

Person-Centered Dialogue – Meaningful Encounters

How students and experts learned from each other in workshops on Motivational Interviewing and Emotion-Focused Therapy Methods - A report from the PCE Pre-Conference at TH Köln

By Renate Kosuch and Valerie Dieterich

From July 6 to 8, 2026, Faculty of Applied Social Sciences at the Cologne University of Applied Sciences (TH Köln) became a vibrant space for practice and interaction during the pre-conference for the World Conference on Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling (PCE World) titled “A Changing World” (<https://pce2026.com/>). As part of the collaboration with Faculty 01, 15 students had the opportunity to actively participate in workshops led by Bill Miller, co-founder of Motivational Interviewing (MI), and Robert Elliott, developer of Emotional-Focused Therapy (EFT). Fifteen social work students from the Catholic University of Applied Sciences Freiburg also attended the event. Almost as a side effect, this led to a successful student exchange, partly because some of the guests from Freiburg were staying with their fellow students.

The Person-Centered Approach as a Learning Experience for Everyone

Right from the start, it became evident just how much the students’ perspectives enriched the person-centered process during the three-day workshops. “We have so much to unlearn in order to be helpful to clients,” emphasized Robert Elliot, “but it is through the person-centered approach that we become effective.”

Bill Miller also emphasized the value of a “beginner’s mind” in his workshop on Motivational Interviewing, noting that whether we are experienced therapists, social workers, or students - it is our task “not to force things, but to observe closely how they unfold in the other person and to accompany this process in a competent way.” He even reported that it was his collaboration with students during his time in Norway that led to the precise formulation of MI as a particular variant of Rogers’ person-centered approach. It was the students who had asked the crucial questions.

Over the course of the two workshops, it became clear that methodological suggestions are only helpful when applied in a person-centered way with appreciation, active listening, congruence, and authenticity. In small interdisciplinary groups, the participants practiced this together based on their own concerns.

Diverse Expertise - Vibrant Exchange

The participating master’s and bachelor’s students were impressed by the openness and willingness to learn of the counseling and therapy experts, as well as the breadth of their fields of work. For instance, there was a psychotherapist with over 20 years of experience, practicing in Vienna and Athens, who had learned from Miller and Elliott early in his career and thus witnessed the development of these approaches firsthand. Then there was the psychotherapist from Frankfurt who also teaches person-centered work at a university, and the freelance therapist from Australia who trains the next generation in the person-centered approach.

A second-semester social work bachelor’s student shared how this expertise and approachability resonated with her:

“In a partner exercise on Motivational Interviewing, we were asked to identify a change we wanted to make in the next six months. I noticed that the experts faced similar life questions as I did. One therapist, for example, named her goal of giving her mother with dementia more time and patience. Just as in my own daily life, challenges arose in managing time and personal resources as she wondered how she could still approach her mother with sufficient empathy and energy after her therapy sessions.”

Experiential Empathy in Counseling Sessions

In the second part of the pre-conference, participants deepened their understanding of attitudes and methods in the EFT workshop using a video example of a client in conversation with Robert Elliott. She had been suffering from emotional numbness for years and couldn't even feel grief at her father's death. When Elliott simply went along with her experience instead of judging it, a student summed it up perfectly: “You didn't pathologize or evaluate her reaction!” All participants thus experienced firsthand the importance of empathic listening, which plays a major role in the various person-centered approaches.

International Exchange – English as a Bridge Language

All in all, this was a successful event where expertise met beginner's mind, and all participants were able to benefit from one another. The international gathering, with English as the common working language, presented communication challenges for all participants, regardless of whether English was their native language or a bridge language. Combined with the encouragement to sometimes struggle to find the right expression, this created an open and trusting atmosphere.

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