

Formal and informal counselling in education

author Piotr Jusik

Since its beginnings Transactional Analysis branched out into the fields of Psychotherapy, Education, Organisational development and Counselling. This diverse nature creates a richness of roles which requires TA practitioners to ‘differentiate roles situationally’ (Schmid, 1994; p. 33) in order to demonstrate their role competence. This article is a map of concepts relevant to TA practitioners that work in education and hold a frame of reference of a counsellor.

EDUCATORS AND COUNSELLORS

The roles (Schmid, 1994; p. 31) of an educator and counsellor differ in terms of a practitioner’s set of feelings, thinking, behaviour, their perspective on reality and the types of relationship that they invite. The education system acts as a context (Napper, 2010; p. 187-188) for various roles, such as teacher, assistant, mentor, coach or school counsellor. Counsellors focus on strengthening the Adult (Tudor, Summers; 2000; p. 26) by uncovering the client’s resources. Educators focus on growth resulting from learning. In the context of an education system and secondary schooling, the following metaphor is useful: education is like climbing up a mountain that is chosen by the educator, while providing support and challenge along the way. In contrast, counselling is more like a hike: the itinerary is decided by both parties to enhance the experience of the hiker. These differences are shown below.

Role component	educators	counsellors
A set of thinking, feeling and behaving	structuring the learning & nurturing the student reality testing	inviting introspection accounting for the here & now
A perspective on reality	imparting knowledge skills & understanding maintaining national or group values (as prescribed by the curriculum) promoting growth resulting from teaching & learning	enhancing relational & problem solving capacities supporting autonomy & individual values promoting growth resulting from relational experiences
A set of relationships	teacher ***** student	mentor, coach, teacher, assistant etc. and counsellor ***** student

Table 1. Distinction between educational and counselling roles
(source: own construction)

This role distinction helps practitioners to become more competent. For example, a teacher who acts in relationally responsive ways is able to contain anxieties that arise during the learning process. The practitioner is aware of boundaries. However, if a student invites a therapeutic conversation, the teacher can refer the student to the school counsellor.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL COUNSELLING

Formal and informal counselling differ in terms of levels of containment, confidentiality, roles and the psychological contract (Berne, 1966; p. 362). Formal counselling is defined as ongoing and timed sessions based on a relationship and an explicit contract. Informal counselling is defined as incidental conversations that aim to promote well-being and autonomy within the education environment. This article demonstrates how some TA concepts can be applied in formal and informal work. This distinction is not absolute due to the flexibility and adaptability of the concepts.

Type of counselling	roles	confidentiality	containment	contract
formal	client → therapist	higher	higher	I'm here to help you solve your problem
informal	learner → educator, coach, mentor, assistant, teacher	lower	lower	I'm here to support your wellbeing I'm available

Table 2. Distinction between formal and informal counselling roles (source: own construction)

Formal work takes place within a bounded environment which provides more containment. Confidentiality is explicitly stated, for example a young student is informed what information might be shared with parents (e.g. harm factors). The learner starts counselling in order to solve a specific problem. The counsellor provides a relationship that acts as a vehicle for change. A prime example of formal counselling is when an anxious student is referred to a school counsellor for eight sessions. In contrast, informal work takes place in a variety of settings, for example corridors or classrooms etc. Confidentiality and containment are compromised due to the nature of incidental conversations. An example of informal work is when a teacher passes through the corridor and sees some students stressed before an exam. The teacher can make an informal intervention by stating: "I trust in your abilities. Good luck!". Thus, informal counselling helps in moments of challenge.

FORMAL COUNSELLING

Formal counselling helps learners solve specific issues by strengthening their Adult Ego State. The requirements of working in education result in some considerations.

Contracting

Each institution has a referral process that allows the learner to access counselling. In a secondary school the learner may be referred by the form tutor or a teacher. In such case, parental consent is necessary. In higher education institutions the learner can self-refer if they need to and want to. In each case, there is a three-cornered contract (English, 1975, p. 383). The counsellor has to account for the psychological distance (Micholt, 1992; p. 229) and ensure that each party's agenda is valued. For example, a university counsellor is often meant to contribute to student retention rates. A skilled practitioner can strike a balance that is ethically justified. In a school situation, sometimes 'naughty' students get referred to the school counsellor who may be seen as a 'fixer'. When this is brought into awareness, it helps the learner to take responsibility and grow into autonomy.

