

READINGS IN COUNSELLING PRACTICUM



edited by
S. A. GEŞİNDE

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CHAPTER 4

Essentials of Counselling Practicum

A.A. ALAO and AYO MORAKINYO

Counselling practicum is usually regarded as a learning experience with growth potential where the student learns about his strengths and weaknesses in his counselling skills. He has the opportunity to correct himself when mistakes are made before his practice as a professional.

The student-counsellor should know what the practicum supervisor expects from him, such as:

- (a) gaining counselling experience;
- (b) ability to develop, test or practicalise the counselling skills acquired during training; and
- (c) knowledge of counselling techniques.

In the first instance, acquiring counselling experience is very essential in practicum. The student-counsellor should strive to develop the necessary skills or traits required of a professional counsellor. He should be in constant touch with the practicum supervisor whenever any ambiguity or any other problem arises during the practicum experience. He can be assisted during practicum to perfect the counselling skills acquired during his preparation.

Secondly, the student-counsellor develops his counselling skills when he explores and understands the experience of the client from a theoretical background. He tests his counselling skills when he reviews alternative lines of action with the client, making use of the background information collected while developing skills. He practicalises his skills when he makes use of his 'over-all' training to the effective counselling of the client or when he makes use of information resulting from his explorations in the diagnosis of adjustment problems.

Thirdly, the counselling techniques and other processes at the disposal of the counsellor or student-counsellor vary from confronting the client when a discrepancy arises in his expression to other processes such as expression of feelings, role-playing, attending, interpreting, clarifying, etc. There are also many counselling techniques which the student-counsellor can utilise during the practicum. As the student-counsellor would have been exposed to different counselling strategies, some students are usually confronted or confused with the choice of which counselling theory to use. Some try to approach every problem from one particular counselling perspective while others use different counselling theories for different problems. This is to say that one can be exclusively psycho-analytic, client-centered or rational-emotive in approach or one may let the nature of the problem dictate the counselling theory or approach to be utilised. Whichever counselling theory or approach is preferred, the student-counsellor should be aware of the following:

1. Creating a free and relaxing atmosphere for the client, throughout the counselling session is an essential ingredient for success;
2. Sitting the client in a position where he or she will not be easily distracted;
3. Paying attention and listening to the content and observing the non-verbal aspects of the client's expression;
4. Expressing adequately the feelings of the client at the appropriate time during the counselling session (knowledge of appropriate feeling words can be useful here);
5. Making use of appropriate counselling leads, whenever and wherever appropriate during the counselling session;
6. Allowing the client to fully express himself and not to turn the counselling session into a mini-lecture; or question-and-answer interaction;
7. Getting the client involved in the discussion and any step formulated, thus enabling him to grow; as well as
8. Planning a programme of change, encouraging the implementation of the programme and following-up on the planned programme.

From his interactions with the clients, from the feedback on the counselling techniques utilised, and from the follow-up on the clients, the student-counsellor can become aware of the counselling techniques which are viable to him, or more useful than others.

Hasty conclusions should not be drawn as for the effectiveness of a technique. With subsequent clients, there is the opportunity to improve on those skills and processes as the student-counsellor becomes more knowledgeable of, and more competent in, handling various cases.

A preparation for practicum

The practicum coordinator usually stipulates the essential requirements for the practicum exercise. The requirements for assessment and what the supervisor expects from the student-counsellor during practicum will serve as a guide to the materials he is to get ready, and the mental preparation for the exercise in terms of frame of reference and psychological disposition.

PREPARATION FOR PRACTICUM

Things to prepare

The student-counsellor may need to provide for himself some materials which are not only useful to him during the practicum exercise, but will also be helpful in his overall assessment by the practicum supervisor.

Some of the materials needed are the following:

1. *Informational materials:* The student-counsellor may need to collect relevant and appropriate educational, occupational and personal-social information that may be useful for his clients. When evidence of information to students is necessary, the student-counsellor, in addition, can design "guidance posters," or cut information material from newspapers and magazines which are then conspicuously displayed to the students on bulletin boards.
2. *Inventories:* Most of the student-counsellors usually end up being posted into the school setting. At present, this is essentially the orientation of their preparation in the university. A good number of clients who will also be encountered will indicate, most of the time,

problems connected with poor study habits, vocational problems, disciplinary problems, choice of subjects and other problems associated with schooling. The counsellor should get ready some inventories which can be used to explore some of the concerns of the clients in these areas, such as Bakare's Student Problem Inventory (1977), Bakare's Study Habits Inventory (1977), Bakare's Vocational Interest Inventory (1977), Bakare's Motivation for Occupational Preference Scale (1977), Akinboye's Adolescent Personal Data Inventory (APDI) (1978).

