

Watching our words: Researching and developing language counselling

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Introduction

We work as language advisers/counsellors in the Autonomous Learning Modules (ALMS) at Helsinki University Language Centre. ALMS is a variety of English course offered by the Centre to undergraduates completing their English language requirements, and language counselling is one of the main forms of support for students as they pursue their learning programmes autonomously. ALMS promotes learner and teacher autonomy and provides one longstanding example of putting pedagogy for autonomy into practice (Karlsson, Kjisik & Nordlund, 1997). Here we first briefly describe our context of work, our research and pedagogical thinking. We then move on to describe the teacher development project (work in progress) on creating guidelines for gaining and improving counselling skills that we started in 2012. Our ReSIG Day workshop at IATEFL was based on the current stage of this reflection-oriented practitioner research project.

Context

More detailed accounts and descriptions of the complete ALMS programme and the role of counselling can be found elsewhere (Karlsson, Kjisik, & Nordlund, 1997; Karlsson, Kjisik, & Nordlund, 2007; Kjisik, 2007) but, in a nutshell, the key features of ALMS can be seen in Figure 1. It has to be remembered that no two individual programmes are identical because the students can choose to study alone, or in pairs or in groups, which they set up themselves, or join one of the teacher-facilitated Skills Support Groups.

In each university autumn or spring term we have approximately 200 students participating in ALMS, with at least one group for students of each of the eleven university Faculties and one group for self-identified 'different' learners. Supporting the students, there is a team of about ten teachers, who act as counsellors and facilitators of the Skills Support Groups. Teachers from the Language Centre English Unit (which numbers about 20 teachers in total) join the ALMS team if they are

interested in the concept and practice of autonomy and are open to teamwork, action research and exploratory practice. These have been essential characteristics of our particular community of practice, as we will discuss in the next section.

Figure 1. Key features of a 14-week ALMS module.

- Two initial learner awareness sessions (4hrs+2hrs) in groups of c. 20, led by one of the ALMS team of teachers/counsellors
- Learning histories discussed and written as free-form texts or using Kaleidoscope (<http://h27.it.helsinki.fi/vkk/kaleidoskooppi/intro.php>)
- Personally meaningful goals and learning programmes. Extent of programme depends on number of credits required.
- Learning logs and diaries, with a focus on reflection on learning
- Skills Support Groups on a wide range of academic, professional and lifewide skills, teacher-facilitated to a greater or lesser extent
- Counselling: 3 individual 15 min. meetings per module:
 - 1st counselling focus on concept of autonomy, learning history and plan
 - 2nd counselling focus on work/learning progress and reflection
 - 3rd counselling focus on learning outcomes, learner identity and portfolio discussion

ALMS research and pedagogical development

The integral and complementary nature of ALMS practice and research has been a central tenet in our development work (Karlsson & Kjisik, 2009). We believe that both educational practice and research need to be, first and foremost, self-reflexive: we thus need to consider and reconsider our motivations all the way through any counselling or research process. Flávia Vieira (2007) writes about the braided nature of research and teacher development and their link to teacher autonomy. She suggests that teacher development, which is at the heart of pedagogy for autonomy, should be inquiry-oriented, experience-based, collective and locally relevant. Such teacher development supports teacher autonomy in terms of interpersonal empowerment, because it involves sharing experiences and interpretations and makes use of *lifewide* and *lifedeepest* teacher knowledge (Karlsson & Kjisik, 2011)¹.

Current project (work in progress)

The original aim of our current project was to create a video and guidelines for novice counsellors. We obviously wanted to better understand our own work but, initially, the focus was on training needs. We felt that producing videos for new counsellors to watch would be ethically less demanding than organising live observation of students in their counselling sessions. After two years of taping, editing and discussion, we have produced two videos and a set of guidelines, which we have presented to colleagues at various conferences

¹ *Lifewide* here refers to the totality of a person's learning in the different parts of her life, not only through formal learning. *Lifedeepest* refers to our beliefs, values, feelings and orientations to life, all parts of our personality.

in Finland and abroad, IATEFL 2014 being the latest. The professional sharing and discussions with our audiences and amongst the ALMS team have helped us to rethink and rewrite the guidelines. We are now relatively satisfied with the set of guidelines but recognise the need to continuously update the document as we continue the project.