Steiner (1969, p. 29-31) describes conditions for contracting which are applicable in various degrees depending on the set up of the educational institution.

Steiner's condition	Implications for formal counselling in education
<p>Mutual agreement All parties agree to the process and content (the issue to be addressed)</p>	<p><u>To what extent:</u> do all parties agree to the process? do parents need to be involved? is the learner agreeing at the overt and covert level? is the 'WHY' of counselling clear? is counselling necessary for the learner's wellbeing?</p>
<p>Valid consideration The practitioner receives some form of acknowledgement of their skills (e.g. salary_</p>	<p><u>To what extent:</u> does the learner perceive the service as valuable? is the learner committed based on his perception of value?</p>
<p>Competency The client is able to access the service with sufficient Adult Ego State availability</p>	<p><u>To what extent:</u> is the learner available to their own experiences? is the institution equipped to meet the need of the learner?</p>
<p>Lawful object The practice of counselling has to follow the law of the land (i.e. policies and procedures of the institution)</p>	<p><u>To what extent:</u> is the counselling consistent with the policies of the institution? are risk factors accounted for? parents need to be informed about any concerns?</p>

**Table 3. Contracting considerations in formal counselling roles
(source: own construction)**

When contracting, it is helpful to consider the extent to which these factors play a role in the counselling process. For instance, a university counselling service does not have to inform parents, whereas in a secondary school it would be necessary.

Brief therapy model

Counsellors working in an educational environment often provide brief therapy. Grant (Grant, 2013; p 61-66) presents an outline of short term counselling from a Transactional Analysis point of view. According to Grant, The Five Essential Ingredients in Short-Term Counselling include:

1. Holding the possibility of one session cure.
2. Establishing a relationship.
3. Contracting.
4. Being a keen observer.
5. Leverage.

For example, universities provide formal therapeutic counselling for students in need, such as Tom (twenty-two year old self-referred male with depression and anxiety). He had a strong need to be 'diagnosed' and invited me to find fault in him by repeating "What is wrong with me?" I was still and allowed him to define his relational space. I clarified that we could only address some of his issues in short term counselling. Our contracting was sound: Tom accepted that the service offered could be a starting point. I insisted on seeing every moment as impactful: "In ten minutes you will leave this room, what would you like to be different? Tom responded well through session to session contracts. We practiced mindfulness or used objects to represent his inner world. Notably, I was open, available and relationally responsive in a gentle manner. I also refused to "fix" him. I did not want to confirm his belief that he needed fixing. I was more concerned with his strengths, resources and options. My refusal to fix him created leverage: it was somewhat liberating for him, as he started to accept himself more. Tom's relational need for acceptance (Erskine, 1996; p. 322) was crucial to establishing a contactful and responsive relationship. Tom finished his counselling after eight sessions with a more positive outlook.

INFORMAL COUNSELLING

Informal counselling relies on the deliberate use of TA concepts in places other than the consulting room. It gives practitioners many options to have a positive impact on the learner, even though the interactions might be brief.

Confronting discounts

Learners can engage in games to avoid learning or when they feel uncontained. One useful approach is based on confronting discounts. Barrow (2010, p. 4) outlines the tasks of an educator in relation to levels of discounting. The application of this theory will be illustrated with an example.

Level of Discount	Practitioner's task
Existence	Recognise
Significance	Reassure
Solvability (options)	Reconnoitre
Personal capacity	Reflect

Table 4. Role of a practitioner in relation to levels of discounting: source: adapted from Barrow, 2010, p. 4

Kate was a challenging fourteen year old student excluded from school. She was a confident teenager attending a pupil referral unit where I taught Science. Kate doubted her abilities and avoided learning. Initially, she spent most lessons outside the school engaging in banter or smoking. She discounted the existence of the lesson and her existence as a learner. I needed to *recognise* Kate's lack of engagement and see her as someone capable. Gradually, she appeared in class wanting to learn. I then *reassured* her patiently and offered lots of strokes. I realised that I was significant to her when after my three day absence she greeted me with the words "Hello stranger!". At this point we built enough trust and Kate became more independent. When completing her lab assignments we needed to explore (*reconnoitre*) the best options of answering exam questions. Towards the end, I *reflected* on Kate's journey and shared my thoughts with her. She gained insight and recognised one of the older teachers as the psychological leader: "Barbara is like a school grandmother, isn't she?". On her last day, Kate gave me a card indicating that initially she did not like me. In my informal counselling role, I held this negative transference when Kate started to account for the significance of her situation of being excluded from school.

