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**Counsellor Clients as
Insider Experts in a
School Community**

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and
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Counsellor Clients as Insider Experts in a School Community

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a practice developed at a large secondary school in Auckland whereby students' experiences of overcoming problems are made available to others in the form of insider brochures. These students are thus able to share their insights and strategies in support of peers who may be experiencing similar problems. Drawing on narrative counselling conversations as well as narrative community work, a school counsellor facilitates the process. This paper describes how insider voices contribute to the brochures, and provides detail from one case example. In keeping with narrative approaches to problems, the goals are to de-privatise and de-individualise young people's experiences of difficulties, and to reposition these students from 'sufferers' of problems to 'experts' on how to overcome them. In the process not only are students' preferred identities developed, but also collective knowledge is created and students are empowered to support one another.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores a practice developed within a large, co-educational, state secondary school in Auckland, wherein students who have an experience of working through a struggle with a particular problem – which would normally be handled only within a counselling room – are invited to contribute to documents that outline both their struggle with the problem and their successful approaches to overcoming it. As part of marking the end of their therapeutic work together, a school counsellor invites the student to share their knowledge via the creation of text for an insider brochure. Brochures become available for circulation within the school community as a whole. This process serves to de-privatise problems, and to empower students to support one another in resolving them.

This approach to addressing problems draws on both narrative counselling conversations and narrative community work (described below) to generate a unique practice within a school. This paper outlines the purposes and goals of these brochures, describes how they are created, and elaborates the content of one case example. Future research might investigate the effectiveness of this work.

The first author of this paper (Nigel Pizzini) is a former school counsellor at this secondary school and facilitated the collection of insider knowledges documented in this paper. He is currently a lecturer in counselling at Unitec

Institute of Technology in the Social Practice Pathway. The second author (Helen Gremillion) is Associate Professor of Social Practice at Unitec, and also teaches in the counselling programme, which centres on a narrative approach. We begin this paper by outlining narrative approaches to problems and situating the brochure project as a distinctive synthesis of existing narrative traditions.

INTERSECTING NARRATIVE THERAPY AND NARRATIVE COMMUNITY WORK

Narrative therapy is a non-pathologising and social constructionist approach to counselling practice (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990). Key assumptions informing the work are that problems, and people's preferred identities, are co-created in relationship with others and within specific social contexts, centrally through the way people speak about problems and preferences. A key feature of narrative work that highlights these assumptions involves externalising problems (White & Epston, 1990). As Gremillion (2003, p. 195) notes, narrative therapists "work to 'externalise' problems that have been experienced as internal to persons, so that the ongoing cultural work involved in the construction of illness and health becomes visible". For example, while a client may bring a problem such as guilt or shame into the therapy room assuming and acting as if its root resides within her/his psyche, a narrative practitioner will encourage an exploration of the problem in terms of its social 'purposes' and effects. For instance, the counsellor might inquire: "What does shame get you to do or say that goes against your better judgement? How does it do that?" In addition to highlighting the social nature of people's struggles, externalising problems in this way creates space between a given problem and a client's identity as a person, which enables the client's preferred identity to be privileged and explored.

It is important to note that the aim of externalising problems is not to disengage persons from them, but rather to shift people's understandings not only of the nature of problems, but also of themselves in relation to them. As Bird (2000, p.

9) writes, externalising language does not signal a rigid separation of problems from the self; rather, it "allows for a perception of or emphasis on the relational." What comes into focus are new possibilities for people's positioning vis-à-vis problems. Positioning theory, as described by Davies & Harré (1990) and further developed by Winslade (2005), is a key element of narrative work. It highlights the idea that clients' identities or stances in relation to problems are socially constructed and are changeable. It makes all the difference whether a counselling conversation or approach construes clients as, for instance: victims of or knowledgeable about problems; struggling as individuals to overcome problems or working to collaborate with others to this end. Narrative conversations support the latter options, which often entail a shift in clients' positioning.

At an early stage of narrative work, clients are supported to detail their experience of problems' often rich and varied lives, always in ways that highlight alternative possible relationships clients could have with these problems. In the process, narrative conversations draw out peoples' distinctive and "experience-near" (White, 2007, p. 40) descriptions of problems and their effects. Unlike many counselling models that assume counsellors are experts about the content of problems, in narrative therapy, clients are taken to be the experts on how problems operate in their own lives. Counsellors may notice patterns and similarities with other clients' stories or experiences, but any specific content comes from, or resonates clearly with, clients' own experiences. Clients are also taken to be the experts about the identities they would prefer, and counsellors work with clients collaboratively to notice, elaborate, and circulate these preferred identities. The circulation of preferred versions of self and relationships amongst others acknowledges the social nature of preferred identities, and is crucial to support and sustain change (Epston & White, 1992; Denborough, 2008; Lobovits, Maisel, & Freeman, 1995; White & Epston, 1990).

