UNIT 2 THEORY, PRACTICE AND MEDIA OF COUNSELLING

Structure

2.0 Objectives
2.1 Introduction
2.2 Theories of Counselling
2.3 The Qualities of a Counsellor
  2.3.1 Warmth
  2.3.2 Acceptance
  2.3.3 Genuineness
  2.3.4 Empathy
2.4 The Skills of a Counsellor
  2.4.1 Selecting
  2.4.2 Listening
  2.4.3 Structuring
  2.4.4 Epilogue
2.5 The Media of Counselling
  2.5.1 Face-to-face counselling
  2.5.2 Group counselling
  2.5.3 Telephone counselling
  2.5.4 Counselling by letter
  2.5.5 Counselling by handbook
  2.5.6 Counselling by audio and video cassettes
  2.5.7 Counselling by broadcasting
  2.5.8 Counselling by computer or interactive video-disc
  2.5.9 Counselling by internet
2.6 Let Us Sum Up

2.0 OBJECTIVES

After working through this unit, you should be able to:

- describe non-directive Rogerian counselling and say why it is suitable for distance education;
- list and describe the qualities of a counsellor and give examples of their use;
- list and describe the skills of a counsellor and give examples of their use; and
- describe the media used in counselling in distance education, give examples of how they may be used, and recognise the limitations of each.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 1 of this block we dealt with the why, when and what of counselling in distance education. In this unit we shall be looking at the ‘how’ aspect—how you counsel, and what skills, qualities and media you use in doing so.
2.2 THEORIES OF COUNSELLING

Counselling in its general sense can be seen as a branch of psychotherapy bearing the same relationship to psychotherapy as a local doctor might to the nearest hospital. Such doctors can deal perfectly adequately with the most common ailments; occasionally they may have to refer patients to the hospital for much more drastic treatment. However, the medical theories underlying both the doctor’s and hospital’s work are the same.

Psychotherapy was originally associated with the work on psychoanalysis of Freud, Jung and others—the process of probing the sub-conscious in order to lay bare inner motivations.

Recently however there has been a reaction against psychoanalysis in the form of the ‘humanistic psychology’ movement. In this movement the role of the psychotherapist is as an enabler rather than a prober; the humanistic psychologist helps his or her clients explore their situation for themselves so that they can move towards understanding and dealing with their problems on their own.

There are various humanistic psychotherapies—gestalt, transactional analysis, psychodrama, bio-energetics and so on, some with a degree of rationality and success, some less well founded. One in particular has been found by many people to be relevant in educational settings and is known as ‘Rogerian’ therapy after its founder Carl Rogers (1902-1987).

The underlying theory of Rogerian therapy is essentially simple. It is ‘non-directive’—i.e. clients are helped to talk over and clarify their problems for themselves, taking charge of their own therapy. The therapist (and therefore to a lesser extent the counsellor) brings certain qualities and skills to the relationship that enables clients to do this in their own way and in their own time.

We have over-simplified the theory, but in a sense it may not be unfamiliar to you. Rogers has re-invented the concept of meditation and prayer, where troubled persons commune with God and themselves and try and move towards finding solutions to their troubles. Roger’s contribution is to suggest that a second person with particular qualities and skills can help this process.

So what are these qualities and skills? We shall see in the next section.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- ‘Rogerian’ counselling is non-directive. That does not mean counsellors cannot make suggestions to their clients. But it does mean that those suggestions must arise naturally out of the counsellor-client dialogue.
  
  i) What do you think are the difficulties of being non-directive?
  
  ii) What might happen if counsellors give advice and suggestions at too early a stage in the dialogue?
2.3 THE QUALITIES OF A COUNSELLOR

Rogers identified four particular personal qualities that appeared to be essential to working as an effective counsellor. They are warmth, acceptance, genuineness and empathy.

2.3.1 Warmth

The ability to communicate personal warmth and to make learners feel welcome and valued as individuals.

Rogers called this 'non-possessive warmth' which means that it should be appropriate and genuine but not overdone; it should not make the recipient feel taken over or manipulated in the way that, say, they might feel by the behaviour of some kinds of salesmen.

Warmth means saying 'Hello, can I help you?' not 'I'm sorry, I'm rather busy, please keep it short'.

People are sometimes not warm for various reasons: tiredness, overwork, consciousness of status, and may be unfavourable attitude. That apart, without an initial welcoming start, a counsellor is unlikely to have a chance to practice the other qualities and skills.

2.3.2 Acceptance

The quality of being able to accept other people and their feelings for what they are without criticising or judging them personally (which of course is different from judging their behaviour).

Criticism, whether in the form of moral injunctions or negative statements, has little role to play in counselling, as it tends to shut down communication.

But let me try to illustrate this: a learner says to you 'I think these regulations are very stupid!'. Which of the two following responses would you make?

a) 'The regulations all have a purpose, you know'.

b) 'It sounds as though you’re pretty angry about this business'.