3. *Tape Recorder*: This is about the most expensive material to be purchased for the practicum. The student-counsellor should make arrangements in advance either to purchase a portable tape recorder or borrow one. Hoping to get one somewhere when the practicum begins may lead to frustration. The time the student thinks of borrowing one from another colleague involved in the practicum exercise could be the time he needs it most.
4. *Cassettes*: The student-counsellor will be expected to submit tapes of counselling interviews. Some student-counsellors are in the habit of recording counselling interviews on poor quality tapes, with the result that much of the discussion is not heard during replay. It is important to ensure clarity of the counselling interview in order to avoid retaping of the same session with the same client. Cassettes when submitted should include:
 - (a) Name of student-counsellor;
 - (b) Identification number;
 - (c) Classification of student-counsellor e.g. Part II or III; and
 - (d) Code of number of client taped.

It is not good to record interviews with two different clients on the same side of a cassette or tape.

5. *Counselling Interview Form*: It is suggested that the student-counsellor completes a counselling interview

form for each client along with the tapes submitted. The counselling interview form can supplement the information in the tape which, in some cases, may not be very clear. It also affords the supervisor a summary of the interview. Thus, the supervisor can have a grasp of the client's problem, the approach used, etc. A possible format of the counselling interview form is as follows:

COUNSELLING INTERVIEW FORM

1. Name of client or Identification No.
2. Background information on client: Age.....
 Sex: School/Agency:
 Date of Interview:
 Interview No. with client:
3. Problem(s) as presented by client (itemise)

4. Problem(s) as identified by the student-counsellor in hierarchy. (Begin with most serious to least serious problem)

5. Counselling/therapeutic approach utilised:
 (Indicate the diagnostic tools used, if any)
6. Summary of interview with client:

7. *Conclusions:* This should include suggestions made to the client, plans for further counselling, referral actions if applicable and other comments:
8. Name of student-counsellor:

9. Identification No.:
10. Supervisor's Comments:

Supervisor's Signature & Date

This format may be replicated for as many clients as you have.

6. *File Jacket:* It is advisable that the student-counsellor, at the beginning of the practicum, provides his or her supervisor with a file jacket in which tapes, weekly assessment reports or any other information relevant to the student's appraisal could be kept. The file jacket should also carry the following information:
- (a) Name of student-counsellor;
 - (b) Identification number;
 - (c) Classification (e.g. Part II or M. Ed.)
 - (d) Practicum site;
 - (e) Date and Year of Practicum (optional).
7. *Time-Table:* The student-counsellor will need to submit to his supervisor, a practicum Time Table indicating when he or she will be available for counselling on the site. A suggested format is as follows:

PRACTICUM TIME TABLE FORM

Name:

Identification Number:

Classification:

Location/Address of
Practicum Site:

Hours
available

days available

.....

mon. tue. wed. thur. fri. sat.

8 — 10 a.m.
10 — 12 noon
12 — 2 p.m.
2 — 4 p.m.

Other hours (indicate)

.....
(Indicate whichever is applicable).

.....
Signature of Student

*It is important the student-counsellor visits his counselling site and consults with the principal or whoever should receive him or her there, and discuss issues relating to the appropriate time he or she can hold the counselling sessions and where, before drawing the Practicum Time Table.

Questions to be answered

The beginning student-counsellor may be faced with a number of issues at the beginning of the practicum exercise or even when the practicum is in progress. Some of the concerns of previous student-counsellors will now be highlighted with possible solutions to these concerns.

1. *Will the student-counsellor be allocated to the Practicum site of his choice?*

Some student-counsellors worry their practicum co-ordinator over choice of practicum site. This is unnecessary. Students are usually allocated to different settings after the practicum co-ordinator might have contacted some agencies, schools and occupational centres. However, if a student-counsellor has another practicum site in mind, where appropriate practicum experience could be gained, this could be explored through the supervisor.

2. *Can the student-counsellor solve every client's problem?*

There are a number of factors that will determine the student-counsellor's success with clients, some of which are the nature of the problem, his or her level of training and other personal factors. Clients should be referred when they cannot be helped. Not all clients can be helped by the student-counsellor.

3. *What can the student-counsellor do if clients do not co-operate during practicum?*

Some student-counsellors get worried, initially during the practicum exercise when clients are not co-operating enough. Some even request for a change of the practicum site. The possibility of few clients coming to the student-counsellors at the beginning of the practicum exercise is not unusual. There could be a number of reasons for this. The student-counsellor may need to build the confidence of the clients in him or her. He or she should let them know his or her mission. He or she should reach out to the clients through discussions, posters or lectures in order to break any barrier between him or her and the clients.