As noted above, the brochure project that is the subject of this paper brings together two kinds

of narrative practice: counselling and community work. Whereas in narrative counselling, clients identify members of potentially receptive audiences for the circulation of new identities outside the therapy room – and these individuals may be brought into the therapy room as well (Carey & Russell, 2003; White, 2007) – narrative community work is enacted at a group level from the start. For instance, community work with Aboriginal groups are public conversations that work towards culture change around, for example, desired responses to colonial legacies (Denborough, 2008; Wingard, Johnson, & Drahm-Butler, 2015). Examples of narrative community work that have taken place in school contexts include the creation of ‘undercover’ teams, which enlist a number of students to support a young person in their struggle against a problem (Winslade & Williams, 2012), and anti-harassment work (Cheshire, Lewis, & The Anti-Harassment Team, 2004).

Existing at the intersection of narrative counselling and narrative community work, the brochure project creates a local community of care, or community of concern (Madigan & Epston, 1995), in a school that emerges from, and documents details of, counselling conversations about problems that a number of students have experienced. The brochures that these students co-create, with the help of the school counsellor, allow advice and inspiring strategies to be (literally) circulated amongst others, supporting the emergence of preferred identities for these students and also potentially helping other members of the student body who have not even seen a school counsellor. As discussed towards the end of this article, insiders who have successfully shifted their lives in a preferred direction are invited to extend their contribution to the brochure project by joining the counsellor in conversation with another student still in the midst of a similar problem, taking up the role of consultant (Epston, n.d.; Martsen, Epston, & Johnson, 2001) by sharing their knowledge and experience directly.

This brochure project is inspired by two existing, interrelated narrative practices: archives and leagues. Freedman & Combs (2012, p. 1050)

describe these practices as follows:

Documents can be shared with others facing similar problems so that a league is formed. The documents (which capture knowledge gained from hard-won struggles, news of steps forward, and responses that people have found helpful in facing dilemmas) become an archive that all league members can consult and contribute to. Therapists can become archivists, sharing the documents with an ever-growing league of people who struggle with similar problems. Through therapist-mediated conversations, members join together and learn from each other. ... [Leagues can] transform people who came as clients into experts who have the knowledge, experience and skill to help others.

The most well-known league is David Epston’s anti-anorexia/anti-bulimia league (“The Archive of Resistance: Anti-Anorexia/Anti-Bulimia”, n.d.). Leagues can support either virtual or face-to-face forms of community work and social action, showing how “people can join forces to engage in political action to protest the social pressures that support a problem” (Freedman & Combs, 2012, p. 1050). The brochure project performs similar work but, as discussed below, in a more subtle and anonymous fashion. Also, in this case, the community work that is taking place occurs within a defined context: the student body of a school.

BEGINNING A BROCHURE PROJECT

There are a number of specific problems that a range of high-school students describe in counselling conversations. Students often have an experience of isolation in relation to the problems they bring to a school counsellor, unaware that other students struggle in similar ways. As narrative practitioners stress, individuals do not invent problems: rather, they are caught up in them, as are others (albeit in different ways and from a range of social locations). Problems that have been the subject of insider brochures include the following: anger and violence; friendship fallout; feeling down; cutting and other forms of self-harm; cyber-bullying; rumours and gossip; mocking; eating issues; worries, anxiety

and panic; times when hope is gone (suicidal thoughts); and unwanted sexual experiences.

The process of creating a brochure begins within individual counselling conversations, towards the end of the therapeutic journey. A guided discussion is undertaken that reviews the student's earlier experience of the problem and the developments they have undertaken in giving it (the problem) the slip. It is important to describe some of the narrative practices that inform these conversations, as they are integral to the process of (later) moving towards effective and empowering brochure projects. When a young person speaks with the counsellor about a problem they are experiencing, the counsellor listens carefully from a place of curiosity and a principled narrative stance of not-knowing (Morgan, 2000). Even though the counsellor may have heard many other young people share their experiences of similar problems, the unique – though not isolated – experience in front of him or her is yet unknown. As noted above, it is a fundamental premise of narrative practice that people experiencing problems are the experts on their specific effects; counsellors, on the other hand, are skilled at posing questions that allow for a mapping of these effects (White, 2007) and a movement towards preferred alternatives. To this end, the counsellor tracks the particular words and metaphors that individuals use to describe their experiences of a problem and, over the course of the counselling work together, their hoped-for journey to freedom from the problem. In doing so, the counsellor does not assume the right to ask particular questions or note anything down, but rather enquires by invitation and seeks permission (Morgan, 2000).

