

Learning from triads: training undergraduates in counselling skills

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1 **Learning from triads: training undergraduates in counselling**
2 **skills**

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11 **Introduction**

12 Since the beginning of the Rogerian movement (Rogers, 1951), students training in
13 psychotherapy and counselling have been required to take part in ‘live’ demonstrations
14 of therapy. This practice is now common to all modalities of counselling skills training
15 (Hill, Stahl & Roffman, 2007). Training in counselling and psychotherapy is provided
16 in both private organisations and voluntary agency contexts, as well as higher and
17 further education institutions, with a range of delivery formats e.g. part-time, full-time,
18 online, postgraduate, and undergraduate. Universities deliver around 50% of training
19 (BACP, 2015). In the UK around 35 university programmes have integrated counselling
20 skills training in to undergraduate degrees (UCAS, 2014). For some students, entry on
21 to an undergraduate course may represent the first step towards professional training in
22 counselling or clinical psychology, while for others, it is simply training in transferable
23 skills.

24 Generally courses providing undergraduate training in helping skills combining theory,
25 skills practice, and personal development aspects, have been shown to be effective, with
26 even relatively short-term training shown to increase students' abilities to self-manage
27 and help others (Payne & Woudenberg, 1978), and to develop conceptual and practice
28 skills, and self-awareness (Korn, 1980). In addition, the practical application of skills
29 during training has been found to significantly increase the use of skills during helping
30 events compared to training in which students simply observe or analyse skills
31 (Klevans, Voltz, & Friedman, 1981). More contemporary research has focused on the
32 pedagogy of training in counselling skills (Hill & Lent, 2006), and the measurement of
33 outcomes (Hill & Kellems, 2002). One study, which examined the effectiveness of
34 undergraduates who had trained on a 'helping skills' course (Hill, Roffman, Stahl,
35 Friedman, Hummel & Wallance, 2008), found good evidence for a range of skills being
36 perceived as improved by clients and counselling students, as well as improvements
37 indicated by objective measures of intervention such as the number of words used
38 during sessions.

39 In 2013 a report by the Higher Education Academy stated that there was a clear need for
40 an evidence base for best practice in teaching counselling and psychotherapy (Rutten &
41 Hulme, 2013). To date, research into skills training has largely focused on effectiveness
42 (Baker & Daniels, 1989; Baker, Daniels & Greeley, 1990; Buser, 2008); and the indirect
43 psychological impact on the undergraduate student (e.g. Naar, 1974). Although the
44 arguments for and against training within university contexts are discussed within the
45 literature (e.g. Wheeler & Miller, 2002), specific pedagogical activities in
46 undergraduate settings have not been well researched.

47 A deeper understanding of counsellor training requires an examination of the ways in
48 which delivery and content impact upon learning. While it is generally accepted that

49 instruction and modelling, practice and feedback, and space for reflection are all
50 essential (Hill, *et al*, 2007), other variables such as class size, tutor input, and teaching
51 and learning activities may be important, and student perspectives on training may
52 provide guidance for educators for best practice.

53 This study focuses on one particular aspect of the training - skills training exercises -
54 and the impact of this practice on the overall learning experience of students. Skills
55 training generally involves small groups of students turn-taking in applying particular
56 counselling activities to each other, with reflective learning facilitated by feedback input
57 from the perspective of the client, counsellor and observer(s) (Inskip, 1996; Swank &
58 McCarthy, 2013). Sharing of the experience of applying skills, observation of others,
59 and experiencing the different counselling styles as a client, creates a situation where
60 the trainee can appreciate counselling from all perspectives (Hill, *et al*, 2007), making
61 counselling personally relevant, increasing empathy towards clients (Anderson,
62 Gundersen, Blanken, Halvorson, & Schmutte, 1989) and broadening an understanding
63 of counselling processes such as boundary maintenance and self-disclosure (Barnett,
64 2011; Hill & Knox, 2001). Being in the role of the client, in particular, may involve
65 disclosure of personal 'problem' material to peers, and so this pedagogical practice
66 involves risk and relationship management for which students may be unprepared
67 (Latham, 1997). While institutional ethical considerations usually mean that use of
68 personal material is not compulsory, Hill and colleagues (2008) found that during their
69 study into the effectiveness of training, peer-counselling students voluntarily used
70 personal difficulties rather than making up problems when in the role of clients.

