and not simply instruct them in a rigid way' [5, 3].

How, then, do the learning processes explored through counseling differ from, yet supplement and nourish the basic skills learnt in teacher training? As I

have already suggested, the essential ingredient is self-exploration which is guided and directed to enable the individual to understand and come to terms with those elements in his/her personality which have formed blocks and blindspots and prevented further growth. These are present in every one of us and are at the root of our everyday anxieties and the way we conduct relationships. Unless they are reached, the same kind of problem will occur again and again. An example is the teacher whom students of a certain personality type invariably complain about but who is successful with everyone else.

As soon as the process of self-analysis is under way, the individual can begin to get in touch with his/her own qualities as a listener, as an under-stander and as a facilitator of others. The process, however, must derive from within.

Truax and Carkhuff state that, apart from respect for the worth and dignity of others, the factors which are most 'facilitative' in the initial stage of counselling are empathy, concreteness, and genuineness [6,135].

One may feel that empathy is a natural gift - something one either has or has not. Although it is true that some people seem to be born with more empathy than others, it is also something which can be developed. Empathy is often defined as the ability to put oneself in another's shoes. Empathy is 'the power of projecting one's personality into, and so fully understanding, the object of contemplation' (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary), and it is an emotion to be experienced deep inside oneself. It implies the ability to cut through the sentiment, the thoughts welling up, the memories of a similar experience aroused, the day-to-day concerns filling our minds, and to feel the depth of the counsellee's trouble.

The ability to be silent, with ourselves and with others, is an important constituent of empathy. In modern society, silence is often interpreted as hostility, and most of us feel awkward and embarrassed when silence falls in a social situation, and lost and anxious when we have nothing to do. We must come to recognize and to overcome this anxiety, because it prevents us from getting in touch with our own well-being. Silence provides necessary space for people to explore their feelings, search for the right words to express what they want and digest what has been said. So 'empathic' identification is to be aimed at, in which the counselor becomes a sort of 'alternate self' perceiving, even living, the emotions, feelings, and attitudes of the counsellee but at the same time remaining emotionally whole and outside.

Another quality is concreteness. This is involved with the skills of putting individuals in touch with their feelings and keeping them in touch. It is the ability to get the counsellees to be more precise in what they are saying, to search within themselves for more accurate definitions of what they are feeling in order to try and pinpoint the problem. On the part of the counselor it requires patience and silence, and the skills of concentrating hard, and of timing any intervention with great sensitivity.

One more quality needed in counselling is genuineness. The counsellor must come to the session as an open human being. For teachers who see themselves as 'a character' or 'colourful', this can be more difficult, but usually genuineness shines through any surface eccentricity. Genuineness is a necessary requisite for

trust. It involves eye contact, but above all it involves just being natural, just being oneself.

These four basic factors are a necessary foundation for the skills of counselling, as well as being necessary requirements for good language teaching. They are also disciplines (empathy, respect, and concreteness, at least) which can be largely trained and developed, and they are all vital ingredients for successful intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. Once people have worked on these elements in themselves, they will feel more confident about their own strengths and weaknesses, less inhibited when confronted with feelings, and less open to manipulation.

Literature

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