4. *Which problems must the student-counsellor tape?*

The student-counsellor should not think that it is when he or she submits counselling tapes on severe psychological problems that his or her tapes will be highly rated by his or her supervisor. The student-counsellor may not even have the skills to resolve many of such problems. In most cases the nature of the practicum setting may determine, to a reasonable extent, the kind of problems that will be brought to him or her. He or she still demonstrates his or her counselling skills when he or she deals with common, everyday problems which could be educational, occupational and personal-social.

5. *How many counselling tapes must the student-counsellor submit for assessment?*

The number of recorded counselling interviews may sometimes give the clue that the student-counsellor is meeting the clients. He or she should inquire from the practicum supervisor, the number of tapes to be submitted. It is advisable the student-counsellor produces more tapes than required. He or she can pick some differences in his or her skills when he or she listens to tapes by himself or herself.

6. *Which of the counselling tapes should the student-counsellor submit?*

Sometimes, some student-counsellors are undecided on which counselling tape(s) to submit. The supervisor, from experience, knows that the student-counsellor will make mistakes during the

interview. The tapes submitted to the supervisor should be those which he or she could, at least, observe his or her opening, rapport, responding skills, initiating and communicating skills, problem-solving skills and the closing.

7. What should be the length of each counselling tape?

The length of the counselling interview will depend on the nature of the problem being handled. Between twenty to thirty minutes is a reasonable length for a beginner, but he or she may soon discover that such a length of time is too short for any meaningful achievement or progress. Experience will teach the student-counsellor the appropriate length of counselling session, but the age and attention span of the client should be taken into consideration. Similarly, the overall time available to the student-counsellor and his or her setting may dictate how to share the time among the clients.

8. How many clients does the student-counsellor have to see during the practicum exercise?

The number should be many as they come and as many as he or she can reasonably handle. The practicum coordinator may expect him or her to interact with a specified minimum of clients.

9. Does the student-counsellor have to visit the practicum site regularly?

It is mandatory that the student-counsellor visits his or her practicum site regularly. The convenient time for such visits would have been worked out between him and his setting, which is later on passed on to his supervisor as the practicum time table. The supervisor can visit you any time during the practicum exercise. He cannot stop going for the practicum exercise even if he has met the requirements as to the number of clients to be seen or the number of tapes to be recorded. His practicum has been scheduled to last for a certain period so that he can accumulate the necessary contact hours. It is wise that he visits the practicum site throughout the exercise. The supervisor should know immediately if he has to be absent for any reason, so that allowance could be made for any time lost and to avoid the supervisor visiting the site only to discover that he is not there.

10. *How does the student-counsellor handle clients who still need his assistance after the practicum exercise?*

The goals of the practicum is to make the student-counsellor learn by doing. He should not shy away from such a responsibility even when the practicum might have been completed. However, he should not allow the clients to depend on him too much, as counselling is for growth. There could be one or two new clients from his practicum site who may still call on him for help.

Handling Practical Cases in Counselling

11. *How to handle initial fears and threats connected with practice*

In written tests many students become anxious and this usually interferes with their performance in such tests, especially when such anxiety is too much. Most students on practicum also extend the practicum period to their examination period and therefore get panicky, only to discover that they flop and can not make any good use of the things learnt in the theories or courses.

First, a student-counsellor should realise that he can only perform best when he is himself and that he performs poorly when he imagines himself to be in a hopeless situation.

Unlike in examinations where the objective is largely to assess, in practicum, it is not only assessment but is also to improve skill. With this at the back of his mind, he will know that he is just starting and can develop or acquire more skill as he goes further in the interview.

Some students unconsciously make the counselling encounter a tense one by inadvertently communicating tension to the client. It starts with the sitting posture of the counsellor. Some sit with drawn chest as in "breathe in" exercise, and perch at the edge of the seat. This is not in any way conducive for a good counselling relationship.

The student-counsellor is advised to sit with his back touching the back rest of his seat and his muscles relaxed. He should, in addition, not be consumed on how well he is going to perform in the practicum, rather emphasis should be placed on what he can do with this client. This simply involves, first greeting him and

welcoming him into his office. He may then ask what the client wants both of them to discuss. By so doing, he has indirectly started the counselling interview.

12. *Psychological principles to remember*

Usually the student-counsellor would have been exposed to some theories of counselling and might have picked one with which he feels more comfortable. Even when a person says he does not believe in any theory or that he has no theory, he has expressed a theory. According to Tolbert (1972) this is "going ahead intuitively."