I hope that you chose response (b), since response (a) is defensive and somewhat critical and is not likely to encourage the learner to think sensibly about how he/she feels.
People are sometimes not accepting because of authoritarian personalities, prejudices of various kinds about class, race, age and sex, and because of fixed, often wrong ideas about their roles (‘I’m a teacher—a teacher’s job is to criticise’).

2.3.3 Genuineness

The ability to be naturally yourself, open, friendly and undefensive.

It means not adopting a superior role as in the ‘white-coat syndrome’ of the person who has the answers and must be respected. It also means being honest with yourself and your learner about your own feelings and activities.

Which would be the ‘genuine’ response to the following comment from a learner: ‘I’m just finding this part of the course so boring’?

a) ‘But you chose the course—you’ll just have to work at it’.

b) ‘To be honest I’ve found parts of my job boring sometimes! Do you think you’ll be able to carry on through to a more interesting part?’

Again we hope you would choose (b). Response (a) is not likely to help the learner very much; response (b) at least admits that you have the same experience from time to time and will encourage the learner to think about ways he/she can keep going. People are sometimes not genuine because of status-consciousness or feelings of their own inadequacy which are hard to admit.

2.3.4 Empathy

The ability to sense the feeling and experience of another person, and so to fully appreciate them as if you were that person.

This is not quite ‘sympathy’ in which you take over the feelings for yourself. It is being able to say, ‘I think I can see you feel that’, not ‘I felt exactly the same when that happened to me’. The latter statement takes over the learners’ feeling and in a sense takes it away from them.

Which is the most empathetic response to the following statement ‘If I don’t pass this exam, I shall have failed completely’?

a) ‘Oh you mustn’t feel that. I mean, it’s not a difficult exam’.

b) ‘You feel that if you fail this exam all your work will have been wasted’.

You may find (b) as the empathetic response that will ensure that the learners feel you understand and appreciate their feeling.

Empathy can be a difficult quality to acquire, sometimes because of the difficulty of understanding that every person’s experience is unique and that our own experience can only be a fallible guide to how other people might feel about an ostensibly similar experience. But it is important to try to feel empathy in all circumstances.

These, then, are the qualities of a counsellor. How can a person develop them? If that question is considered objectively as a teaching exercise it sounds faintly absurd. Can you really teach someone to be warm and genuine?
In fact that is not necessary. Most people—certainly most people who are attracted to distance education—already possess these qualities to a high degree and are already well on the way to being effective counsellors on that count alone. The challenge is to recognise that these interpersonal qualities are essential and to give yourself permission to express them professionally.

In order to remember the individual qualities, it might help you to think of the word WAGE (warmth, acceptance, genuineness, empathy).

**Check Your Progress 2**

Imagine that you are writing a handbook for new learners just about to start their course. How do you think they are feeling and how might you take those feelings into account in your writing?

**Notes:**
1) Write your answer in the space given below.
2) Compare your answer against the one given at the end of this unit.

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**2.4 THE SKILLS OF A COUNSELLOR**

There are three essential skills of a counsellor: selecting, structuring and listening. There are a host of other subsidiary skills, but these are the core ones.

**2.4.1 Selecting**

We have already mentioned selecting: It is the process of deciding what kind of response from the informing-advising-counselling spectrum is appropriate at any particular stage in an interview.

An inappropriate response can halt progress in its tracks. Giving information to someone who really needs advice or counselling may satisfy him/her temporarily but will not answer his/her real or long-term needs; giving counselling to someone who would like a piece of straight information is likely to be very frustrating for him/her.

We will not give any more examples at this stage. Turn back to Unit 1, and take another look at sections 1.2.1 to 1.2.3.
2.4.2 Listening

The skill of active intelligent listening is central to counselling of any type, whether informative, advisory or counselling. As Rogers himself wrote ‘...I discovered that simply listening to my client was an important way of being helpful. So when I was in doubt as to what I should do in some active way, I listened. It seemed surprising to me that such a passive kind of interaction could be so useful’.

So is that all then a counsellor simply listens? Of course, it is not as simple as that; the key lies in the words ‘active’ and ‘intelligent’. The counsellor listens actively by encouraging learners to think through their query or problem for themselves: the counsellor listens intelligently by clarifying what is being said and looking (sometimes) for what is not being said—the implications of omitted or unclear statements.

There are some useful but simple techniques to help you listen better. They are open-ended questions, acknowledgements, reflections, and silences.

i) Open-ended questions: Use questions that encourage a learner to think and to develop rather than giving straight mono syllable answers.

For example, a counsellor asks the same question in two different ways; which do you prefer?

a) ‘So you think you want to be a maths teacher?’

b) ‘How do you feel about maths teaching as a career?’

