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Writing a “compare and contrast” counselling assignment

Most counselling students at some point in their studies have to write an assignment in which they compare and contrast two counselling approaches. This document provides some guidance to writing such an assignment.

1. Choosing the two approaches

First, the student has to choose the two counselling approaches. This seems to be the easiest, but some thoughts would help the completion of the assignment. Two very similar approaches would make it rather difficult to contrast because of the similarities, while two extremely different counselling approaches would make the formulation of arguments very difficult. In any case, the introduction of the assignment should state why the student chose those two counselling approaches.

2. What does it mean ‘compare and contrast’?

Most of the assignments written by students on this subject are barely more than a rather haphazard summary of each of the approaches including the ‘exciting’ and largely irrelevant details of the life of the main representatives of the approaches and then a concocted end in which the students either state the obvious or pledge their allegiance to one of the approaches or claim that one approach suits more to one situation, while the other for another one (of course, without any explanation).

One can compare two things only if there is anything common in them. Thus, the student first has to identify the factors, features that are present in both counselling approaches. Such factors can be: theoretical framework, perception of the human personality, role of the counsellor, the counselling process, objectives of the counselling, etc. Now then, if the approaches are genuinely different (that is one is not a new dress on the other), these factors would be different in the two counselling approaches. **The function of the assignment is to explore these differences.**

3. Creating a structure

As a result, any assignment that first describes one approach and then the other (separately) is a candidate for a fail. The structure of the assignment should be dictated by the factors that the student identified. It is maybe helpful to create a table, in which the rows are the factors, while the columns are the two approaches. This table could act as a guidance for the whole assignment as, in fact, it is the outline of

such a counselling assignment. The task then is only to fill in the short descriptions of the table with words – making it pleasant reading.

4. The ‘whys’

Now the job is half done. However, for a good assignment, the student should have the question, why one approach is different from the other. The cause could be rather complex and sometimes speculative. One can start with the theoretical foundation of the approach (but some of the approaches have barely any theoretical foundations). Then it is possible to draw on the evolution of the approach (e.g. that one was developed on the basis of the critique of another approach). In some cases the success of the practice of the approach led to sharply defined characteristics. These ‘whys’ should be present throughout the assignment as a chain of reasoning. Why did Rogers put ‘empathy, genuineness and positive regard’ to the centre of his approach? Why does one approach insist on being non-directive, while another is explicitly directive? And so forth.

5. Conclusions

If the previous steps were correctly carried out, the writing up of the conclusions should be a relatively easy exercise. The differences in the two approaches and the ‘whys’ should be sufficient to draw the conclusions. Conclusions are not summaries, but rather perspectives. After doing the analysis, the student should state what he or she learnt from the exercise and what is next. Now the student can state that one approach could suit better to one client or one situation than the other, because the evidence is in the main part of the assignment. Now it is possible to say that one does not agree or even does not like one approach, because of the factors that shape that approach. The conclusions section is the most personal one in an assignment, but at the same time could be the most objective one too.

6. Referencing

There is a plethora of sources on counselling approaches in books, journals and on the world wide web. Anything that a student uses of these should be referenced, even if only the meaning of the source was borrowed (and not a word for word copying). Using other people’s work (or the student’s own previous work) without referencing is theft (plagiarism) and as such should be punished (as at CTPDC) through a disciplinary procedure.