



# Counselling/Advising for Language Learning: Setting the Context, in Search of Identity

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## Setting the context

When I was invited by Carol Everhard to become a keeper of a worm, I was amused and intrigued. I was amused because as a member of a different language community (Italian) the metaphor of a can of worm, however figuratively intense, does not mean anything. To describe the same concept we would probably use metaphors such as *è un gran pasticcio*, which originates from the food tradition, or we would use the expression *suscitare un vespaio* which involves wasps rather than worms (different climatic influences of course).

Metaphors are therefore culturally loaded, so in order to undertake this assigned task I first had to deconstruct the initial metaphor. This is also an important task which any good counsellor has to carry out if s/he wants to be able to engage in a meaningful learning conversation with a learner and provide constructive support.

In this short article I shall try to carve out an identity for counselling by providing an initial framework on which to build gradually our understanding of this concept and its related professional role. As we shall see both the notion and professional role are also culturally loaded.

## In search of identity

The struggle to reconcile the individual and the social aspect of learning in the autonomy debate is reflected in the redefinition of learning spaces (the classroom, the online environment, the self-access centre) and roles within them. This redefinition has implications for advising and the implementation of self-directed learning.

In discussing the role and skills of advisers, I start from the premises that

1. practices of advising are determined by the expectations of institutions towards self-access and autonomy;
2. advising practices throughout the world vary depending on the institutional and cultural

context within which they develop (Mozzon-McPherson 2001);

3. the current lack of consensus on an appropriate name for the new profession is symptomatic of a far wider problem: the lack of a discourse to define what advisers do without constant borrowing from existing genres (viz. teaching and counselling);
4. staff development programmes (for example, the Postgraduate Certificate in Advising for Language Learning we offer at the University of Hull)<sup>1</sup> and research on the discourse of advising are paramount in influencing a change of attitudes and practice;
5. interpretations of autonomous learning affect definitions of advising.

The debate on advising, like that on learner autonomy, has been conducted at three levels: operative spaces, content and professional role (Benson 1997). Whilst the term facilitator/helper seems to be more related to the classroom, the role of adviser/counsellor has been associated with one-to-one sessions with an emphasis on psycho-social features (Gardner and Miller 1999). These, possibly oversimplified, definitions of advisers based on where they interact can be significant in relation to their professional profile. In some cases it has meant a physical non-negotiated displacement of the traditional teacher - from the classroom into the self-access centre - causing confusion and scepticism amongst teachers who have felt 'used' and 'de-skilled'.

Koul (1995) notes that counsellors are often seen by learners as teachers, whilst counsellors see themselves as being unable to become involved in personal learner's problems as, however relevant to learning these may be, they feel inadequate in dealing with such problems. Consequently, they limit

<sup>1</sup>

<http://www.hull.ac.uk/languages/prospective/courses/pg/langlearn/index.html>

themselves to providing practical strategic training. Pierson (1996:52), citing Exum and Lau (1988), points out that when Hong Kong undergraduates in Canada seek counselling therapy, they prefer a more direct approach in contrast with the indirect approach underlying counselling practice: *'They seem to want to be told what to do'*.

Regardless of the nomenclature, a more fundamental difference exists in content at the level of discourse. Advising is performed through mediation, and such mediation cannot help without interaction and conversations. It is a *'system of interventions which aims at supporting students' methodology of language learning by means of 'conversations' i.e. by using language in the framework of social interaction to help students reflect on their learning experience, identify inconsistencies and steer their own path.'* Esch (1996:42). The advice is not necessarily language-specific, but process-related.

Riley (1985, 1997) and Kelly (1996) examine the nature of the interaction between advisers and learners as a distinctive feature of advising in relation to teaching. Kelly (1996:94) extends this notion of learning conversation and defines it as a *'form of therapeutic dialogue that enables an individual to manage a problem.'* She describes the transformation which anyone – students or staff – involved in self-directed learning, has to undergo as one which challenges beliefs about language and perceptions of their roles as learners/teachers. She continues by stating that, although learner training programmes may directly or indirectly lead to this transformation, counselling provides the framework to develop new ways of interacting with learners. Kelly distinguishes between two sets of skills – macro and micro. Whilst many good teachers may recognise themselves as using some of the macro skills (guiding, modelling, giving feedback, supporting, evaluating etc.), it is the second set of skills (attending, restating, paraphrasing, questioning, confronting, reflecting feelings, empathising) which contributes to distinguishing advising from teaching and associates it with counselling therapy.

One element characterising many advising practices is the effort to find tangible tools, environments, and contents to isolate the differences between new and existing roles. This fits a 'technical' view of advising with advisers as 'technicians of learning'. In this effort to be accepted by the academic community, advisers may lose track of their professional identity. Consequently, instead of creating a new discourse to define new ways of working with learning schemes, they may adopt old ones. The dangers of focusing on technicalities may obscure the issue of professional development and reduce it to a set of skills, which can quickly be learnt from existing study skills, and learner training, manuals. The recurring use of vocabulary such as 'skills', 'tools' and 'training' also

implies a mechanistic approach to learning with a consequent potential risk of de-professionalisation of both status and employment conditions. Riley (1985, 1997) defines counselling as 'a category of communicative situation' (1997:119) and considers it as a complex skill which cannot be acquired overnight, or by the simple transfer of rooms or adoption of different tools.

If advising is not only a matter of technicalities, but involves gaining full control over one's learning, it follows that knowledge is constructed through negotiation and interaction with others rather than taught by experts. In this context learning consists of the reorganisation and restructuring of the learning experience rather than the gradual internalisation or discovery of pre-determined knowledge. Subjectivity, rather than objectivity, comes to the fore and with it an emphasis on learner's representations, beliefs and behaviours. This more radical concept of learner autonomy can get lost in the effort of adapting it to institutional constraints with the danger of 'fossilisation' and 'psychologism' of learning (Little 1991:1).

Finally, I can identify at least six research strands which could usefully contribute to the understanding of good advising and can give an authoritative voice to the role of counsellor:

1. analysis of individual advising skills (e.g. use of echoing and mirroring strategies, prevalence of micro or macro skills) and their impact on changes in learning behaviours;
2. analysis of adviser-learner discourse (e.g. use of pauses, open and close questions);
3. management of change, particularly in relation to the integration of advising into classroom teaching, group advising and the construction of communities of practice;
4. investigation of advising as a culturally-bounded performance
5. issues of gender in relation to the professional profile of advisers.
6. advising in online learning environments.

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