As usual we hope you have chosen (b), the open-ended question. Question (a) encourages the answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and no further; question (b) encourages the learners to think more about the implications of what they are saying.

ii) Acknowledgements: This simply means that counsellors do not sit listening in inscrutable silence. They are always indicating that they are listening—nodding, saying ‘Ah-ah’ (or ‘Umm’ if you prefer) and using positive ‘body language’ (maintaining reasonable eye-contact, sitting alertly on the same side of the desk as the learner and so on). It also means not interrupting the learner unnecessarily.

iii) Reflecting: The most useful listening skill is ‘reflecting’, sometimes called ‘mirroring’. It simply means saying back to the learner something that they have just said but in such a way as to clarify it, reassure the learner that they are being heard correctly and encourage them to go on. It is best illustrated by a simple example:

Learner: ‘So you see I just don’t think I can keep up’

Counsellor 1: ‘Oh well, I’m sure it’s not really that bad. With a bit of effort...’ etc.

Counsellor 2: ‘You’re worried that you’ll fall so far behind that you’ll have to withdraw?’

Counsellor 1 is certainly trying to encourage the learner, but fails to accept the learner’s real fears. The learner is likely to feel that the problem expressed simply has not been heard or has been denied.
Check Your Progress 3

i) Here is a learner statement with two counsellor responses. In which response do you think the counsellor is best using relevant qualities and listening skills?

Learner: 'You see I haven’t studied since leaving school nearly 20 years ago. So I’m rather worried about starting again'.

a) Counsellor 1: 'Oh studying's just like riding a bicycle you never forget'.
Learner: 'Yes, well, thank you for the reassurance'.
Counsellor 1: 'You'll be fine'. (And so on.)

b) Counsellor 2: 'You're worried about being able to cope after so long?'
Learner: 'Yes, that's right'.
Counsellor 2: 'I think a lot of people feel like that. I'm sure we'll be able to help you overcome any problem. But tell me how did you get on at school?'.
(And so on.)

ii) Here's another learner statement. How would you respond?

Learner: 'It's my parents. They are pushing me so hard and I just want to do something for myself'.

Notes: i) Write your answers in the space given below.
ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

...
2.4.3 Structuring

By now you may be asking how, after listening to the learner, do we actually move towards solving their problem, answering their query, choosing the right course etc.

This is the heart of counselling. It is knowing when, for example, is the right moment to stop counselling and give advice, when a learner has solved a problem for himself/herself or at least come to terms with it, when you have done as much as you can. This is the process of structuring your counselling and the interviews in order to move towards the best solution.

Structuring consists of three stages: clarification, checking and consequences.

i) Clarification—the basic counselling process of clarifying the issue or problem by dialogue with the learner.

ii) Checking—going back to the learner to ensure that the problem or issue is now completely clear or at least that it is as clear as it is possible to be at this stage.

iii) Consequences—settling with the learners what will be done by them and by the counsellor (action or advice) as a result of the interview.

These stages can be short or long but they are almost always present even in the simplest ‘informing’ interview.

For example:

Learner: ‘I'm interested in a career in nursing’.

Counsellor: ‘Is that mental nursing, district nursing or hospital nursing?’

CLARIFYING

Learner: ‘Oh, I meant in hospitals’.

Counsellor: ‘Hospital nursing—right. I have a leaflet about that; I could send it to you if you’d like’.

CHECKING

Learner: ‘Oh yes, please’.

34
Counsellor: ‘Fine—I’ll put that in the post to you today. And then if you have any questions after reading it you’re welcome to contact me again’.

CONSEQUENCES

Learner: ‘Thank you very much’.

Clarification is important because it is essential to find out what the learner’s needs are. This is often a short process but can be much longer when, for instance, learners are not fully aware of what they need.

Checking is important before deciding on any action, to be sure that it is appropriate. Consequences agreed upon mutually are important because any action or advice not mutually agreed upon is almost certain to fail. Think how often you have been given advice which you failed to take because you found it unconvincing or inappropriate.

In a complex problem the stages may well be repeated for different states of the same problem. Think of it as a cycle.

2.4.4 Epilogue

This has been a long and complex section and you should not worry if it feels rather like learning to drive a car. Remembering how to steer and change gear simultaneously is not unlike remembering to listen, select and structure all at the same time.

If it helps, remember the various mnemonics:

Qualities—WAGE (warmth, acceptance, genuineness and empathy)

Skills—SLS (selecting, listening, structuring)

Selecting—IAC (informing, advising, counselling)

Listening—OARS (open-ended questions, acknowledgements, reflecting, silences)

Structuring—3C’s (clarification, checking, consequences)

Much of your counselling will be very straightforward, needing more information than skill. Indeed it is probably true that 80% of your counselling will only need 20% of your skill. But there will certainly be 20% of the counselling needing 80% of your skill and it is often very difficult to tell at the outset of what sort of query you will get.

So we hope you will have found the emphasis on skills in these last sections helpful, even if you only exercise the whole battery of skills on the rarest minority of occasions.
Check Your Progress 4

Here is a dialogue between a counsellor and a learner. Read through it and ask yourself how the counsellor is using her qualities and skills to clarify the query and how well she is structuring the interview.