71 This awareness of safety and risk and its role in the training environment (as opposed to
72 the counselling environment *per se*) has not been subject to a great deal of research (but
73 see Payne (2001) for a discussion of the role of safety in dance therapy for postgraduate

74 trainees and Robson and Robson (2008) for experiences of students personal
75 development groups), and no studies look at how peer-counselling in counselling
76 training might be best provided or developed within the undergraduate training cohort.
77 Consideration should be given to responsibility of the training institution towards their
78 students, as teaching and learning practices may involve voluntary engagement in self-
79 disclosure practices in a context where students may not be able to make an informed
80 choice, and disclosure is implicitly required by the context (Haney, 2004; Seawright &
81 Seawright, 2012). Counselling training is a potentially fertile ground for the divulgence
82 of problematic stories and emotions and students may find themselves in a context
83 where the role, and ratio, of trainers to students potentially precludes suitable
84 monitoring of problems. In a qualitative study exploring the experiences of training for
85 counselling undergraduates (Truell, 2001), two of the six students interviewed reported
86 that the most stressful experience on the course was self-disclosure, with little perceived
87 support from trainers due to blurred boundaries between students, and between students
88 and tutors. Along with the stresses of disclosure, and perceptions of support roles, the
89 suitability of students who have self-selected to study counselling, may be a concern as
90 the course may provide an arena for the presentation of unaddressed emotional needs
91 and potentially challenging material (Guy, 1987). Self-disclosure may be implicitly or
92 explicitly encouraged by tutors and peers, and be seen as evidence of emotional
93 maturity or successful processing of events (Perillo, 1997). For students, potentially
94 high-risk subject matter such as mental illness, relationships and interpersonal issues,
95 sexual abuse, physical health, substance use or misuse, and sexuality, may be current
96 (Storrie, Ahern & Tuckett, 2010), and moral perspectives and socio-cultural beliefs may
97 also be challenged by peers. In a skills training context inappropriate disclosure or
98 inappropriate response to disclosures either within or out-with the course context could

99 lead to emotional distress, on-going interpersonal problems, a break-down or rupture in
100 the training group, loss of confidence and a negative impact on the learning experience.
101 This is of particular concern to an undergraduate cohort that is undertaking a three- or
102 four-year period of study and who may share time both within the programme and
103 socially.

104

105 This research study explores the experiences of undergraduate students training in
106 counselling skills as part of their Psychology and Counselling undergraduate degree.
107 The aim of the research is to examine the perspective of students engaged in triads, and
108 ask what challenges may arise for this group in terms of self-disclosures, with the
109 objective of informing on teaching in further and higher education.

110

111 **Method**

112 Semi-structured interviews were carried out on a cohort of students focusing
113 specifically on the experience and impact of self-disclosure during training. The
114 interviews and analysis were carried out by the lead counselling tutor on the
115 undergraduate programme. The initial research question was based on a professional
116 observation of the different dynamics between a group of undergraduate students
117 compared to a group of mature postgraduates on a comparable course. The
118 undergraduate students were less engaged with disclosure, reporting it as difficult, and
119 how it could impact on their relationships with their cohort outside the classroom.

120

121 **Participants**

122 Twelve participants (identified as A-L) were recruited from a cohort of 20
123 undergraduates approaching the end of their second year of a BSc Psychology and

124 Counselling. Their counselling-specific training had comprised one introductory
125 module, and at the time of interview, between two and three counselling skills modules
126 (approximately 25% of their full-time timetable). Ages ranged from 19-26 (mean
127 20.58, sd 1.98), and included two males and 10 females.

