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Smith, Vicki J

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“It ‘Ain’t What You Do It’s the Way That You Do It:”
The Tutor Perspective on the Impact of the Student / Tutor Alliance on Student Wellness and the Quality of the Learning Experience in UK Counselling Training.

Vicki Smith
Senior Lecturer in Counselling Studies, University of Huddersfield, UK.
v.smith@hud.ac.uk
The impact of the ‘teaching alliance’ in counselling training

- Previous study (student perspective) revealed the importance of tutor/student relationships for students

- Suggested this could have a huge impact on the effectiveness of the training (including student wellness)
Previous research

• Studies showing the importance of certain teacher qualities on learning outcomes (Lowman, 1995; Teven and Hanson, 2004; Benson et al, 2009)

• Fewer studies focusing on trainees in health care professions (Dobinson-Harrington, 2006; Salahuddin, 2000; Jones et al, 2008)
The nature of the course

- Counselling training is not purely an academic discipline
- Application of skills and reflexive abilities
- Personal development, self disclosure
- Can be emotionally demanding
The study

- Focused on the tutor perspective:

(1) Which tutor qualities and skills tutors thought were particularly important

(2) To what extent tutors thought they were able to demonstrate these relational features

(3) To what extent, and in what ways, these relationships have an impact on student wellness and the quality of the learning experience
Method

- Counsellor trainers from three HE institutions
- Given questions to consider in advance
- Semi-structured interviews
- Audio recorded
Analysis

Qualitative study

- Small sample
- Rich understanding of data
- Analysis still in progress-reporting from two interviews
Analysis

**Template analysis** – to identify themes

- Allows flexibility
- Provides a structure without being too rigid
- Enables a priori codes to be used
- Used the same codes as for the previous study to aid comparison
Findings

- Will highlight the similarities and differences between student and tutor perspectives
- Will focus on aspects relating to wellness and a positive learning experience
- Will discuss the possible implications of these findings for counselling training courses
Findings: similarities

- Significant overlap
- Many of the reported tutor qualities and skills were the same
- Likely effects of the relationship on student wellness and learning had many similar features
Which qualities tutors valued highly

Similarities:
Links with the client / therapist relationship

• use of Rogers’ (1957) ‘core conditions,’ (empathy, acceptance, being non-judgmental, genuineness)
• modelling an effective relationship,
• self-disclosure
Which qualities tutors valued highly

Differences:
Self-disclosure
- Tutors highlighted the need for *appropriate* self-disclosure (limits to this)

High self-esteem
- Need to be assertive and robust
- Non-defensive if challenged
Findings: differences

High level of self-awareness

- “acknowledgement of one’s own strengths and weaknesses..management of prejudices and biases.”
- “critically reflecting” on one’s own performance and behaviour.
Perspectives on the learning environment

Similarities:

- If students felt safe and supported:
  (a) Increased participation
  (b) Increased risk-taking- “feel able to make mistakes”
  (c) Sense of being held- able to grow
Perspectives on the learning environment

Similarities and differences:
- Need for safe, supportive but **boundaried** learning environment
- “Appropriate balance of support and **challenge**
- Tutor needs to **lead** the group, take responsibility for learning

“My tendency is to be very democratic…but..you’ve got to have some authority.”
The effects of the relationship on student wellness / affect

Similarities:

- They’re frightened of being judged, scared of the criticism (increased anxiety)
- “If you trust someone and you feel like they’re not going to judge you, you might be able to take feedback from them better as well, or even criticism.”
- “They’ve got someone nurturing there...I’m not talking about like mothering them or something.”
- Students are “happier,” “more comfortable” and have increased motivation if relationship is positive
The effects of the relationship on wellness /affect

Differences:
• Possible negative effects on tutor wellness
Can face **attack** from group members
**Stress levels** can be high
More difficult if feeling **vulnerable**

“They might have a go at you or they might really target you...we were nearly wiped out emotionally.”
The effects of the relationship on wellness /affect

Differences:

- **External pressures** including increased workload/reduced resources impact on the alliance and tutor wellness

“When I’m trying to prioritise everything...in that situation the empathy is reduced”

“I want to be patient, I find myself sometimes not being as patient...as I’d like to.”
The effects of the relationship on wellness /affect

Differences:

• Group dynamics/ students in the group can have a negative effect

• (students were) “
  frightened of being judged by people or you felt like people were talking about you behind your back.”
Conclusions

- Too early to draw firm conclusions
- Tutors’ views seem to support student perspective in many respects
- More focus on challenge /boundaries
- More focus on managing the learning environment
- Student and tutor wellness seen as inter-dependent (tutor overload, managing own wellness)
Conclusions

**Group / Relationship management**

- Self-awareness, self-reflection
- Commitment to self-development
- Resilience and robustness
- Non-defensiveness
- Clear boundaries
- Ability to manage / challenge negative behaviours
Implications for training courses

Tutors need to:

• provide a safe, boundaried and sufficiently challenging learning environment using the above relational features

• be skilled at managing groups and relationships, including alliance ruptures

• discuss roles and expectations and other relational issues with students (especially when views differ)
Implications for training courses

Other considerations:

- Rigorous selection procedures for tutors including ability to manage relationships and groups

- Vital importance of on-going personal and professional development
References


References

