

COUNSELLING IN ACTION

Informal situated counselling in a school context†

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The institutional regulation of counselling conversations does not always provide optimal conditions for counselling. Many teachers experience that some “normal” conversations develop into conversations which are of a counselling nature. Conversations which resemble counselling can be optimal counselling opportunities. In this paper we describe and develop these counselling conversations, which we call Informal Situated Counselling.

Keywords: conversations; optimal counselling opportunities; informal situated counselling

Much of the work that a teacher does in relation to his/her colleagues and students can be characterized and described as counselling. The starting point for such conversations can be academic problems and challenges, or linked to more social and personal conditions where a student requires help and which are directly or indirectly linked to teaching and learning. The counselling which is given to students has been described and understood in a number of different ways (Mathisen & Høigaard, 2004). The descriptions and definitions reflect a form of angle of attack or reference to different academic and work-related standpoints. To some extent the way in which counselling is defined and practised is based on the function which the counselling has or is reflected in the role of the counsellor. In addition, counselling has been described and defined in various ways based on different professions, working groups and scientific guidelines (Egan, 1990; Geldard, 1989; Lauvås & Handal, 2000). On the one hand, these look like different descriptions of reality but they can also appear prescriptive for the way in which counselling is carried out. For example, counselling can be planned carefully, defined by a narrow structure or a lack of structure. It can consist of several counselling sequences or be a one-off phenomenon. Counselling can be characterised by plenty of time, calm and reflection, other times by limited time and the need for action.

Traditionally counselling is often described in the literature as agreed, organized and limited conversations (Carkhuff & Anthony, 1979; Egan, 1990; Lauvås & Handal, 2000). Furthermore, the “outer frameworks”¹ which establish the premises for counselling are known and for the most clear and open. We can recognize such conversations in a school context such as student conversations and colleague counselling.

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Conversations where the outer framework is relatively clear represent to a large extent what we normally associate with counselling and thus appear as ideal situations. However, the difference between the ideal and what often happens in practice can be significant and is described by one teacher thus:

The ideal situation is where you are not disturbed and you have the time and opportunity to talk and find out what the student has on his mind. However, it's not usually like that. Conversations arise spontaneously in free time, on the way to or from a lesson, before or after school. Three minutes here, five minutes there, and I have learned that a lot can be said and done in a short time. A brief conversation in the corridor, for example, can help a student to start thinking in a way which means that he chooses or acts in another way than he had planned. It can also be the start of a process which means the student gains a clearer picture of what would be the sensible thing to do. (A. Jørgensen, personal communication, 20 April 2001)

Even though the concept of counselling is relatively comprehensive and multi faceted, it does not really encompass these conversations which have common links with what we traditionally regard as counselling. It is therefore necessary to focus on communication arenas and communication patterns which can be alternatives and supplement the institutional counselling conversations. This way of regarding counselling as an activity which stretches out beyond the traditional institutionalized understanding has been promoted by Persson, Lindblom and Odemark (1981, p. 12): "Counselling can take place anywhere – on an evening stroll, at sporting events, in the class room, during a dance, after a meeting" [English translation]. Informal, situation-driven counselling conversations have been described as informal situated counselling (Høigaard & Mathisen, 2003; Mathisen & Høigaard, 2002). Informal situated counselling conversations occupy a place somewhere between what we normally refer to as counselling and other remarks/forms of conversation (Figure 1). They cannot be classified as formal conversations but neither can they be categorized as any old everyday conversation or chat. Informal situated counselling conversations can be rich in both time and content, but experience shows that they are often short and concentrated. These conversations can be of great significance as a result of their immediacy and their proximity i time to events and experiences. Informal situated counselling conversations cannot be planned or enforced, they occur spontaneously and as a result of a perceived need on the part of one or both parties.

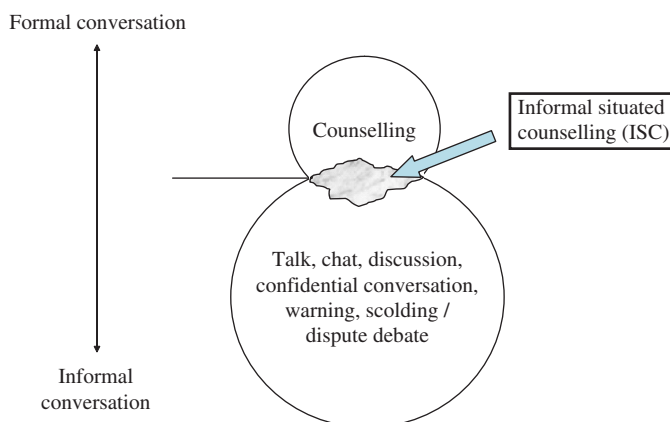


Figure 1. Informal Situated Counselling can be inserted between traditional counselling and other conversation forms.

Such conversations are initially one-off events but can occur on a number of occasions and thus have a thematic, reciprocal connection.

The purpose of this article is to describe and develop central aspects of informal situated counselling based on a school context using case examples.

