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**A FIVE-STAGE MODEL OF SKILL ACQUISITION  
APPLIED TO COUNSELLOR TRAINING**

by

**R. Vance Peavy**

**Department of Psychological Foundations**

**University of Victoria**

**Victoria, Canada V8W 2Y2**

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INTRODUCTION

Based on my experience and observations as a training consultant for the Canadian Employment and Immigration Commission and upon other training experience as well, in the Fall of 1985 I wrote a draft paper (Peavy, 1985) outlining a six stage model of training. I had recognized that employment counselling trainees go through a progression of skill acquisition. The progression begins with strong dependence on rules and structured instruction to guide practice and performance. Some trainees eventually reach an advanced stage where they perform at a fluid, natural, intuitive level without dependence upon rule-following. In my paper I also attempted to identify training group process dynamics which either inhibit or facilitate skill acquisition. I also proposed trainer initiations which facilitate skill learning and promote a healthy group climate for learning.

In the early winter of 1986 several of my graduate students attended a seminar given by Patricia Benner (1984) on nursing skill acquisition. Benner had based her work on the Dreyfus model of skill acquisition. I secured two Dreyfus documents (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980; 1986) and studied them carefully. I could see that they had analyzed the skill acquisition process in a manner somewhat along the lines of my own analysis.

In this document I have attempted to apply the Dreyfus model and descriptions directly to counselling skill acquisition. Based on my own analysis, I have made certain alterations which, in my opinion, do not distort the Dreyfus model but adapt the model to the specific skill domain of counselling.

## COUNSELLING: AN OVERVIEW STATEMENT

Counselling is a specific social practice requiring skillful performance--especially in interpersonal communication. Counselling, as a "face-to-face" communicative process, is used with individuals to elicit and clarify meaning, make decisions, and implement deliberate goal-directed actions. In essence, counselling is a form of discourse dedicated to personal problem-solving. Example "problems" which bring individuals to counselling are: whether or not to change careers, how to locate a new job, whether or not to repair or dissolve a marriage, how better to cope with a difficult child, etc.

Counselling is not an "advice-giving" procedure although the word "counsellor" is sometimes mis-applied to activities of an advice-giving nature--for example, financial counsellor. Nor is counselling, in the sense intended here, synonymous with the practice of psychotherapy.

Psychotherapy tends toward an alliance with medicine, frequently purports to "change" personality, and often is applied to individuals exhibiting dysfunctional behavior and thought processes or who are classified as non-functional, e.g., psychotic, crazy, abnormal, hospitalized, etc.

In contrast, counselling is carried on with persons who are coping with daily living in a "normal" manner, although not without problems. Counselling is not allied with medicine. It is allied with pedagogy. In short, counselling is defined here as a learning-based, problem solving activity utilized with "normal" individuals who have practical problems in everyday living and for which they wish assistance. The main mechanism of counselling is the interview.

Since counsellors do utilize interpersonal communicative skills such as listening, clarifying, instructing, requesting and negotiating to carry out problem-

solving and since these same skills are used in most, types of psychotherapy, various analogous comparisons can be made between counselling and psychotherapy. Some research on psychotherapy topics is also instructive for counselling and vice versa. Examples of research useful to both psychotherapy and counselling are studies of psychotherapy process, interview dynamics, client variables, and outcome studies.

### THREE ELEMENTS OF SKILL

Within the literature of counselling, "skill" is narrowly defined to mean performance--either verbal or behavioral. An example of verbal skill is the ability to reply empathically (paraphrase). An example of a behavioral skill is the ability to maintain eye contact. While performance certainly is an important component of "skill," it is not the whole of skill. There are two other essential elements in the doing of skill, and, perhaps, even a third. I will explain this expanded conception of skill.

1. Recognition (perceptual awareness). We are, as the existentialists remind us, always situated. At each moment of our experience we are in a specific situation with its panorama of features. Certain features are salient to our reasons for being in this particular situation while other features remain irrelevant to our purpose of the moment. Within the context of the counselling interview salient features may appear as part of the environment (the office is quiet, or noisy as the case may be; useful data is accessible, the form of leaflets, computer displays, etc); they can also appear as characteristics of the client or what the client does, says, doesn't say, doesn't do, and so forth; finally, salient features

may appear as characteristics of the counsellor--such as the counsellor's mood or initial impression of the client--perhaps experienced as bias toward the client or liking for the client.

It is also to be noted that salient features emerge from the interaction between client and counsellor as the interview proceeds.

2. Discretionary decision. As the counsellor becomes aware of salient features within a specific counselling situation, it becomes possible to form a decision about which performance, how much, and when it should be initiated. Thus, as a counsellor listens to what a client is saying, and what the client says is incomplete or vague (salient features), the counsellor may decide that it is best to check his or her perception of what has just been said by the client.

Recognition and discretionary decision are cognitive operations and, in the case of experienced counsellors, typically occur rapidly and outside the counsellor's intentional awareness. Beginning counsellors actually have to deliberately think of their cognitive operations--a training phase which results in conversations which are characterized as "awkward," "mechanistic," and "unnatural." Of course, when one has to "stop and think" what one should say, interference in the natural flow of conversation is the inevitable result.

3. Goal-directed performances. Upon becoming aware of the salient features of a concrete situation, and upon having formed a decision about what constitutes an intelligent action in the situation, and given the perspective which one holds, then being able to perform the appropriate verbal or behavioral action is essential. This is what is usually referred to as the counselling "skill."

In summary, in this document the term "skill" implies three interdependent elements: recognition, discretionary decision, and performance.

It can also be commonly observed that counsellors are able to recognize salient factors, decide about an appropriate performance, and have in their performance repertory the appropriate response and yet fail to implement it! Upon analysis, this last moment "paralysis" indicates a lack of confidence. A clear example of this is shown when a client makes two statements which are in some way quite discrepant but does not appear to recognize this discrepancy. The counsellor hears the discrepant utterances (recognizes salient features of the client's expression) and decides that it makes sense to confront (verbally) the discrepancy. The counsellor can demonstrate the ability to (a) state the discrepant messages, (b) remark that the messages appear to be contradictory, and (c) ask what the client thinks about the apparent discrepancy now that it has been pointed out. However, the counsellor fails to take this clarifying initiative. Why?

There appear to be at least two explanations. First, the counsellor may be possessed of a non-assertive or "timid" style of communication and in spite of training in the art of verbal confrontation, remains cautious about saying anything which might "offend" or cause the other distress--such as might occur when confronting others with their own discrepant meanings.

Secondly, the counsellor may have practiced confrontation under role-play or simulated conditions but still has not had the "experience" of using confrontation in so-called "real" situations. So even though familiar with example experiences through practice in a training context, the counsellor has a failure of confidence in a work situation.