128 The training provided in the counselling skills modules was embedded within a three-
129 hour long, weekly session. The sessions themselves involved a taught component,
130 followed by a description or demonstration of an intervention or skill e.g. person-
131 centred counselling, followed by the use of empathic reflection in practice. Students
132 were then split in to 'triad' working groups of three/four, and practised the skill on one
133 another with the roles of client, counsellor and observer(s). Following the skills
134 practical, student personal development groups provided the opportunity to reflect on
135 the theory and skills with semi-structured tasks. It is important to note that while the
136 use of personal material was not compulsory, it was encouraged when in the role of a
137 client in the triads.

138

139 **Data collection and analysis**

140 Semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes, were conducted by
141 the researcher following guidelines laid out by Whiting (2008). The development of
142 interview questions was guided by Agee (2007) and focused on preparedness and
143 preparation for triads, on-going training experiences and disclosures, changes and
144 learning over time, and reflections on the process.

145 Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed as soon as possible following the
146 interview. Thematic analysis followed a process of open-coding for initial meaning
147 units within the text followed by categorisation of themes. Returning to the text to
148 verify the categories allowed for the adjustment and removal of repeated or over-

149 lapping conceptual units. Then a stage involving axial coding (linking categories), and
150 higher order or ‘selective’ coding was undertaken to establish a conceptual framework
151 to best exemplify the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

152

153 **Ethical considerations**

154 British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) ethical guidelines for
155 counsellors underpinned the research process (Bond, 2004), which was given approval
156 by the university’s Ethics Committee. Participation in the study was voluntary, and
157 informed, written consent was obtained.

158 Specific ethical considerations related to the relationship between the researcher, a
159 member of university staff, and the students. The potential impact of this relationship
160 was two-fold. First, it would influence the students’ perception of their obligations to
161 take part, and to report particular aspects of their experience in favour of others. Second,
162 the tutor would be influenced by what was said and the study would become a platform
163 for specific feedback (which should occur through formal programme-level channels
164 and meetings arranged by the institution). In order to mitigate this blurring of
165 boundaries between the course and the study, student recruitment occurred outside of
166 class through emails sent to potential participants, and statements were made to clarify
167 the purpose of the study and provide assurance of neutrality and confidentiality.
168 Participants were also encouraged to bring issues of complaint to the termly programme
169 meetings, as what was divulged during the study was not fed directly into teaching.

170

171 Reflections from the author:

172 As the lead tutor and co-ordinator of these students’ triads, I approached the project as a
173 way of addressing my personal concerns about a teaching practice that appeared to be

174 commonplace. I wanted to ask questions of the students, not as a tutor in conversation,
175 but in a way that allowed more exploratory and honest accounts. Although triads were
176 the activity on this course with which I had least involvement (the main facilitation of
177 skills practices being carried out by other tutors), I had the job of ‘designing’ the
178 practical work, and also of facilitating post-triad reflective discussion. Questions in my
179 head during the research revolved around bias in the reports, and bias in the analysis:
180 ‘Are these students telling me what I want to know, or messages they want me to hear?’
181 ‘What am I not seeing, am I blindsided by expectation?’ Participants were assured that
182 all comments would be treated with equal value both in the study information and
183 verbally prior to- and during the interviews. It was also verbally clarified that
184 participation (or not) would have no impact on their studies: for example, opinions and
185 experiences of triads were not made available to, or discussed with, the triad tutors. I
186 also approached the interviews from the perspective of acceptance and respect for what
187 was being presented, to minimise, as far as possible, interpretation from my perspective:
188 to honour participants’ contributions at ‘face value’. The systematic analysis of the
189 transcripts involved an extra layer of complexity for me, as there were aspects of the
190 accounts that were expected, but also aspects that were surprising. I was also aware of
191 my professional position, and the risk of finding evidence of poor or unethical practice.
192 I was prepared to follow ethical guidelines but was also aware that in the long-term I
193 may have to accept that the teaching of the course might have to change. On the other
194 hand my involvement with the students allowed me to share their context and
195 knowledge, which, I believe, enhanced my understanding of the students’ perspectives
196 and experiences.
197
198

199

200 **Results:**

201 Three theme clusters emerged from the data (table 1), the first relating to the *functioning*
202 *of the cohort* including relationships inside and outside the class, premature intimacy of
203 the cohort, and overall group dynamics. A second cluster existed around the *personal*
204 *impact* of disclosures, which included the impact of saying too much, the consequences
205 of breaches of trust, and a third concerning the *impact on learning*. The quotes reported
206 are identified by participant letter (A-L), and the transcript line number.