Essential encounter

Informal situated counselling corresponds in many ways with what Bolnow (1976) describes as a “meeting” which, in contrast to the continuous, pedagogic processes, is a discontinuous process. It is a “meeting” which provides an opening and motivation for counselling partly because it is characterized by actuality and significance and deals with something which involves, affects and demands something of the “counselee” there and then. Another aspect of the “meetings” which characterizes informal situated counselling is that they occur unexpectedly. Buber expresses it thus “they flash up, isolated from each other”, “the meeting does not allow itself to be forced nor consciously planned, but there is always grace” [English translation] (Bolnow, 1976 p. 88 & p. 137). Based on this understanding, informal situated counselling can be characterized as an *optimal counselling moment*.

A student at secondary school said:

I can remember how long the conversation was – it was 20 metres. It was just after a lesson. I’d been sitting wrapped up in my own thoughts the whole lesson and was the last one out of the classroom door. Then I started walking down the corridor with the teacher. He was a guy I trusted and who was usually good at listening. I can’t remember who started the conversation but suddenly I got to the heart of the matter, the thing that was bothering me just then. During those few metres we were walking together it suddenly became clear how I should deal with a difficult decision. I can’t remember exactly what was said and I am not even sure that the teacher understood that he was actually some kind of counsellor. But an awful lot went on in my head in those 20 metres. The conversation happened just at the right time and things fell into place.

Contact and contract

According to Bolnow (1976) there are continuous formation processes which follow traditional, planned and structured paths, the background and conditions for the “meeting” to take place. If the “meeting” occurs, it presupposes both trust and contact between those involved, in this case the “counsellor” and the “counselee”. Giges and Petitpas (2000) emphasize for example the importance of what they describe as Brief Contact Intervention occurring within an established and on-going sequence of counselling. As a rule, informal situated counselling will take place within established relationships, but it can also occur between people who do not know each other very well and who for this reason have not developed a relationship over time which is characterized by contact and trust. In such random and spontaneous meetings a relationship can develop which is sufficient as a basis for informal situated counselling.

Informal situated counselling will often be constituted through an invitation. The invitation can be clear and expressed: “can you . . . , would you . . . , could I talk to you about”, or it can be less clear; *it just happens*. The invitation is the “agreement” or the “psychological contract” which defines and initiates a situation where counselling is the way of working. Who takes the initiative for counselling can vary. It may be the one who requires counselling or the one who has the counsellor function. In traditional counselling

the roles (counsellor, counselee) are as a rule open and clear. In the informal situated counselling the role of counsellor can develop as a result of the case, the situation or the person who initiates the counselling. Clarification of roles will be linked to the following conditions; *I would like counselling* and *I take the role of counsellor*. This clarification does not have to be particularly clear or permanent. Changes in content, situation, etc. may mean that the roles change. Role clarification and the quality of the relationship will also be steered by the participants' knowledge of each other, the formal or informal roles they have and what characterises their relationship. A complementary relationship is then established with the counsellor on the one side and the counselee on the other. In a school context, this can be seen in relationships between teaching colleagues and between teachers and the head teacher. In the teacher-student relationship, however, the clarification will be more pre-determined, in that the role of counsellor is usually taken by the teacher.

An experienced teacher:

The conversation can often begin with "I was just thinking..." or "– there's something I've been wondering about". Sometimes I'm aware, particularly with the younger pupils, that they hang around me for a while, as if they are waiting for a signal or an invitation from me which says I'm ready to listen to them. And then we're off...

Informal situated counselling between colleagues can occur in this way:

... This type of informal situated counselling often seems to happen by the photocopier or during break times, i.e. not in typical working situations. It tends to start with general chat about everyday things, but then the conversation changes character. Suddenly I'm aware that the conversation resembles a counselling conversation and that I have become a kind of counsellor. The format is usually informal, unstructured and rather casual. It's more an act of friendship than a "professional service".

In a situated perspective

Place, time, situation and relationship are thus vital elements in, and pre-conditions for the conversation. These elements will also be decisive for the form, content and not least the exchange and effect of the conversations. The close and direct connection to the participants' experiences and events create a situated learning situation (Lave, 1988). The context will directly and indirectly express itself in the conversation: there is an interactive relationship between context and conversation. The context is often initiating or liberating for the conversation. It can be a specific experience, something which has happened, which is happening or will happen, a conflict, a success or maybe a fiasco. Furthermore the context will affect the form. If time is scarce, the conversation may have to be short and have a limited focus. For example the conversation may be directly linked to a current event where it is appropriate to be strategic in the choice of focus and content and to let some themes remain untouched. However, the situation may also demand that one needs to try to extend a person's perspective with regard to the event at hand.

The participants' experience of actuality in relation to what has become the theme, and the fact that there can be a high degree of correlation between the conversation situation and the theme of the conversation, is a condition which means that the will to change and the influential effect of the conversation can be great. Naturally it is not possible to impose binding guidelines for content and themes. At the same time it is precisely these and the actuality of the conversation which mean that it can be experienced as meaningful and important. The ability to register contextual conditions for the one taking on the role of counsellor in the conversation will be decisive for the quality of the conversation because

then one can adapt and limit both form and content to the situation, place and time. Gibson (1979) uses the term “affordances” to describe the relationship between individuals and the surroundings. “Affordances” are thus what the situation offers in the way of opportunities for action. The participants’ own experiences and emotional state will again decide what they focus on and prioritise in the surroundings.

