

Teaching in higher education emphasises mainly the cultivation of students' mental and practical skills, as well as to some degree, the nurturing of students' social skills. This CDTL Brief looks at some issues surrounding 'Discipline and Counselling', modes that educators often employ to influence student behaviour.

Care and Control: On the Relationship between Discipline and Counselling in Education

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School discipline has always been a top concern for teachers and educators. In recent years, there has also been an increasing emphasis on the role of counselling in the education process at all levels—primary, secondary and tertiary. In the context of education, discipline is specially concerned with promoting behaviours that conform to teacher expectations and/or change behaviours that do not (Hoover, 1997). On the other hand, counselling is a “short-term, interpersonal, theory-based, professional activity guided by ethical and legal standards that focuses on helping individuals to resolve developmental and situational problems” (Gladding, 1992). Discipline is often associated with punishment aimed at correcting behaviours whilst counselling denotes the presence of a helping relationship characterised by warmth and acceptance. The two processes are quite different, but they have similar goals—to bring about behavioural change. Many have argued that discipline and counselling are incompatible with each other. They say concepts like ‘discipline’, ‘control’, ‘sanctions’ and ‘punishment’ have no place in the vocabulary of caring people like school counsellors. They are concerned that if teachers have to play the conflicting roles of the disciplinarian and the counsellor concurrently, they may end up being effective in neither. Are discipline and counselling incompatible practices? Is it true that the twain shall never meet?

If we try to understand both concepts in a holistic manner, discipline and counselling are certainly not incompatible. In its holistic form, discipline involves much more than the mere meting out of punishment. In fact, there are three aspects of discipline—developmental, preventive and corrective. The developmental aspect of discipline involves instruction, training, inculcation of values and setting of standards for acceptable behaviours. In the context of classroom management, Kounin (1970) concluded that effective teachers differ from ineffective teachers not in the way they respond to the students’ misbehaviours, but in how competently they organise and manage classroom activities. If the teacher makes an effort to create a tension-free atmosphere in the classroom, presents the instructional materials in a lively and interesting manner and demonstrates a passion and enthusiasm for the subject matter, the students are likely to be interested and attentive. When students are meaningfully engaged in learning tasks, they are unlikely to pose disciplinary problems.

The preventive aspect of discipline is characterised by limit setting and the laying down of ground rules. If students are fully aware of the boundaries of what is considered acceptable or unacceptable behaviours and the consequences of breaking the rules, they are more likely to abide by the rules. Thus to function smoothly, classrooms need clearly defined rules so that students

know what to expect and what is expected of them. Weinstein (1997) described four principles to keep in mind when establishing classroom rules. First, the rules must be reasonable, necessary and seen as fair. This means that the rules should be appropriate for the age and grade level of the students. Rules that are appropriate in the secondary school may come across as absurd and unreasonable when applied to undergraduates in the university. Second, the rules should be clear and comprehensible. When rules are concrete and specific, they will not be subjected to the personal interpretation of the students. Third, the rules should be consistent with instructional and learning goals. For example, if a teacher is too concerned with having an orderly, quiet classroom when conducting group activities, it would be difficult for the students to engage in meaningful, collaborative learning. Fourth, classroom rules should be consistent with school rules. If instructors in the classroom try to enforce rules that contradict the general rules of the institution, the students will become confused.

The corrective aspect of discipline involves the use of teaching strategies and intervention procedures to promote acceptable behaviours and change undesirable behaviours. The type of interventions needed depends on the seriousness of the problems presented. Most minor behavioural problems in the classroom such as inattentive and disruptive behaviours can be corrected with non-verbal cues like a hand signal or a warning look. When dealing with more serious problems like aggression and bullying, there may be a need to mete out appropriate punishments. Whilst conveying the message that a person has to bear the consequences of his wrong behaviour, the punishment also serves as a deterrent to prevent further offences. All these three aspects of discipline contribute to the ultimate goal of discipline—self-control. If students are motivated to learn, know the ground rules and exercise self-control, there will be very little need for classroom discipline.