207

208 *(insert table 1 about here)*

209 ***Functioning of the cohort:***

210 This theme was indicated by an awareness in the participants that there were both
211 shared and individual rules on how to manage what was divulged during the triads:

212

213 A275: ‘It’s just clear that you wouldn’t take that outside (the group), like maybe
214 you could look at someone and say “alright?” but I wouldn’t think of bringing it
215 up.’

216 H121: ‘Some of us just got it, like in that early discussion group, it all clicked
217 and we were like permission to share, it kind of made it easy that the rules were
218 talked about.’

219 E332: ‘I still monitor what I can say, like I have to prepare for triads to get a
220 problem that’s the right size, sometimes I don’t want to talk and that’s okay, it’s
221 not a problem.’

222

223 Reports indicate that the group functioned on very personal level from early on. This
224 was felt to be an unusual experience for students, and unlike that of other groups. A
225 strong sense of positive group identity pervaded many of the reports.

226 D254: 'You look at other students and I mean, they are not like us, we're really
227 unusual because we have like grown up really fast together.'

228 An awareness of the impact of intimacy, which came out of disclosure, was viewed
229 positively and negatively by participants.

230 K176: 'Trust is a big deal for me, I know I can trust everyone, I feel really close
231 to the class, I've told them stuff I wouldn't say to my mum.'

232 This related to discussions around the ideas of sharing with friends and sharing with
233 peers on the course, with some students distinguishing between them.

234 C344: 'I walk in here and I don't think about it, but I definitely have my friends,
235 like X, and then there are people I will work with, but then I wouldn't see them
236 from one week to the next except in class but they are easier to work with, you
237 know?'

238 Some of the students reported negative feelings around the formation of sub-groups
239 within the teaching cohort, impacting on the way triads worked.

240 G401: 'I think we have now got our little groups, cliques, and if we don't get
241 made to work with other people we don't, and if I'm with X (student) then we
242 tend to just not do our work.'

243 *Personal impact*

244 This theme cluster concerns the ways in which being on the course has impacted on the
245 students personally, in particular the impact of what is said, when too much might be
246 shared, and the consequences of breaches of trust.

247

248 Students sometimes felt that they were managing a tension between their social
249 presentations of themselves and the ways that they were expected to be open and honest
250 on the counselling course.

251

252 B316: 'I'm not sure I want to be like, "I know all about you, and you know all about
253 me", it doesn't make me feel good sometimes that someone knows your
254 underneath.'

255 This was highlighted by important aspects of the emotional experience and how these
256 were managed by others on the course.

257

258 C167: 'My eyes were red from crying, and everyone knew why, but it was fine,
259 I mean they knew but no-one made a fuss when I saw them later.'

260 The students were very aware of the real or potential impact of sharing too much with
261 peers. Sometimes sharing left the students with sense of reduced safety.

262 B105: 'At first when I got the whole story out I felt okay but then the worries set
263 in about what people thought and where they would take it, I mean like I'd hate
264 to think that they were down the pub telling everyone, "Oh yeh there's this girl
265 on my course with an alki for a mum."' '

266 There was awareness of the need to limit what is said in triads.

267 I56: ‘God, I have to be careful because if I am on a rant it all comes out, I don’t
268 hold back and I had to learnt to just think of how it would sound, and what I can
269 talk about in like 15 minutes....sometimes the sessions would just be one person
270 going on, and that means you get in to a lot of s***.’

271 There was also a need to ensure that the listener was not overloaded, or too concerned.

272 D320: ‘To be honest I don’t think he’d cope with it all, I didn’t want to tell him
273 all about it and then he’d not know what to say and that would be just awkward.’