Starting a brochure project involves recognition of the “hard-won knowledges” (Marsten et. al, 2001, p. 69) or insights being shared, and a request to write down and include these knowledges in a brochure to be circulated, without any names attached, to other students at the school. The student is told that a number of insiders are contributing to the same brochure (about a particular problem). If a draft brochure exists, the counsellor shares that text with the student, inviting them to reflect on the content already

there and to add their ideas and experiences. Contributions are anonymous; the identities of other contributors are not known, even to those whose ideas are included in a given brochure. This arrangement maintains the confidentiality of counselling conversations and reassures the student that their identity will not be known to others.

Working with brochure text in the counselling room allows for externalising problems in a specific way. When the counsellor and the student review the text that they have newly created, the student becomes an audience to their own story. Also, when exploring the text created by other contributors, the student becomes an audience to others' (similar) accounts. Through these practices the student is able to compare and contrast their own experience and that of others, often with the effect of clarifying their own struggle and/or preferred story.

It is important to honour the fact that the stories and expressions of meaning conveyed in a brochure, as in the counselling room, belong to the young people. The content of a brochure is ‘owned’ by the insiders – the people whose experiences they convey. Acknowledging this point is a key part of any invitation to young people to include their experiences and ideas in a brochure project.

Often, young people immediately feel less alone with a problem, knowing that there are others who have experienced a problem in similar ways and reading about those people's experiences. They are often surprised to encounter others' experiences that echo their own, and become excited and delighted to know that their unique ideas and insights about how a problem works, and about what has been helpful in response, may be helpful to others who are still in the midst of similar struggles. This process marks a movement from individual therapy to community engagement. Students begin to see their personal struggle as part of a collective experience of overcoming problems, and of recovering identity from the effects of problems.

CREATING THE BROCHURES

Over the course of a range of counselling conversations with various insiders, the young people co-create the brochures via the counsellor's facilitation. Drafts are reflected upon, edited, and refined as the young people advise. In so doing, these students become collaborators and co-authors with the counsellor in the creation and refinement of brochure content. Some students are excited to consult their friends for ideas, or share with the counsellor speeches or essays they have produced for class assessments that include potential brochure content.

When the counsellor consults with the insiders about a brochure project, contributions are invited using the following questions as a start:

- What did this problem get you to think about yourself, about others, and about other things?
- What did it feel like when this problem was around?
- What did this problem want you to believe about yourself, your future, your family/teachers/friends, the world, and the problem itself?

Questions such as these seek to map the effects of problems (White, 2007). The counsellor then asks:

- What did you want for yourself or your life (instead of what the problem wanted)?
- What did you find helpful, or what could have helped you with this problem?
- What advice do you have to offer others still dealing with the problem in their lives?
- What would you advise friends to do? What did you want them to do to support you?

These questions help generate text that will not only circulate preferred identities, but also serve as a guide and a document of hope for newcomers to such problems.

A standardised structure is used for each brochure via the following section headings:

1. What the problem is like.

2. What I want.

3. What we found helps.

4. Advice (to someone experiencing this problem).

5. Suggested strategies (e.g. creating a support team).

6. Where to go for help.

7. How to make an appointment with the school counsellor.

The following paragraphs detail how the first five points above are addressed within one brochure developed at the school where the first author of this paper worked. The topic addressed is the problem of mocking.

CASE EXAMPLE: MOCKING

Mocking, or teasing, is a common problem in high schools. The mocking brochure begins simply with a description of mocking that captures, in their own language, young people's experience. This brief opening section spells out the territory in which the problem dwells: how mocking is expressed, and what it looks or sounds like. It is important to include broad coverage in these descriptors, to increase the likelihood that a person who struggles with this problem picking up this brochure will identify with the issue being explored and see themselves in what is shared. In the mocking brochure, terms and phrases under the heading "Ways we have experienced this problem" include: "mocking, teasing, mean comments, put-downs, being left out, 'jokes' about me, imitating my voice or actions, judgemental looks, laughing behind my back, making fun of me".