However, when discipline problems do arise, mere meting out punishment alone may not be enough. This is because punishment only serves as a deterrent but does not necessarily change behaviours. In fact, repeated punishments for the recalcitrant student may leave him embittered and angry, and even antagonistic towards the school authority. This is where counselling can come into play. Wolfgang (1999) has conceived the “Three Faces of Discipline”, an approach to behaviour management which integrates the philosophy and theory of counselling with that of discipline. He called these three approaches the “Relationship-Listening Face” (a therapeutic process), the

“Confronting-Contracting Face” (a counselling process) and the “Rules and Consequences Face” (a controlling process). These three faces may be placed on a power continuum from minimum to maximum use of power. The continuum reflects the level of autonomy and control given to the student to change his own behaviour or the aversive actions used by the teacher to get the desired change in the student’s behaviour and re-establish order in the educational setting.

According to Wolfgang (1999), the Relationship-Listening Face of discipline is a therapeutic process that involves minimum use of power. The student is viewed as having the capability to change his own behaviour. If he misbehaves, it is because of inner emotional turmoil or a feeling of inadequacy. Allowing the student to ‘talk it out’ will help him develop insights and become more purposeful in his behaviour. This approach is akin to client-centred therapy, an affective approach to counselling developed by Carl Rogers, the father of counselling psychology. Rogers believed that man has a natural capacity for growth and development, a strong desire to become mature, socially adjusted, independent and productive. The counsellor must rely on this inner force, not upon his own influence, for therapeutic changes in the counsellee. To Rogers, the true benefit of counselling lies in the therapeutic nature of the counselling relationship. He postulated that if the counsellor can provide a non-threatening relationship characterised by non-judgemental acceptance, warmth and respect, the counsellee will discover within himself the capacity to use that relationship for growth and change, and personal development will take place (Rogers, 1951).

The Confronting-Contracting Face of discipline grants the student the power to decide on how he will change, with the counsellor’s encouragement, and live up to a mutual agreement for behavioural change. This approach to discipline offers students a unique opportunity to explore and express their ideas and feelings in a non-evaluative, non-threatening environment, reflect on their own behaviour and make choices whether or not to change their behaviour and how to do so. The idea is to empower individuals to own and manage their problems.

Immediately, one can recognise a strong resemblance between Wolfgang’s Confronting-Contracting Face of discipline and Reality Therapy, a cognitive behavioural approach to counselling developed by William Glasser (1965). Like many modern counselling theories, Reality Therapy contends that human beings are responsible for their own behaviour. Glasser himself believes that all human behaviour is motivated by striving to meet

two basic psychological needs—the need to love and to be loved and the need for self-worth. These two needs have been incorporated into one need which he calls “identity”. When individuals are frustrated in their attempts to satisfy their need to be loved and to feel worthwhile, they develop a “failure identity” and resort to other avenues such as delinquency and withdrawal. Glasser believes that this “failure identity” can be changed to a “success identity”, but only when individuals change their behaviour in such a way that their needs for love and self-worth are met. This behavioural change can be brought about by Reality Therapy, a counselling process which helps individuals make value judgements about their own behaviour, face reality squarely, assume personal responsibility for their own behaviour and decide to do what is right, responsible and realistic (George & Cristiani, 1995).

Glasser (1972) formulated an eight-step procedure as a guide for the counselling process:

1. **Be involved.** Glasser emphasises the need for the counsellor to communicate concern to the client, along with warmth and understanding.
2. **Focus on behaviour, not feelings.** The emphasis here is on making the clients aware of what they are doing that makes them feel the way they do.
3. **Focus on the present.** The past is important only as it relates to present behaviours.
4. **Make value judgements.** The clients are helped to self-evaluate their behaviour to determine whether it is responsible behaviour. Is their behaviour getting what they want or is it hurting themselves and others?
5. **Make a plan.** The counsellor works with the client to develop a specific course of action that will change irresponsible behaviour to responsible behaviour.
6. **Get a commitment.** Glasser believes that a plan is worthwhile only if the client makes a specific commitment to carry it out.
7. **Accept no excuses.** Since not all plans succeed, Glasser suggests that when a plan fails, one should focus on developing new, more realistic plans rather than investigating why the old plan failed.
8. **Eliminate punishment, but don't give up.** Plan failures are not to be met with punishment, only with the natural consequences that the client has to live with. Glasser urges the counsellor not to give up when plans fail, but to repeat the whole counselling cycle all over again (Wubbolding, 1991).