274 E178: ‘There’s a limit, not just time, but like a limit on how much you put on
275 people, they are going to be thinking about it all day.’

276 Sometimes what was shared in the triads left a mark, and this impact left long-term
277 feelings of discomfort and concern:

278 K365: ‘I just felt for her, really, really bad, like so sorry that this had happened,
279 and I didn’t know what to say, and when I saw her later I wanted to say “are you
280 okay?” but wasn’t allowed and so I’ve never even said anything to her.’

281 Putting trust in others, and being placed in a situation where trust is required, presented
282 problems especially at the start of the training. Several participants mused about when
283 and where breaches were being risked, that someone might take the information out of
284 the group, but also that under some circumstances breaches should occur for the benefit
285 of other students.

286 G214: ‘My feeling was that you couldn’t talk about it outside, like you would
287 never talk about it outside but this time we all left together and were in the hall
288 before I thought ooh no shut up.’

289 B115: 'Do I say something, like when is it appropriate to like say to X (tutor)
290 that there is an issue?'

291 This perceived risk was matched in many reports by a sense of trust:

292 C12: 'We've all been like so trusting over the last year or so that no-one would
293 break that now, it's like a pact between us.'

294 The role of the tutors was again important in terms of emotional support, and for formal
295 and informal advice. They were seen as a resource.

296 E54: 'So I spoke to X (tutor) about it, and she was great, she suggested that I
297 went to student services, which I did and I've been going there for four weeks
298 now.'

299 ***Impact on learning***

300 This theme reflects the various ways that the triads impacted on learning in the group.
301 The triads were approached with various levels of trepidation, but recognised as an
302 important aspect of training.

303 G62: 'I can still remember oh my gosh when X (tutor) said we were going to be
304 counselling each other, I was so nervous.'

305 H300: 'You have to be careful with feedback, you want them to be honest but
306 you don't want to say anything negative to them.'

307 E51: 'You can't learn without it.'

308 Some of the students reported going through a stage of withdrawing from the group, not
309 wanting to take part in the triads or reverting to role-play as a client.

310 B201: ‘There was definitely a stage where I went right back and thought, these
311 aren’t people who need to talk to me right now, I don’t want to engage you
312 know?’

313 For some, the major challenge was to understand the need for skills practice, and why
314 taking the role of the client is so important to personal development.

315 I329: ‘I kept looking for the learning, you know like what is it that I have got
316 from this, and I still can’t put my finger on it.’

317 Ultimately many of the students summarised their experiences as being hard going but
318 worth it, with the positive aspects and learning far outweighing the negative.

319 A197: ‘...at that point I really got it, it clicked and I thought I had really learnt
320 something significant, not just about counselling, but about me and them, it
321 changed me.’

322

323 **Discussion**

324 The key themes for the participants in this study were around aspects of managing
325 personal and group processes and boundaries while engaging in counselling skills
326 training, with clear links being drawn between the experiences in triads and those of
327 self-awareness and relationships within and outside the cohort. As was found by Truell
328 (2001) and Latham (1997), aspects of the risks of structured intimacy and the use of
329 personal material in triads were clearly impactful, but results also indicate participants’
330 awareness of the complexities of confidentiality and the impact of trust on relationships.

331 The participants appear to have taken the first steps towards building a therapeutic
332 community, developing interpersonal awareness, and boundaried and trustful

333 relationships with one another in a way similar to that reported by Payne and
334 Woudenberg (1978), and Korn (1980). Overall the interviewees revealed themselves to
335 be highly self-aware, and aware of the emotions of their peers.

336 One further important aspect, which was highlighted in the Truell (2001) study, is the
337 sense of the tutors being a continued and stable presence in the group. Teachers of
338 counselling should be aware of this role when running courses of this type.