Relationship modalities

Clarkson’s model of relationship modalities (1995; p. 6-22), when translated into classroom practice, is a useful way of thinking about informal counselling interventions. The role of a practitioner is outlined below and will be explained through visuals and case studies.

Relationship modality	Role of a practitioner
Working alliance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Provide strokes to create an optimal learning environment · Offer clear contracts to manage expectations
Transferential relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Act with integrity based on the practitioner’s professional values · Make a point to be different than the transferential expectation
Developmentally needed relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Identify specific learning and emotional needs · Provide appropriate and relevant nurture, structure and challenge
Person-to-person relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Mutually recognise humanity and human struggle in each other · Enjoy an appropriate and non-possessive exchange of strokes
Transpersonal relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Allow yourself to be impacted by the unknown and elusive · Allow meaning to emerge from co-creation

**Table 5. Role of a practitioner in relation to different relationship modalities;
source: own construction**

Counselling roles need to be built on warmth and trust. That is why my students were greeted with a poster stating “Learning to be together”. They entered an environment where strokes were available in abundance. The ground rules were simple: “I will listen to you, you will listen to me, what we say is important.” This way we established a **working alliance**.



Fig.1. Classroom view that greets the learner

On some occasions, my classroom was vandalised. I represented some negative aspects of students' past experiences. The learners saw me as a critical figure that sought to invalidate them. This gave rise to a **transferential relationship**. When the students damaged equipment, I categorically named their behaviour as unacceptable and stated the consequences that would follow. I acted according to my values of integrity and growth by talking to the students in a calm manner. At the same time, I made a point to be different than their transferential expectations. I did not intend to belittle or humiliate them, e.g. "You can choose to learn, rather than wasting your time".



Fig.2. Vandalised classroom

Some of my relationships with students got stuck at the transferential stage, while others moved into a **developmentally needed relationship**. Once the students tested me enough, they were ready to show some of their learning and emotional needs. My role was to identify these needs and respond to them by providing relevant structure, nurture and challenge. For example, some teenagers needed to play in order to settle. The picture on the right shows how a student explores the concept of the centre of gravity. I consciously responded to their need for play and extended this into more challenging Science concepts that helped the students to develop their higher order thinking skills.

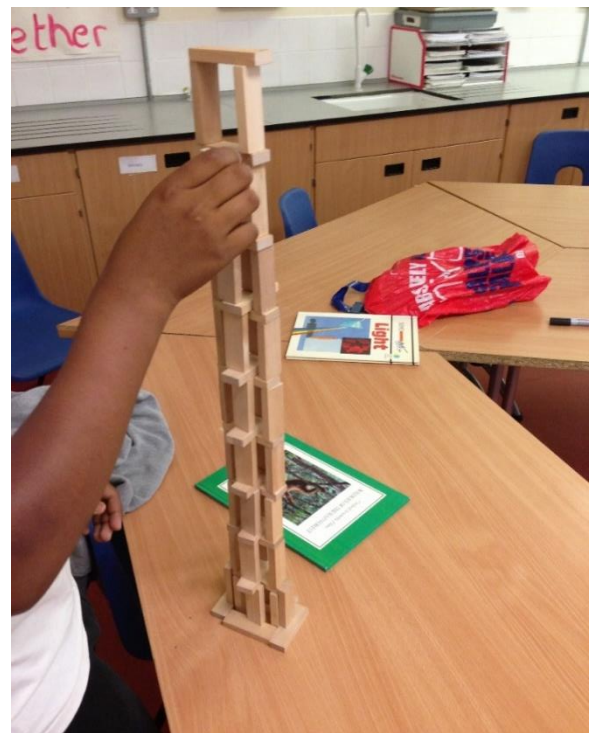


Fig. 3. Engaging students through play

The **person – to – person relationship** develops when both the practitioner and the student are ready to see each other authentically. This is also called the real relationship: the healing aspect of human connection. Some students were able to enter a relationship whereby

we mutually recognised our struggles. We showed each other appreciation through jokes and silent understanding. However, I was clear that the student did not owe me anything and our exchange of strokes was meant to be non-possessive as otherwise it would skew my professional integrity. This type of relationship requires the most skills and awareness.