1 Learner: 'I'm worried about my studies. They don't seem to be going very well'.
2 Counsellor: 'Mmm. What's the problem?'.
3 Learner: 'Well, I spend a lot of time reading but nothing seems to go in'.
4 Counsellor: 'So you read a lot but you don't feel you're remembering what you've read?'
5 Learner: 'Yes that's right'.
6 Counsellor: 'Tell me exactly how you set about studying'.
7 Learner: 'Well I simply read through the text, sometimes three or more times but I can't get a feel for what it all means'.
8 Counsellor: 'Do you try to ask yourself specific questions about the meaning?'.
9 Learner: 'Well no not really. Should I?'.
10 Counsellor: 'It might help. You see I get the feeling that perhaps you expect that the text will sink into your mind just by reading a lot. But in distance education you have to work with the text as well. Look, here's a different method of reading. It's called SQ 3R—survey, question, read, recall and review. (The counsellor goes on to explain the method.) So will you give that method a try for the next unit?'.
11 Learner: 'Yes I will'.
12 Counsellor: 'Good. Come back to me next week and let's see how you got on'.
13 Learner: 'Right. Thank you'.

Notes: i) Write your answer in the space given below.
ii) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.
### 2.5 THE MEDIA OF COUNSELLING

We have now dealt as comprehensively as we can in a short space with the skills of counselling. If this were a course on counselling in conventional educational settings, then the unit could have almost ended here.

But, as you are now well aware, in distance education the varied media, such as face-to-face, correspondence and telephone make a critical difference to everything we do.

For instance so far we have made at least three implicit assumptions about how counselling is conducted. However, these assumptions may not be true of all media. What are those assumptions?

i) That counselling is a two-way process between a counsellor and a learner.

ii) That counselling is directed at individuals.

iii) That it can be initiated by either the counsellor or the learner.

You may be able to spot other such assumptions. But let us look at the different media and ask how far counselling (informing, advising, counselling) is possible in each medium, and what are the relative advantages and disadvantages.

We have summarised this below (Table 2.1) and we will go over each medium in detail subsequently.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Is two-way communication possible?</th>
<th>If not, is 'interactive' communication possible?</th>
<th>Can it be initiated by the counsellor?</th>
<th>So is it suitable for informing, advising and counselling?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes — but can be threatening</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group face-to-face</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes — much less threatening</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes, but can be threatening</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-one-to-one</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes — unthreatening</td>
<td>Informing only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-teleconferencing</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes — unthreatening</td>
<td>Informing/advising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-answerphone</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes — unthreatening</td>
<td>Informing/advising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Informing/advising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-letters</td>
<td>Limited-slow</td>
<td>Yes — unthreatening</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Informing/advising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-handbook</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes — unthreatening</td>
<td>Informing/advising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio or video cassette</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Informing/advising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes — unthreatening</td>
<td>Informing/advising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Radio &amp; TV</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes — unthreatening</td>
<td>Informing/limited counselling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Computer &amp; interactive video-disc</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes — unthreatening</td>
<td>Informing/limited counselling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Informing/limited counselling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-line discussion</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Informing/limited counselling</td>
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<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>WWW computer conferencing</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Informing/limited counselling</td>
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<td>Media</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Any particular advantages or disadvantages?</td>
<td>Examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Usually developmental</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Most less expensive—uses other learners' experience</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>face-to-face</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Relatively cheap</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>—one-to-one</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and quick</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>—tele-</td>
<td>Developmental</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Available 24 hrs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>conferencing</td>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>‘Adviseline’</td>
<td>UKOU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—answering</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Usually problem-solving</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Permanent record, unthreatening</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>—letters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—handbook</td>
<td>Usually developmental</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Permanent record, unthreatening</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio or video</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Can be replayed—audio cheap</td>
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<td>cassette</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Broadcast</td>
<td>Usually developmental</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Can be very fast and sophisticated—reaches many people</td>
<td>TV &amp; Radio ‘Open forum’; UKOU</td>
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<tr>
<td>—Radio &amp; TV</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Entry Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>Computer &amp;</td>
<td>Developmental</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Relatively cheap after capital outlay</td>
<td>CASCAID—Careers Advisory, Programme—UKOU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interactive</td>
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<td>video-disc</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Developmental Problem</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Permanent record Immediate communication Reaches many people independently of time and space</td>
<td>Open University of Hong Kong</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Solving</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### 2.5.1 Face-to-face counselling

Everything that we have said so far applies to face-to-face counselling and in many ways this remains the most important medium for counselling of all
kinds. However, it can be extremely expensive in terms of staff, time and travel and could also be inaccessible to distant learners. One way of at least reducing the first problem is through group counselling.

### 2.5.2 Group counselling

Counselling is possible in a group situation. Normally a group might consist of any number from three upwards, commonly a dozen but it is perfectly possible for it to go up to thirty or more. We have seen counselling attempted in groups of 200, but this really then becomes another activity.