Reality Therapy was introduced to Singapore in the early 1990s. In 1995, Dr William Glasser himself was invited to Singapore by the National Institute of Education to conduct training for hundreds of school teachers. Since then Reality Therapy as a counselling approach has been gaining popularity, especially among school counsellors, many of whom have reported success in using the model (Tan, 2002).

The third face of Wolfgang's model to discipline, known as the Rules and Consequences Face, is basically a controlling process. If a student breaks a rule, he has to bear the consequences. So under-age smoking may land an adolescent in the juvenile court and cheating in examinations could lead to expulsion from school. In the primary schools the discipline master or discipline mistress handles discipline problems as well as counselling cases. This is because more often than not, discipline problems in primary schools are often linked to social or psychological problems such as low self-esteem, learning difficulties or ineffective parenting. Indeed, the management of discipline problems in primary schools often involves counselling the child and working with the parents. In secondary schools, disciplinary functions are carried out by the discipline master while counselling is provided by either the school counsellor or the teacher in charge of Pastoral Care and Career Guidance (PCCG). Sometimes the ‘culprit’ is sent for counselling after punishment has been meted out. This is important, not just to clear the air, but also to help the student reflect upon his/her own behaviour. In fact, the Handbook on School Discipline issued by the Ministry of Education to schools recommends that all disciplinary cases involving corporal punishment should be followed up with counselling (Ministry of Education, 1997). In post-secondary and tertiary institutions, recalcitrant students who flout rules repeatedly are usually counselled first, before disciplinary action is taken against them.

Are discipline and counselling compatible practices? Will the twain ever meet? The answer is a resounding “yes”! Counselling is not a substitute for discipline but the two certainly can complement each other. They also share something in common—both are motivated by care and concern for the well-being of the recipient, and both aim at bringing about behavioural change, problem-solving, personal growth and development. When properly implemented, both discipline and counselling can succeed in fostering in our students the values of respect, self-discipline, social responsibility and moral integrity, the foundations for character building and affective education.

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Discipline and Student Counselling

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There are many misconceptions about the relationship between discipline and counselling. By far the most common is the view that counselling or 'talk therapy', with its emphasis on empathetic understanding, is the humane alternative to discipline. Here would fall in that category of educators who 'punish' students caught cheating with counselling or who buy into the plea that emotional wounds and distress somewhat exonerates misdemeanours like shoplifting, violent outbursts and injury to others. Just as misguided is the notion that counselling is too soft: that what is needed is swift and decisive punishment for neglect and wrongdoing; that to 'spare the rod' is to 'spoil the child'. These views tend to see discipline and counselling as being dichotomous. In practice, however, discipline and counselling intertwine in helping students meet their goals and in equipping them with the skills and attitudes to succeed in their lives.

One way to break through this dichotomy is to examine the goals of discipline. While discipline is often equated with punishment and control, effective and positive discipline goes beyond the merely punitive to include rehabilitative and restorative goals. The first deals with how the university can encourage future compliance while the latter deals with

how the transgressor can repair the harm and make amends. After all the goal of discipline in an educational setting like NUS is to help students to fit into the real world happily and effectively; to be able to delay self-gratification in pursuit of their goals; and to develop an internal sense of control and responsibility.

In fact discussions about discipline in the last 30–40 years have moved from issues of control to those of human motivation. During this time, counselling has often been seen as a way to help transgressors understand themselves and resolve their conflicts. The basic approach involves helping transgressors discover what their real goals are, reflect on the extent to which their present behaviours are hindering them from achieving these goals and to plan more effective future behaviours. Proponents of these approaches include Glasser (reality therapy) and Gordon (open communication and mutual solving). An obviously corrective orientation to counselling is Dreikur's social discipline model. According to Dreikur, misbehaviour is due to four mistaken goals: to gain attention, exert power over others, seek revenge for real or imagined events or out of feelings of helplessness or impotency. Hence one important function of

counselling is to determine which goal is in operation and to respond accordingly.