The first principle to have in mind is that of willingness to sincerely want to help the client. This focuses the attention on how to help, what to do and less on how well the client will perform or what mark he will score, etc.

Similarly he needs to remember some steps in the counselling process. Brammer and Shostrom (1977) outlined some of the steps.

These briefly are:

- (a) "Stating concerns and establishing a need for help." This involves getting the client to express his problem, **perceive** it as such and express willingness to be helped and **readiness** to cooperate.
- (b) "Establishing the Relationship." This involves building in the client some confidence in the counsellor and **counselling**.
- (c) "Determining goals and structure." Here, one discusses with the client the goals to be achieved. Such goals, **however**, should be stated in clear and 'measurable' terms.
- (d) "Working on problems and goals" — Work now starts in full on the problem, so as to achieve the goal jointly arrived at, but this depends on the nature of the problem.
- (e) "Facilitating awareness," i.e. enabling the client to gain 'insight' into his problem;
- (f) "Planning a course of action" i.e. jointly formulating a concrete plan of how the client will implement some of the resolutions arrived at; and
- (g) "Evaluating outcome and Terminating." The seven-step process can be combined and reduced to five. Activities outlined

in the first three steps take place simultaneously. Hence what the student-counsellor needs to keep in mind are:

- (i) Getting the client to state his problem and establishing that this is the actual problem;
- (ii) What the objectives/goals to be achieved are;
- (iii) How to go about doing these;
- (iv) Arising from the resolutions in (iii) above, how the client implements the plans; and
- (v) Termination.

Remembering the procedure helps the student-counsellor to focus on what will be done and so generate task-relevant ideas.

A third point is the way a counsellor comports himself. This means a lot to the client. In other words, his own appearance should be neat and he should clearly and logically express himself.

Yet another point to remember is the existence of mannerism among student-counsellors, and which should be avoided. Some probably unknowingly frequently look at their wrist-watches. By so doing, one is hasting up the client and this is not an attending skill, rather it is repelling.

While counselling, the emotions that some problems might generate can be tremendous such that the counsellor himself is in danger of sinking with his client. It is the counsellor's responsibility to note that, while he communicates understanding, he does not take over the problem of the client.

Another hint which is related to this is that of expressing surprise at the problem stated by a client. Experience has shown that such an expression makes the client feel awkward and dejected.

13. *The problem of school authority's resistance to practice*
One major problem that a student will face in counselling is that of resistance by the school authority, personified in the principal.

For one thing, the development of education has brought about shortage of teachers. Coupled with this is the shortage of funds, hence most schools cannot afford to have a counsellor. In addition, the idea is still new to many principals and so ignorantly object to students having practicum in their schools.

Another problem, apart from this, however, is that some

principals, who hitherto have been the confidant to the pupils, see a threat in the person of the counsellor. They, therefore, try as it were to protect their own "area of influence" which they wrongly perceive that the counsellor would erode.

This problem can be tackled in two ways. One of these is to get the appropriate section of the ministry to approve the practicum and notify principals. Such information, coming from above, dissolves the resistance of some principals.

On the other hand, the student can on his own meet the principal and discuss with him. Realising that he is dealing with a "resistant" person, the student-counsellor needs to marshal all the points that can convince him of the usefulness of counselling to pupils.

In spite of the resistant principals, it is important to note that very many do co-operate and, some even go all out to request for student-counsellors to come to their schools.

Once in the school, the student-counsellor will need, in addition to the verbal conviction, to demonstrate his usefulness. This will go a long way to actually convince the school authority.

A student-counsellor can think of organising a "Career day," giving lectures to the students on various topics of importance, and at each stage, getting the principal and his assistant involved especially when guest lecturers are invited. All these in a way educate the Principal on what counselling is about.

14. Relating with Teachers

Teachers in the school see themselves as part of the established system. Like the principal, some may react negatively to the student-counsellor while others will be welcoming. As a student-counsellor, there is the need to build good relationship with the school's staff generally.

Teachers are relevant to the guidance programme because they can serve as referral source to the counsellor. They are closer to the students because they go into the classrooms to teach and might observe sudden changes in the behaviour of some pupils; changes from excellent achievement to poor achievement, extroversion to introversion, being withdrawn to poor personal appearance, etc. They need to refer such pupils to the counsellor quick-

ly and for this, it is worth the while to solicit their assistance, and get them involved in some of the group activities.

15. *Getting a room to practise*

As counselling is yet new to most schools, adequate provision of physical facilities, such as room, cabinet for keeping records, tests, etc have not been provided. Also, the creation of many new schools has resulted in two or more schools sharing the same compound and so there is pressure for space.