Next, and still introducing "What the problem is like", insiders spell out "What mocking (or teasing) can do to us". This section of the brochure further details the problem's effects:

- When mocking happened I started to think everyone is judging me. I felt embarrassed, nervous, and self-conscious.
- I lost confidence in myself. I was embarrassed and would hide things I loved doing or felt

good about fear that these things would be mocked too.

- I stopped being myself because of other people's judgements. I was afraid I would stand out.
- I would feel really alone, sad, left out, and powerless to make it stop.
- It stopped me from talking to others in the class.
- I struggled to focus – I was always worrying about what people might do or say.
- I used to keep it all bottled up. I would get really snappy and mad, even at my friends when they said little things.
- At home it stopped me talking to my parents and got me angry and shouting at my younger brother and sister.
- Sometimes I wanted to hide away. I was afraid to ask for help, or tell my parents what was really going on because they would get angry at the school.

As in a narrative counselling session, mapping the effects of a problem in this way is of key importance, in order to explore the range of the problem's power, and therefore reveal the scope of one's preferences. Often, naming specific effects that might ordinarily go unnamed can in itself lessen the power of problems. Because the brochure lists a range of effects students have encountered, when a person picks up this brochure they might recognise some of these effects occurring in their own experience, and immediately be drawn to other possibilities, even in cases where the problem is strongly felt.

Naming effects invites the student to elaborate their preferred reality, which leads us to the next section of the brochure: "What I want". In the mocking brochure, students share the following:

- I want people to treat me normally, to see me for who I am and not judge me.
- I want to be treated with respect and be free from mocking and feel safe.
- When I come to school I want to feel happy and get along with others in my class. I want

to be accepted, included, and not to feel different from everyone else.

At this point the counsellor offers a therapeutic contribution to the brochure text, intended to connect the brochure reader personally to what they are reading:

You might want these things too. It's what everyone deserves and is entitled to.

The purpose of spelling out "What I want" is to validate and acknowledge the person's values and ethics – what they stand for, even in the midst of the pain the problem brings. The narrative principle at work here is that all experiences are multi-storied (Morgan, 2000). More specifically, all expressions of a problem include absent but implicit meaning (Carey, Walther, & Russell, 2009) in the form of preferred realities. Problems cause pain because they act against states of being that persons hold dear, value or stand for. While the pain may be strong, even at times unbearable, uncovering absent but implicit values and desires – which might otherwise go unstated or unnoticed in life – can lead a young person to identify their preferences and stances more solidly than might otherwise occur.

Articulating "What I want" in light of the effects of the problem begins the process of co-constructing a preferred identity experience – which, in this case, is quite literally circulated in the form of documentation in a brochure. As a bonus, others who are struggling might also be helped in the process without even having a counselling conversation.

The next sections of the mocking brochure cover "What we found helps" and "Advice". The former includes:

- Sticking with my friends or mates who are good to me.
- Talking to my friends about the problem so I don't feel alone or that it's 'just me' (my fault, or because something is wrong with me).
- Asking my friends to help. They can come with me to tell the person I don't like what they are doing, or share their experience of similar problems and what helped them.

- Talking to the school counsellor or another trusted person.
- Setting up an ‘undercover team’ in my class. [Described earlier in this article.]
- Remembering that people who use mocking aren’t happy. They may be jealous, angry, or needing to make themselves feel better.
- See mocking as trying to take away my happiness, confidence, self-acceptance or whatever and add it to theirs.
- This is happening because something is wrong for **them**. Perhaps I could feel sad or concerned for them?

“Advice” includes:

- Don’t put up with it! It probably won’t just stop or go away all by itself.
- First, try talking calmly to the person face-to-face without being confrontational, demanding or aggro.
- Give a reason why what they are saying or doing is hurtful to you.
- Consider having a neutral person come along as a referee or helper.

Drawing attention to this hard-won knowledge, and validating its expression through recording it for others to see, repositions the students from being beleaguered by the problem to a place of holding wisdom worth sharing. Anecdotally, it is very empowering for these students to be in a position of offering solutions, especially to a wider audience of individuals who may still be struggling with a similar issue.