Although a group loses the one-to-one relationship of counsellor and learner, it gains something almost as valuable, the opportunity for learners to share their concerns with each other. Inevitably, in doing so they discover that their concerns are common and find this immensely reassuring.

The skills in group counselling are just the same as one-to-one counselling, except that the counsellor is using them primarily to encourage learners to talk about their concerns (and solutions) with each other, and not with him/her. In addition the group counsellor must develop some sensitivity to the dynamics of the group.

For example, let us assume that you are a counsellor who has gathered together a group of dozen or so learners about to start their distance education course at a local centre. How would you help them talk about the issues, concerns, anxieties and hopes that will certainly be present in that group? Here is a possibility:

1. You introduce yourself within 2-3 minutes.
2. You say ‘Now I want you to get together with any other learner in pairs. Introduce yourselves and say briefly why you are taking the course and how you feel about it. Take 5 minutes’.
3. After five minutes you say ‘Now I want each pair to get together with another pair and share your introductions and see what motives and feelings you all have in common. Take 10 minutes’.
4. After 10 minutes you say ‘Now let’s all come together and share our introductions and what we’ve been discussing’.
5. At this point the learners will have discussed their feelings in pairs and in groups of four. They will have discovered that many of their concerns are mutual and will now have no difficulty in talking about their feelings in the larger group. (Indeed you may have difficulty in getting them to stop talking!) As they talk, you will be able to listen, clarify, reflect and decide upon general consequent action (such as preparation) with the whole group.

This particular group process of discussion in pairs, threes, fours and so on is known as ‘pyramiding’ or ‘snowballing’. It can be used in many different situations.

In the next unit (Unit 3) of this block we shall be discussing face-to-face contact in distance education in greater detail as it is an important medium of counselling.
Check Your Progress 5

Imagine you have groups of learners at the following stages of their studies. Devise a suitable group counselling activity for each.

i) About to tackle the first assignment.
ii) Choosing future courses.
iii) Coming up to the exam.

Notes: i) Write your answers in the space given below.
   ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

i) ...................................................................................................
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2.5.3 Telephone counselling

i) One-to-one

There is a curious myth attached to telephone counselling that it is somehow very different from face-to-face counselling. The experience of organisations like the UK suicide-counselling service, the Samaritans*, suggests that this is not so and that the similarities are far greater than differences.

There is one very obvious difference—the absence of visual clues. This is not an entire disadvantage, as such clues can mislead as well as help. Possibly a more serious problem is that the absence of visual clues makes it harder to find ways of disengaging the process of learning from the call.

* Samaritans is a voluntary organisation which gives advice by telephone (only by telephone so as to preserve anonymity) to individuals suffering personal distress and contemplating suicide.
But undoubtedly the biggest problem of telephone counselling is the feeling that it is different from face-to-face counselling and that the skills are different. They are not. Apply your WAGE, SLS, OARS, and 3C’s, with an additional emphasis on verbal acknowledgements and you will be as successful a telephone counsellor as a face-to-face one.

ii) Teleconferencing

It is now possible to link a number of people at different locations to the same telephone line; for technical reasons the maximum number is about six. So in theory it should be possible to run group counselling sessions over the telephone.

However we are not aware of any significant reports on group telephone counselling sessions as distinct from group telephone tutorials. One related development was the ‘Dial’n Learn’ project run in the London Centre of the British Open University. In this project learners could dial a given number between certain hours and be automatically connected to other people who had also dialled the same number. The hope was that learners would use this facility to engage in counselling—less group counselling.

In actuality the project was let down by technical difficulties including the quality of the telephone lines (this is a constant problem with group telephone tutorials). However, with better equipment and improved technology (such as the use of satellite communication for the purpose) teleconferencing is now being used successfully in some advanced countries. Besides, two-way-audio and one-way-video teleconferencing is also being used successfully these days. (More of this in the course ES-318.)

iii) Answerphones

Telephone answering machines which give an automatic taped message when dialled are now in relatively common use in many parts of the world. Since most offices have more than one telephone line, it is relatively simple to use one of those lines out of office hours to provide an appropriate counselling message.

There is a report on such a system in the journal ‘Open Learning’, February 1987, called ‘Adviceline’. ‘Adviceline’ provided a taped message which could be dialled at any time outside office hours. The message depended on the time of year: ‘Choiceline’ for course choice time, ‘Examline’ about exam time, and so on.

Clearly ‘Adviceline’ could provide only a very elementary counselling service. Yet it did have two very special advantages: it was available at times such as 2 o’clock in the morning to any learner with access to a telephone when no other form of help was available, and it was completely anonymous and non-threatening.