The problem of getting a room to practise is best discussed with the principal on the first day the student-counsellor gets to the school.

As much as possible, a fairly reserved place to protect confidentiality and minimise noise interference is advised. In the absence of this, part of the laboratory which is not used most of the time is manageable, so also can part of the library serve the purpose. But these should be at the last resort where there is no room to practise.

Finally, the practicum organisers are advised to discuss first with school authorities and examine the facilities available before posting students. The problem with this is that one may end up having few schools, and these may not be able to take all the student-counsellors. This is why the alternative place such as the library and the laboratory have been suggested.

16. *Power tussle over discipline*

Sometimes, many principals want to hand over the problem of discipline to the counsellor. This arises from the conception that the counsellor handles all cases of abnormal behaviour and should therefore, be involved with the discipline of student. This is an unending controversy, while some people feel that the counsellor can be involved with disciplining the student and at the same time to counsel him; others do not share this view.

For one thing, it is better to have a committee on matters involving discipline. A counsellor may then be on this committee so as to either enlighten other members of particular cases being treated, give side points to the problems, etc. He is not in any case supposed to hold brief for offending pupils, otherwise he soon becomes a refuge for offending students.

It has been argued that a counsellor may be able to counsel student who is guilty of committing offences on the rules of the school, and subject to discipline. But this itself can be done provided the counsellor is not charged with judging the case and meting out punishment. To be involved in judging and giving punishment may make students to withdraw from counselling, particularly those who have some guilty conscience to clear.

There is an example of a clique in one school where some big boys have constituted themselves into bullies and extorted money from younger and "smaller" pupils. The money is spent by members of the clique during the mid-day meal. Later, a member of the group started developing guilty conscience and reported himself to the counsellor. If the counsellor had been perceived as the judge, such cases might not come to him.

Apart from such situations, counselling services are professional in nature. It should, therefore, not be performed by a person who is also solely in charge of discipline. He can sometimes be the lawyer who will take up a case before the judge, but not advocating that serious offences be overlooked. The counsellor should be a person who possesses dignity and respect among the pupils. However, it is very important that a student-counsellor undergoing practicum should be careful as to how he gets involved in discipline problems or issues.

17. Recording Interviews

In recording interviews, some pertinent questions one might ask are: what to record, when to record, where to record and how to record.

In a direct answer to the question of what to record, it will be suggested that, as much as possible of an interview, in fact, all and as many types as possible should be recorded. The objective of the practicum is both to improve the practice as well as to assess. It is, therefore, necessary to record all since the objective is to see how the student-counsellor handles the interviews. The supervisor will not base his assessment only on sections of the interview, rather it is the entire interview. In addition, while playing back, some errors can then be pointed out to the student-counsellor and some possible alternative actions given. This provides for feedback and lear-

ning experiences.

As regards the question of when to record, it is suggested that recording begins soon after the client has agreed that the interview be recorded and has indicated willingness to state his problem. This may then leave out the pleasantries of greetings and welcoming and initiating acceptance. However, such must be included in the report.

Recording is best done where there is minimum noise. Noise distracts the attention of both the counsellor and the client, and so recording should be done in a very quiet place.

Secondly, it should be a reserved area where other students will not see their colleagues being recorded. This might attract attention to the client as other students will come rushing in to ask what was discussed.

How to record? Many students have always asked the question as to whether one cassette tape should be used per client. To minimise the expenses of the student-counsellor, it is advised that a general tape be first used in recording all clients who turn up; after exhausting that, another tape can be taken for recording. After the exercise, i.e. the end of the practicum, the interviews judged to be the best can now be dubbed to new tapes — well labelled, for submission.

18. *Listening to and learning from taped interviews*

Experience, it is said, is the best teacher. Knowledge derived from one's own personal experiences are lasting and easier to apply. One of the reasons for advocating that many interviews be recorded is that the first few tapes from which "the best" will subsequently be selected will remain with the student-counsellor. He can then play back such tapes and listen to himself the way he opened up the interview, how the goal was set, as well as how the handling of the main problem and the termination of it was done. This provides for a learning experience and an opportunity to improve as well as for memoirs of early beginnings in counselling. Soon, one can listen to many tapes over a period of time in order to assess how far he has improved.

Tapes from the counselling practicum also serve reference purposes which the counsellor himself can, after graduation, use to improve his practice or train others. While playing back such

tapes, he can point out examples of specific skills used in counselling. Obvious examples are openness and honesty of purpose as verbally expressed as well as how to communicate acceptance and understanding to the client.

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