A common feature of narrative counselling is to help situate clients within relationships of support. Across several of the brochures, the counsellor includes a fifth section, “Creating a Support Team”, to outline some practical steps to this end. Clients are invited to take up a position of coach with selected friends and/or family members (people they consider might be willing), considering that they are uniquely placed to instruct others about what would be most supportive for them. This process is summarised and shared in several of the brochures because

the students found it a significant and helpful element of support. The mocking brochure lists the following:

- Choose 5 or 6+ people from your life who you think will want to support you.
- For each one, come up with one or more specific things that person could do or say that you would find supportive (e.g. sit with me in class, include me in group activities, call or text me on the weekend, ask me how I’m feeling).
- Invite each person to become an *official* member of your support team.
- Instruct them in what you want them to do and how they will know it’s time to do it (e.g. let them know what they will be asked to do, or what they need to be on the lookout for as a sign that their support acts are needed).
- Periodically give them some feedback about how they’re going as a member of your support team – and don’t forget to thank them!

Again, the counsellor offers a therapeutic contribution, this time to encourage the brochure reader to try out the ideas suggested:

Give it a go – you may be surprised how excited and pleased these people will be that you trust them or think so highly of them

Often people want to support, they just need clear instructions on how!

In this way, young people/insiders are not only positioned as knowledgeable advisers, but also as capable of contributing to a reshaping of school culture towards a caring and respectful environment.

CONSULTANT REGISTERS

Drawing on Epston (n.d.), the counsellor may ask students who co-author brochures if they are willing to be included in a confidential list of potential consultants for other individual students. The invitation to serve as a consultant is another way in which insiders are repositioned as knowledgeable advisers for others. As the counsellor finishes working with a given student,

the student is asked if, at some future time, they would be willing to receive a request to join the counsellor in a therapeutic conversation with a fellow student who is experiencing a problem like the one they have overcome and has expressed interest in hearing from a past client. For new clients, hearing from a fellow student who has come through a problem with which they are currently struggling is a powerful experience bearing hope, empathy and a sense of not being the only one. For the consultant, this opportunity consolidates how far they have come and has the potential to greatly enhance therapeutic outcomes. There is a high level of uptake of student-to-student consultation of this kind. In this way, ongoing contributions to an improved school culture are further enhanced in ways that empower students to take stands together against problems and toward preferred ways of being.

CONCLUSION

Involving student clients in brochure projects and to serve as consultants circulates their knowledge about, and strategies to address, the problems they have faced. This approach offers a set of narrative practices existing at a crossroads between narrative counselling conversations and narrative community work. While the latter normally entail public conversations in groups which are seeking a culture change of some kind, insider brochures and consultation practices – like archives and leagues (Freedman & Combs, 2012) – embody a different kind of community engagement. The brochure project is unique in that it is semi-public, and exists within the defined context of a school community. Insider brochures surface language from the counselling room into a collaboratively generated document that performs relatively subtle work within a school.

The ‘official’ status of insider brochures supports the positioning of insiders as community advisers – and also has the effect of helping to sustain their preferred identities – through the process of offering helpful ideas to others. Narrative counselling practices have long supported such positive uses of what are normally strictly

private ‘case notes’, subverting the often pathologising effects of such notes by rendering them as documents of achievement that can be circulated with pride (Bjoroy, Madigan, & Nylund, 2015; Harré, 1985; White & Epston, 1990.). For instance, a young child who has overcome the negative effects of a problem may receive a certificate of achievement to this effect, which uses some of the language employed in the counselling conversations about this matter. In the case of the brochures, the purpose of collaboratively-crafted documents is explicitly a form of community work. One can note the distinctive status of an ‘official’ brochure that is deeply “experience-near” (White, 2007, p. 40): it documents and validates the direct experience of insiders, using their own words.

In the process of creating these brochures, the counsellor/facilitator is decentred and influential (White, 2005): the insiders are the experts, and the collaborative process whereby the brochures are created itself reflects the ethic of interpersonal support that the brochures promote. Further, a school context provides an opportunity for the counsellor to maintain and encourage ongoing contact and collaboration amongst and with students, for instance via counselling consultancy.

These practices share the wisdom, experiences and insights of young people with a wider audience. In keeping with narrative approaches to addressing problems, this sharing can work to break down young people’s sense of isolation, reflected in problem-based identity conclusions (Morgan, 2000) such as ‘there’s something wrong with me’, ‘no one understands’, or ‘I’m the only one who has this experience’. Brochure and consultancy practices invite young people to see themselves as holders of unique and important information, which is nevertheless linked with others’ experiences. They thus turn a struggle into something positive that can benefit other young people by repositioning insiders from a place of being troubled by a problem to being a consultant and guide for others. Finally, these practices help create communities of care across the school campus, supporting a shift in school culture. These communities of care are broader

than friendship groups, and include young people who are on the other side of problems so that they might embody, inspire, and model hope and positive change.

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