In over two years of operation, about 400 learners found ‘Adviceline’ sufficiently valuable to be worth dialling.
2.5.4 Counselling by letter

There is probably still more counselling carried out by letter than in any other way, especially in distance education in the developing world, where other forms of communication can be tenuous. Such correspondence counselling has obvious limitations: it is slow, two-way dialogue is difficult, it is hard to convey feelings accurately, and so on. Yet there are advantages: the counsellor has time to think carefully over both the originating letter and the reply, there may be helpful clues in the writing, and a counsellor-initiated letter is generally less threatening than a face-to-face interview or telephone call. Above all, the learner has a permanent record to pursue at leisure and think over.

The process of writing such a counselling letter, whether as a counsellor initiative or a response to a letter received, is still informed by basic counselling principles. Active intelligent listening is replaced by careful reading to try to clarify the feelings and issues in the learner’s letter. It should then be possible to respond with warmth, acceptance, genuineness and empathy, structuring the letter to ensure its meaning is clear.

For example consider the following letter received from a would be learner and two possible replies:

Dear Sir

Do you have any course in journalism at IGNOU? Now that my family is all grown up. I find time hangs heavy on my hands and I would like to develop a new interest.

Yours faithfully,

(Mr.) P

a) Dear Mr. P,

Thank you for your letter. I regret that we do not run courses in journalism.

Yours sincerely,

Learner Adviser No. 1

b) Dear Mr. P,

Thank you for your letter. I can understand your desire to use your new-found leisure constructively.

Unfortunately we do not have any course in journalism yet. You could try my colleagues at Veracity College, (address...).

However, I did wonder if you have considered alternatives to journalism. If you are interested in improving your writing skills and perhaps making some money we have an interesting course called ‘Creative Writing’ of which I enclose details.

I do hope you find what you are looking for. Please contact me again if I can help you further.

Yours sincerely,

Learner Adviser No. 2
Which reply do you prefer? Adviser No. 1 has been business-like but no more. Adviser No. 2 has read the letter carefully noting that journalism might not be what Mr. P is looking for. She has then responded with warmth and empathy to the enquirer’s feelings and tried to clarify what he wants. Which letter would you have preferred to receive?

Check Your Progress 6

Imagine you have received the following letter from a learner. Write a 'counselling' reply.

Dear Adviser,

I am writing to tell you that I have withdrawn from IGNOU. I am very sorry to have let you down but our new baby is taking up much more time than I thought and I cannot keep it up.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs. P

Notes: i) Write your answer in the space given below.
   ii) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

2.5.5 Counselling by handbook

Many institutions have developed counselling materials in handbook form. We gave some examples in the summary chart. These handbooks are usually aimed at learners at particular points in their careers. For instance, the text from UKOU 'Taking Off' is designed for pre-entry learners and there is a similar text called 'Bailing Out' for learners who are withdrawing from the course.

Clearly such handbooks are an economical way of providing some kind of counselling to a large number of learners. They are also about as unthreatening as it is possible to be. They are always written with the usual counselling qualities but obviously unless a learner responds in some way there cannot be any two-way communication.

So these handbooks are often written in an 'interactive' style. They contain text which encourages learners to ask themselves questions about, for
example, their motivation, needs, and so on. The hope is that such reflection will enable learners to clarify such issues on their own or at least encourage them to raise appropriate questions with a counsellor.

For example a section in a handbook for pre-study learners might read:

"Why have you applied to IGNOU?". Listed below are some of the reasons people have given in the past. Tick the ones that apply to you and add at the end any other reasons you might have.

1 to improve my qualifications to get a better job;
2 to prove I can get a degree;
and so on, for about a dozen different reasons.

The text then ends:

"Does that help you clarify why you have applied? It is useful to be clear about your reasons as they may affect your wish to study, and your choice of course."

There might be other pages dealing with feelings about study, preparedness for study and so on.

Another form of interactive text uses quotations from existing learners for new learners to react to. Such handbooks can be used with groups of learners in reactive discussions. An example of this approach is ‘How to Tutor in an Open Learning System’ (Lewis, 1984), which consists almost entirely of a series of quotes and responses from Open Learning tutors. We have occasionally used this approach in these units, as you will have noticed.

2.5.6 Counselling by audio and video cassettes

For obvious economic reasons, the use of audio-cassettes is much wider in distance education than that of video cassettes and some attempts have been made to use them for counselling.

Often this use is similar to that of a counselling handbook and tapes can be made interactive in a very similar way. For instance the tape ‘Telling it like it is’ from Athabasca University consists of a series of learners talking about their experiences of distance education. The tape is designed to be stopped at particular points for listeners to think about their reactions.

A different and unique use for audio-tapes is in anxiety counselling. There could be different tapes for different types of anxiety. For example, you could have an exam counselling tape of ‘relaxation exercises’ designed to help anxious learners to reduce their levels of tension before the exam. The advantage of such tapes is that they can be heard whilst the learner is actually undertaking the exercises, for example whilst lying on the floor.