The person who undertakes the counsellor role acts on the basis of something he has found in the situation and in the other person’s way of being. This can be described as a form of perception, intuition or what Van Manen (1993) describes as “pedagogical tact”. “The teacher’s innermost being manifests itself in the moment of action in a concrete situation” [English translation] Van Manen (1993, p. 44).

A specialist teacher gives the following example of what he felt to be informal situated counselling:

As a newly qualified teacher I was on playground duty together with a colleague. It was winter and it was snowing. The students were playing “I’m the king of the castle” and to me it looked more like fighting than playing. Just as I was about to step in to stop what I thought was fighting, my colleague came up to me, took me by the arm and said “Hang on a moment”. There and then we had a quick chat about the difference between playing and fighting and I learnt that the children had established their own rules and boundaries, which in fact regulated their game.

The informal situated counselling has elements of what Schön (1983) describes as “reflection-in-action”. The actual situation or event where counselling is desired, requires limits and focus, and the informal situated counselling contributes towards constructing and framing the situation so that “an unclear and undecided situation becomes a decided and limited situation which one can then adhere to” [English translation] (Lauvås & Handal, 2000, p. 101). The context is altered and with that the content becomes clearer, the matter takes shape and becomes the “figure” against the background of the situation (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1973).

An unclear shape or form

Based on the above, the form of the conversation will be varied and partially unclear. It is possible to move almost unnoticed in and out of the conversation and it may take a while to realize that one is or has been in this type of conversation. Assuming that one is aware of the situation, the counsellor’s ability to orient himself and focus on the relationship, person, content and context will be decisive for the quality of the conversation. This requires the ability to observe, to be sensitive, to empathize and to analyse. The counsellor’s role and function together will be a result of both his attitude and actions, and the interpretation of both the situation at hand and the relationship.

Using Kottler and Kottler (1993) as a starting point to make the situation clearer, one can say that the situation and the *contact* put the counsellor into an “altered state of consciousness” where the counsellor *slips into* the counsellor role and a counselling situation (see Figure 2). Kottler and Kottler (1993, p. 26) describe this as: “slipping into a helping mood”. The next phase is the *contract* where the conversation is constituted at a high or low level. This means that to a varying degree and with varying clarity, a clarification of the roles, relationships, focus, progression, time etc occurs. Phase three can be described as *counselling*. Here we will recognize elements which often make up counselling in general or, for that matter, advice, coaching, mentoring, supervision etc. Methodological, strategic and structural “handles” are used to the extent that the

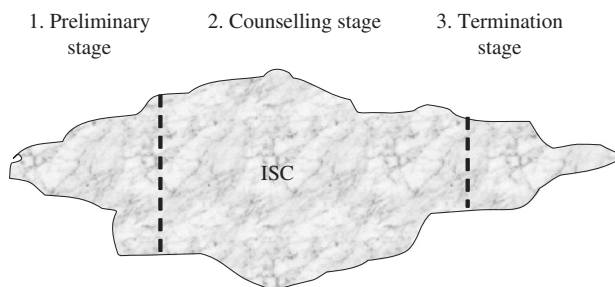


Figure 2. The structure of Informal Situated Counselling.

counsellor wants or has in his repertoire. The quality of the conversation will depend on the counsellor's counselling skills. The end of the conversation can be recognized by "slipping out", where one moves almost imperceptibly out of the "counselling sequence", or by leaving it in a more marked, noticeable way and in some cases, in a clearly defined.

Conclusion

We have used the term *informal situated counselling* in an attempt to capture the small and important conversations which resemble counselling. These are the non-institutionalized, informal, fleeting and often short conversations which at times can be more like counselling than the institutionalized, "correct" wide-ranging conversations. Even though it is not within the counsellor's power to plan to bring about such conversations or moments, teachers should be aware that they can occur. It is also important for those who have counselling responsibilities to note such these conversations and develop an understanding of the significance and potential they contain. However, a central question is how one should react to the informal situated conversations when they occur. As counsellors, ought we to "pedagogize" them and intervene with all our teacher-counselling competence and enthusiasm, or should we let them pass by and take the form and direction that the situation and the opportunities offer? Both alternatives can be right, but there is reason to be careful lest in our professional enthusiasm, we come to grief for thinking that *counselling is the answer!* – while forgetting what the question was.

We hope that this paper will contribute to directing attention to what we have described as informal situated counselling and provide a starting point for theoretical and empirical research into this type of conversation.

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Note

1. *Outer frameworks* are the context, i.e., all the influential factors which surround the informal situated counselling itself, but which are significant for the form which the counselling takes. For example, these could be time, place, conversations, student assumptions, content, goals, expectations and power relationships. The counsellor, with his subject expertise, personal style, way of being and his counselling qualifications, will also be one of the framework factors. It is important to be aware of these factors and to be able to deal with them, influence them or even change them so that the counselling has an "optimal" effect in the actual situation (Hoigaard, Jørgensen, & Mathisen, 2001).

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