Lastly, sometimes it is possible to witness traces of a **transpersonal relationship** when some universal qualities emerge in the classroom. On one occasion a student asked my colleague “Miss, why is it that everybody dies, but not everybody lives?”. The colleague did not answer but remained silent and created a permissive space where profound questions could be asked. Sometimes young people’s words embody transpersonal qualities that reveal the unknown and elusive. Teaching can be hard and without allowing the transpersonal relationship into the classroom, one can lose a sense of meaning. Education needs to inspire us to create meaning. This can emerge from co-creation when the unknown and elusive touches us.

CONCLUSION

This article presented a number of Transactional Analysis concepts that are useful for counsellors when working both formally and informally in an educational environment. There are differences in terms of roles between educators and counsellors. There are also differences in approaches between formal and informal counselling interventions. At its humanistic core, Transactional Analysis can help us become closer and more authentic or... understand why we choose to play games that prevent growth and learning. In order to be fully engaged we need to draw on the resources coming from all of our Ego States. This promotes resilience, achievement and a hopeful outlook on life. At the same time, many counselling practitioners who work in education may hold more than one role. They need to consider the nature of a particular role and inhabit it appropriately and with awareness. Berne (1964; p. 158) points out that awareness is one of the components of autonomy. Practitioners need to model autonomy through cultivating their self-awareness of the various elements of their roles. Consequently, they can increase their role competence (Schmid, 1994; p. 34) and become more robust. Thus, counselling in education is a quest for resources that is not for the faint-hearted.

Word count 2472 (without references)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barrow, G. (2011). Educator as Cultivator. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 41(4), 308-314.
- Berne, E. (1961). *Transactional analysis in psychotherapy: A systematic individual and social psychiatry*. Toronto, Canada: Ballantine Books.
- Berne, E. (1963). *The Structure and Dynamics of Organizations and Groups*. New York: Grove Press.
- Berne, E. (1964). *Games people play: The psychology of human relationships*. New York: Grove Press.
- Berne, E. (1972). *What do you say after you say hello?: The psychology of human destiny*. Beverly Hills, CA: Corgi.
- Berne, E. (1966). *Principles of group treatment*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Clarkson, P. (2014). *The therapeutic relationship*. London: Whurr. Chapter 1, A multiplicity of relationships in psychotherapy
- English, F., (1975). The Three-Cornered Contract. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, October 5, 383-384.
- Epstein, M. (2014). *The trauma of everyday life*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House.
- Erskine, R. G., & Trautmann, R. L. (1996). Methods of an Integrative Psychotherapy. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 26(4), 316-328.
- Erskine, R. (2013). Life Scripts: A Transactional Analysis of Unconscious Relational Patterns. W: Napper R., *The individual in context: How do I fit in around here?* (p. 179 – 201). London, England: Karnac.
- Grant, J. (2013). Short-Term Counseling and Transactional Analysis. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 43(1), 58-67.
- Lambert, M.J.,& Barley, D.E. (2002). *Research summary on the therapeutic relationship and psychotherapy outcome*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Mellor, K., & Schiff, E. (1975). Discounting. *Transactional Analysis Bulletin*, 5(3), 295-302.
- Micholt, N. (1992). Psychological Distance and Group Interventions. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 22(4), 228-233.
- Schmid, B. (1994). Transactional analysis and social roles. In: G. Mohr & T. Steinert (Eds.), *Growth and change for organizations: Transactional analysis new developments 1995-2006* (pp. 32-61). Pleasanton, CA: International Transactional Analysis Association.
- Schmid, B. (2008). The Role Concept of Transactional Analysis and other Approaches to Personality, Encounter, and Cocreativity for All Professional Fields. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 38(1), 17-30.
- Steiner, C. M., & Cassidy, W. (1969). Therapeutic contracts in group treatment. *Transactional Analysis Bulletin*, 8(30), 29-31
- Summers, G. Tudor, K. (2000). Co-creative. *Transactional Analysis Transactional Analysis Journal*, January 2000; vol. 30, 1, 23-40.