2.5.7 Counselling by broadcasting

Very little counselling use appears to have been made of broadcasting in distance education except for relatively ordinary informing purposes. Perhaps this is not altogether surprising since broadcasting offers very little
possibility of either two-way or interactive working. Although for instance it would be easy to make a programme about learners talking about their feelings and experiences, it would be difficult to make that interactive as it cannot be stopped and started, and proceeds at its own pace.

Nevertheless broadcasting can uniquely enthuse, enrich, motivate and excite, and it is surprising that no one has given attention to it. Perhaps one way would be to run a problem question and answer session or a phone-in. There is much work to be done in this area.

2.5.8 Counselling by computer or interactive video-disc

We shall deal with these together as they are very similar. (Video-discs offer a superior quality but at considerably greater expense.) The advent of relatively cheap micro-computers has made them accessible at Study Centre and Regional Centre Levels if not at home in the developing world. Computer programmes can be made interactive relatively easily; for example, they can respond to different choices made by learners.

So it is not surprising that there has been some interest in the use of micro-computers, particularly in developmental counselling.

The most obvious example is in career counselling. A typical example of this is the programme called CASCAID.

CASCAID—the ‘Careers Advisory Service Computer Aid’ is a programme in which learners are asked to respond to a series of preferences: ‘How would you like a job in which you would (e.g.) ‘gather information’, ‘cope with members of the public’, and so on.

The programme then analyses those preferences and produces a list of career suggestions for the learner together with a note of the preferences most relevant to each career.

An example of such a list is:

1 Teacher in higher education
2 Social Worker
3 Priest
4 Lawyer.

The relatively cheap interactive and non-threatening nature of computer-counselling means that many learners appear to enjoy it and find it useful. It cannot stand on its own. It is essential when using CASCAID, for instance, that learners are ‘talked through’ the results with an experienced CASCAID counsellor.

Nevertheless computer counselling is here to stay and is likely to become more useful in other areas as well, specially since the Introduction of programmes on-line.
2.5.9 Counselling by internet

The internet as a counselling medium for distance education programmes remains a largely untapped resource. The use of the internet demands access to both computers and telecommunication equipment. The lowest level of connection to the internet requires dial-up telephone access, which remains problematic for many distance learners in developing countries. Even those located close enough to highly developed telephone infrastructure may find that long distance tolls or hourly connection charges restrict access to those with limited disposable income.

Let us look at the methods and devices that internet based distance education can use for counselling distance learners:

Online discussion, which is also conducted in computer networks. The counsellor interacts with one or more learners simultaneously at different terminals. The counsellor announces his/her "contact time" in cyberspace, and distance learners log-in to discuss questions in that period. The counsellor acts as the chairperson of the discussion. It is known in bulletin board systems as the 'chat room' or 'talk room' which holds one-to-one or to many conversations respectively.

E-mail is another commonly used example of correspondence or an asynchronous interaction between counsellors and distance learners. Instead of writing letters and waiting for several days to get the reply by post, counsellors can post assignments, announcements, supplemental materials, as well as give feedback or responses to distance learners individually or in a group. Distance learners who are "quiet" and "shy" are able to respond in a comfortable and private atmosphere.

Another way used by the counsellor of reaching out in a 'one-to-many' way is by the use of the World Wide Web (WWW). WWW can be used to put out articles, study guide and whole textbooks and slide shows. In the context of counselling it could be used for posting information, messages, assignments etc.

The most interesting part for distance education is group communication, (many-to-many communication), for which we could use the device of computer conferencing. Computer conferencing connects the counsellor and distance learners present at different locations, through computer networks. If a camera is attached to the computer, the computer conferencing gets converted into video conferencing. All the participants can be seen on the monitor whenever they log-in. In this way the counsellor can see the distance learner and the learners can see the counsellor.

Basically videoconferencing is similar to regular face-to-face interaction except that the learners and the counsellor are located at several different locations, thus providing an opportunity for group discussion and team learning, independent of space and time.

It is interesting to note that this medium has the potential to offer opportunities for collaborations between institutions across the globe.
Check Your Progress 7

Imagine you are setting up a counselling system for the new Veracity College from scratch. Which media would you adopt and what would be your priorities?

Notes:  

i) Write your answer in the space given below.

ii) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of the unit.

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2.6 LET US SUM UP

The unit covers the following topics:

Theories of counselling: ‘Rogerian’ or non-directive counselling.

Qualities of a counsellor: warmth, acceptance, genuineness, empathy (≡ WAGE).

Skills of a counsellor: selecting, listening and structuring (≡ SLS). Selecting skills—informing, advising, counselling (≡ IAC). Listening skills—open-ended questions, acknowledgements, reflecting, silence (≡ OARS). Structuring skills—clarification, checking, consequences (≡ 3C’s).

Media of counselling: face-to-face; group; telephone (including teleconferencing and answering machines); letter; handbook; audio/video cassette; broadcasting; computer and internet.

