

# AUCC conference 2007 – a debutante's view

Trish Middlemist shares her experience of attending conference as a lone FE counsellor

I have been a lone counsellor coordinating a small team of volunteer counsellors at Edinburgh's Telford College since May 2001. Last summer we moved to a new campus, a transition that saw the introduction of new methods of working, increased e-communication, teething problems with new technology and systems, and competing demands on available accommodation. Add to this heady mix the lack of an adequate counselling room, a small dose of fractured relationships, and you have the perfect recipe for a stressful year for staff and students alike.

I had often asked to attend conference but lack of funds always prohibited my going. In September 2006 I asked for conference to be considered as part of my staff development. In May 2007 I was delighted to be supported in my request by the student services manager, in acknowledgement of the difficult year I had had.

And now, conference week had arrived!

My journey from Edinburgh to Cirencester featured five different trains, 2½ hours' delay, signalling problems, debris on the track and re-routing because of flooding – none of which dampened my enthusiasm and anticipation. In fact, I recall feeling very relaxed with my coffee and books, knowing that someone else had the responsibility of getting me to my destination – even if it did take 9½ hours! Being met at Kemble station by Kay from the conference committee and a waiting coach was a bonus. Her welcome gave me a sense of belonging, a sense that was to grow as we proceeded through the week. One of the

other delegates on the coach was a counsellor in my home town college near Glasgow. What a promising start to the week.

There are many aspects of conference I could share but I have selected a few that stood out for me.

## Keynote speakers

The keynote speakers evoked some unexpected and interesting feelings ranging from irritation to laughter and from comfortable agreement to feeling strongly challenged. As I also work privately and have just completed couple counselling training, I was particularly interested in Philip Stokoe's concept of 'The couple state of mind as part of individual human development'.

## Workshops

The pre-conference choice of workshops was difficult as I wanted to attend almost all of them.

I select, for particular mention, the excellent workshop by Ann Heyno on 'Managing suicidal thoughts in students'. Numbers attending exceeded expectations; perhaps a sign of the increasing despair faced by many students in our fast-moving society and also a sign of counsellors' willingness to look at and share both how we work with these students and the impact it has on us as counsellors. I felt a deep connection here with others who truly understood the impact of such work.

Then there was the workshop on 'Counselling students who procrastinate'. Should I attend? Might do. Do I have to decide now? Yes, I did go to the workshop led by Susie Jackson because not

only do I work with students who procrastinate, I also have a tendency to put things off (obviously picked up by Janet Aldridge – hence the three reminders I received about the deadline for this article!).

With good Scottish humour (I could be slightly biased) Susie took us through details of a workshop provided three times a year for students at Edinburgh University. We looked at reasons for procrastination and the resulting anxiety that can sometimes end in paralysis. We then covered one method of working through the stuckness, the Action Spiral, devised by Andrea Perry. I think I will find myself referring to the hand-outs from time to time – and yes, Susie, I would still like to sit in on one of your student workshops if that is possible.

In the last year, finding time for 'me' has not been easy, so I was looking forward to the final day workshop on 'The good enough therapist, being kind to yourself'. Geoffrey and Heidi Windham, a father and daughter team, gently helped us reflect on the relationship we have with ourselves and the impact of our self-care – or lack of it – on our work with others.

We were asked to study ourselves in a mirror for what seemed like a long time. This was highly unusual for me and the experience was decidedly uncomfortable (not just because I was reminded what the years can do!). To focus solely on myself in a group setting seemed almost rude, as I felt 'unavailable' to others. In sharing that experience I realised how difficult it is for me to pay attention to my own needs when the needs of many others are so evident –

## AUCC conference



DASY HAYES, UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER

a timely reminder that I need to redress the balance once again.

### FE breakfast

The informal FE breakfast provided a wonderful opportunity to put faces to names that I see regularly on the excellent link of JISCMAIL. I was beginning to see the AUCC delegates as a family, and now felt that I was meeting with 'immediate' family, as we considered the common challenges within the changing face of further education.

In this forum – and indeed in the AUCC Advisory Committee meeting – it seemed appropriate to voice the issue of counselling not being accepted for Additional Learning Support (ALS) funding by the Scottish Funding Council. Funding is, of course, available in English colleges (and perhaps throughout the remainder of the UK?). It would be interesting to know how many more Scottish FE colleges would have retained their counselling services if additional funding

was available – and indeed how many more AUCC members we could have in FE colleges north of the border.

In asking the AUCC to represent the Scottish case, I felt heard and reassured by their willingness to look at the issue.

### Gala dinner

What can I say? Although I was a little apprehensive, as I had not arranged to join anyone in particular for the dinner, I soon found myself with a super group of people. We shared many stories – some sad, some serious and some simply very funny. We laughed a lot in an atmosphere that was very relaxed – even if we had to shout to be heard above the music at times. Did the Bacardi and Coke add to the bonhomie? I am sure it did!

### Overall experience

Conference was a nurturing and nourishing experience in which I learned and re-learned much about myself. Having

felt times of acute isolation in the past year, connecting with others in our profession grounded me once again. It restored my sense of value in the work that I do – until conference, I had not realised the value had even been eroded!

In terms of training, I would rate conference as better value for money than a collection of training days over the year (some of which have been very good), partly because at conference we live and work with a counselling mindset over a prolonged period of time.

My special thanks to the following: Myra, student services manager, for supporting my request to be at conference; the AUCC committee, particularly those who put conference together; and the delegates – you were part of what made conference great! ■

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