339 The key issue of the personal impact of training, both in the short and long-term, is an
340 established part of postgraduate training and has been well explored, e.g. Folkes-
341 Skinner, *et al*, (2010). However, this is less so for undergraduates, and this study reveals
342 the tensions within and between students, who manage their learning activities by
343 deliberate personal choice-making in terms of disclosure and sharing. This leads to a
344 sense, at times, of voluntary disengagement.

345 Researchers approaching evaluations of teaching practices have tended to examine
346 outcomes of training, and although this was asked about in interviews, the participants
347 in this study talked less about effectiveness, but more on the experience and challenges
348 of the practice. Triad work on this course functioned as a way of developing
349 counselling intervention skills, but also as a catalyst for personal reflection and
350 development, and it was the impact of this secondary role, which appears to be
351 paramount in the reports. Although it brings inherent stresses and challenges, self-
352 disclosure in triad training was a personal choice for the students, and appears to be an
353 appropriate learning activity for this undergraduate group.

354 The implications of these results are that teachers and teaching providers need to be
355 aware of the demands placed on undergraduates undertaking training of this type, and
356 should monitor students closely, and also make efforts to clearly describe these
357 demands to students thinking of entering the programme. For students during training,

358 it may be that the individual interactions and group dynamics become the focus of the
359 learning rather than the skills themselves, and adaptations to teaching and learning - for
360 example by allowing discussions within the group, and individually with tutors - could
361 support this process and mitigate potential problems. There is also variability between
362 students in the ability and willingness to engage in skills practices, which has
363 implications for institutions offering and assessing a teaching and learning activity that
364 not all students are able to fully engage, and so programme providers should consider
365 the impact of this during evaluation of learning.

366

367

368 Limitations:

369 Limitations include the use of participants from a single undergraduate course from a
370 UK institution which means that the experiences reported were to some extent shared.
371 The cohort was also relatively young for students of counselling, and this further
372 reduces the generalisability of the findings to other groups. The implications of the
373 relationship between the researcher and participants is discussed in the methods section,
374 and include the assumption of 'face-value' in the reports of participants, and also
375 possible bias on the part of the investigator..

376 An objective measure of effectiveness of the counselling training in improving skills
377 was not the focus of this project and participants did not evaluate the training, as
378 opposed to the experience of training. More exploration of participant perception of
379 skills learning would constitute a valid focus for a follow-up study. In addition to
380 finding no evidence for overall effectiveness of practical skills training, this study failed
381 to provide evidence for learning being enhanced by reflective engagement, and future

382 research should focus on widening understanding of the impact of pedagogical
383 approaches on academic performance.

384

385 Conclusion

386 While reflective experiential learning is potentially important as both the means and the
387 ends of counselling skills training, there are potential pitfalls, and little published
388 guidance on how this should be managed for undergraduate courses. In this paper the
389 experiences of students who self-disclosed during practice triads were reported, and
390 highlights the personal and academic impact of this kind of learning activity.

391

392

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Table 1: Emergent themes and theme clusters

| <i>Theme cluster</i> | <i>Theme</i> | <i>Participant</i> |
|---------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| Functioning of the cohort | Group rules | A, B, C, D,E,F, G, H, J, K, L |
| | Depth of group engagement | B,D, J, K, L |
| | Not just friendship | A, C, D, E, G, H, K |
| | Process of group development | A, B, E, H, J |
| | Challenges of learning activity | D, E, F, H, I, L |
| | Problems within the group | A, B, C, E, F, H, J, K, L |
| | Formation of sub-groups | C, E, G, F, H, L |
| Personal impact | Social versus group presentation of self | A, B, D, H, J, L |
| | Emotional impact | C, F, G, H, J |
| | Self-policing | A, C, D, G, H, L |
| | Policing for others | A, B, C, D, G, L |
| | Emotional hang-over from triads | C, D, G, J, K |
| | Trust | B, C, E, F, G, I, J, K, L |
| | Need for tutor support | A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, J, K, L |
| Impact on learning | Being prepared for triads | A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L |
| | Not wanting to take part | B, E, F, K |
| | Role of triads in learning | A, C, I, J, L |
| | Outcomes of the course | A, B, D, E, F, G, H, I, K, L |