An important corollary of Dreikur's approach is that the person must then be made to face the undesirable consequences of his behaviour. For example, if a student is caught shoplifting, he/she needs to face the legal ramifications. This might include being put in a temporary holding cell and paying a \$5,000 bail. Some would argue that such a student needs counselling and in all likelihood they are right. But this does not detract from the need for consequences resulting from a moral or legal lapse. The stand taken is that while a misdemeanour may be prompted (in a very few cases) by emotional need, therapeutic goals should be pursued only after some form of discipline has been meted out and accepted. Like all of us, students need to learn to deal with their wounds in a more effective way. Moreover, there would be no motivation for doing so if they need not face up to unpleasant consequences. Worse, we may actually be encouraging unacceptable behaviour by responding with special attention.

As can be seen, counselling is neither soft nor fuzzy. While it listens and provides a safe place for students to talk through and process their thoughts, feelings and needs, it also challenges and confronts. In addition, talk (counselling) and action (discipline) go hand in hand.

It is important to note that the consequences Dreikur describes refer to natural and logical results of misguided behaviour. For example it is logical that non-submission of assignments or projects would lead to a failure in the module and hence necessitates a repeating of that module or its alternative. However for consequences to have their required restorative and rehabilitative effect, it is also important that sanctions be clearly spelled out and consistently enforced. In the interest of promoting future rectitude, there should also be a direct link between misdeed, consequence and enforcement. Hence, in the case of academic issues, it is only logical that the consequences be drawn up and directly instituted by the faculty and not by an unrelated body like university administrative staff or counsellors.

Yet it takes only a minute's reflection to realise that clear logical consequences cannot always be arrived at for all behaviours, or for all students, as the natural consequences may be too dangerous. For example although there are few sanctions that we can take against students who choose to self-mutilate, it would obviously be irresponsible to ignore such actions in the hope that the attending pain would cause the student from hurting themselves. In fact, it often does not as the physical pain suffered is often a welcome substitute for great emotional pain. In the face of such deep emotional and psychological issues, the best response would be to refer such students for counselling with a professional counsellor. In fact when dealing with chronic rule-breakers, it is often useful to consider that these students may have deeper personal issues and social difficulties that require more professional counselling on top of appropriate sanctions.

In conclusion, for discipline to be effective, there must be a meaningful connection between misdemeanours and sanctions. Towards this end, it is often necessary for faculty and student-transgressors to sit together to discuss issues like personal goals and obstacles as well as the consequences and effects of behaviour—practices which fall within the purview of counselling. However this is not to ignore the fact that some forms of misbehaviour may point to more dire root-causes. In such cases, proper handling may include referral to professional assistance as well as appropriate sanctions.

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Services provided by PGCS

The Personal Guidance and Counselling Service (PGCS) is a special unit under the Office of Student Affairs which looks into the emotional and psychological needs of the students. Services include:

- **Guidance and brief counselling**

The service seeks to empower students and help facilitate the problem solving and decision making process by providing a safe place for students to talk through and clarify issues concerning career, study, relationships and personal growth.

- **Contextual counselling**

As students and their problems are often best seen in the academic and social context of NUS, PGCS also liase with faculty members to help students in need. Counsellors also liase with Halls, residences and various officers at the Office of Students' Affairs to promote a continuum of care.

Faculty members may also choose to refer students in distress to the service. It is important to note here that PGCS is not the place to refer students for misdemeanours such as cheating, shoplifting and other offences in lieu of discipline and legal consequences. However, counselling would be useful in helping students to understand their motivations and accept the consequences of their misdemeanours.

- **Crisis work**

In situations which require immediate attention, given the degree of emotional distress and likelihood of serious danger and harm to the student and/or others, counsellors at PGCS provide assistance to help alleviate and manage the distress at that point in time.

- **Referrals and case management**

In some cases, more serious psychological and psychiatric problems may underlie emotional distress. In such cases, referrals to medical professionals like psychiatrists would be made. Counsellors at PGCS then serve as case managers and help to coordinate support and resources available in the University.

- **General education**

A wide variety of self-help information (both on the Web and as handouts) as well as self-development and career guidance workshops for students are also provided. In addition, training sessions for staff on basic listening and counselling techniques, and identification of at-risk behaviour are conducted at various times and upon request.

How to reach PGCS?

PGCS is located at Yusof Ishak House Level 4 (on the floor above the study room) and can be reached at 6874-2376. Or you can email us at guidance@nus.edu.sg. ■



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