The videos have worked well in the workshops we have given; they seem to capture the nature and reality of the ALMS counselling process and the experiential context of the discussions, even though they are a compilation of short extracts from counselling meetings. It has been rewarding to notice that the videos demonstrate how, on the landscape of counselling, there is no “solid single reality” of autonomy but, instead, “fluid multiple realities” (Aoki, 2008:16). The two very different students in the two videos show some of the range of skills, personalities, needs and wishes of students that the counsellors encounter. The two counsellors in turn bring two counsellor identities with different lifewide and lifedeeep understandings into focus, and present two examples of choosing words and actions in a counselling meeting. The ReSIG Day workshop further convinced us that the videos provide a good basis for discussing good practices in counselling, in particular with colleagues who are less familiar with counselling as a way of supporting learner autonomy.

During the project, however, our focus has moved towards an exploratory orientation and to involving all our counsellors as learners of counselling, as key practitioners (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). This has happened because we are convinced that examples of counselling in action can only give a starting point for novice counsellors, and that it is indeed the practising counsellors, both new and old, who need to question their habitual actions and avoid becoming complacent in their work. Reflecting on the experiences and autobiographical understandings of counselling forms the basis of learning from the work and for the work.

In the past academic year, the ALMS team has explored the guidelines and discussed their relevance to our counselling practice in peer group mentoring (PGM) sessions. Peer group mentoring (see Heikkinen, Jokinen & Tynjälä, 2012) is an emerging approach in Finnish teacher development and induction, and has proven to be an excellent way for sharing ideas and experiences of different aspects of counselling. The PGM approach draws on an ideal of professional autonomy as collective meaning-making and will-formation, and we have found it to be in harmony with our own pedagogical thinking. In an atmosphere of confidence, trust and equality we have been able to candidly analyse our own counselling and to share our worries and concerns (wellbeing at work is an important aspect of the PGM model). Our discussions have mostly dealt with aspects of counselling that have also become the focal elements in our guidelines: the elusive nature of autonomy, the challenges of active and

appreciative listening, encouragement, and the support of reflection, to mention a few.

Our project will now continue with this new focus: we want to encourage our counsellors to record their own counselling sessions and to share them, in order to deepen their understanding of the counselling dialogue in action. We will continue our PGM meetings using the set of guidelines for reflection that has emerged from the professional sharing described above. We hope that these would also help individual counsellors and/or groups outside our Language Centre to better understand and cope with their practice.

Guidelines for reflection

The list below represents the gamut of ‘actions’ that we have come to see as significant elements of successful language counselling. Actions can be the words we use, the body language we radiate, the talk and the silence we create, the challenges we set and the patience we demonstrate – all of these can foster or hamper the dialogue. After initially creating a mind-map of bubbles of actions arising from our discussions and workshops, we have recently arranged them into the six groups seen below, although they are not presented here in any order of importance. The groups are necessarily overlapping and to some extent repetitive, but the six areas do seem to form a skeleton of vital and inter-connected counselling skills.

1. The balance of power/control
 - establishing rapport and positioning (roles)
 - showing respect
 - being genuine
 - asking questions
 - showing empathy, suspending judgement
2. Encouraging and developing the learner’s sense of autonomy
 - encouraging self-reflection
 - providing (meta)language needed by the learner
 - validating lifewide and lifedeeep experiences
 - giving specific advice
3. Motivating
 - showing commitment
 - being positive
 - being supportive
 - offering positive reinforcement and affirmation
 - encouraging self-reflection in learning
4. Listening
 - not interrupting
 - paraphrasing, reformulating
 - waiting, attending
 - active listening
 - mirroring, echoing

- asking for clarification
- not completing sentences

5. Storytelling

- 'remembering how'
- 'imagining what if'
- sharing memories and experiences
- considering the future (immediate and long-term)
- eliciting ideas for learning

6. Appreciation of diversity

- noticing the learner's being in the world
- promoting belief in self
- avoiding generalisations

We feel that when a counsellor is watching her words and actions, a powerful pedagogical dialogue can be built that, unlike the traditional forms of pedagogical discourse, is immediate, "embedded in the here and now of the teacher and her learners, focused on jointly understanding the process in which they are engaged" (Little, 2001: 50).

Conclusion

In this vignette, we have presented the ALMS programme and our counselling team as a learning community. The project on good counselling described in the text exemplifies reflection-oriented practitioner research, which combines collective research and critical exploration of practice. Presenting the project at IATEFL gave us yet another opportunity to share our ideas on counselling as pedagogical dialogue. We got fresh reactions to the guidelines and, as always, intriguing questions about counselling as a form of learner support.

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