Check Your Progress: Possible Answers

1

i) One of the principal difficulties you may have thought about is that as teachers we are often expected to be directive, writing and running syllabuses, testing learners and so on, and it is very difficult to step out of that role.

Another difficulty is the feeling (well-expressed in the quote from Rogers) that being non-directive is ‘doing nothing’. That of course is not so: in some ways your undivided attention and time are the most important things you can give anyone.
ii) If advice is given too early, before someone is in the right frame of mind to accept it, then it is simply unlikely to be acted on. Advice must be seen to be appropriate both in quality and timing.

2

Think back to your own experience of starting something new. A new learner may be excited, hopeful, looking forward to new career or leisure prospects. At the same time they may be anxious, wondering if they can cope, wondering if they will be shown up in front of teachers and fellow learners. After all there can be an element of exposure in becoming a learner. You are saying in effect ‘I am ignorant and need to be taught; I am likely to get things wrong and need correcting’.

When writing a handbook for such learners it will be important to acknowledge that some of them may share some of these feelings. Your ‘cognitively-based’ colleagues will argue against this, saying that to talk about such fears is to aggravate them: survey work carried out at UKOU shows that this is not true. Learners are grateful and relieved to know that others feel the same way as they do.

So include some ‘interactive’ material (see Section 2.5.5) in your handbook. Perhaps quotes from learners about how they felt when starting. But finish on a positive note touching upon their hopes and expectations of the future.

3

i) Counsellor 1 is trying to be encouraging but is trying too hard. He does not really listen to what the learner is saying at all, and the learner, although polite, can sense that and draws the interview to a close.

Counsellor 2 reflects the learners statement. He then empathises (‘I’m sure a lot of people feel like that’) and offers some appropriately timed reassurance, before exploring the issue further.

ii) It can be particularly difficult on the (relatively rare) occasions that a learner introduces personal issues into the conversation. But remember you have a resource that is always available to you at difficult moments—your own humanity. Respond as one human being to another and you will not go far wrong.

In this case I would say something like ‘you are under a lot of pressure from your parents and you would like to escape?’ and see where we went from there.

4

In exchange (1) to (6) the counsellor is clarifying what the learner means by his studies ‘not going very well’. She is drawing on her previous experience and recognises a pattern—the learner who
(perhaps because of study anxiety) simply reads and re-reads his units without assimilating them or interacting with them at all.

By (8) the counsellor has a clear enough idea not to need to check the query any further and feels that some advice might be appropriate—(10).

(11), (12) and (13) are the consequences. The learner has 'contracted' to try a new method of reading and the counsellor has 'contracted' in turn to give further help.

5

i) About to tackle the first assignment. Learners will be wanting some practical help with this, but there will be some for who it is the first thing they have done since leaving school which will be assessed in this way. So it will be helpful to demystify the assessment process.

Find an old assignment answer (or part) and give copies of it to the learner. Tell them 'pretend you are the teacher and mark this assignment on your own' (5 minutes). 'Now get together with another person and compare your results. What things did you find yourselves looking for? Where was the assignment good and why, where bad and why?' (10 minutes).

In the ensuing group discussion it should be possible to bring out the importance of answering the question, planning the essay and so on.

ii) Choosing future courses. For some learners the leap to the next course can seem intimidating. So invite some experienced learners to your group to talk about how they choose their future courses and to lead a discussion of course choice.

iii) Coming up to the exam. There is always a lot of anxiety focusing on exams and group sessions can be very helpful in sharing and ameliorating this anxiety.

Suggest to the learners that they are examiners reporting on this year's paper. What sort of things will they have identified as losing learners' marks? This can be run as a simple 'brainstorming exercise', with learners calling out items for you to list on the board for subsequent discussion.

The list might end up including:

a) not following the paper's instructions about how many, and which questions to answer.

b) misreading the questions.

c) spending too much time on some questions and not enough on others.

6

Here is my answer; yours may be different but I hope you have
Dear Mrs. P

I am sorry to hear that you have withdrawn from IGNOU.

1 Although as a father myself I know how demanding a new baby can be sometimes.

2 Please do not feel you have let anyone down; these things can happen and we are prepared for them.

3 When life is a little calmer please write to me again and we will work out a way of getting you back on the course.

My warmest wishes for happiness with your ‘new arrival’.

Yours sincerely

Learner Adviser

1 The counsellor empathises with the learner’s concerns by drawing on his own experience in this case.

2 He deals with the learner’s feeling of having let someone down by meeting it head on: such feelings of embarrassment are not uncommon and can be a barrier to further study.

3 He deals with the consequences, trying to encourage the learner to return when she feels ready.

The media you would adopt would depend on Veracity College’s situation. In a technically advanced society with a reliable and accessible telephone system you might place most emphasis on telephone counselling, and usage of the internet, which has several devices for counselling distance learners.

In a developing country the most important counselling medium would be correspondence both by letter and handbook and perhaps your most important initial task would be to write such handbooks.