

ACAT Conference 2016: “Resilience in the Face of Change” Reflections on our experience organising the conference at the University of Exeter

Clinical Organisers – Andrea Daykin and Mandy Wildman

ACAT’s invitation to the CAT community seeking out proposals for the 23rd National ACAT Conference sparked our interest in the summer of 2015. Whilst on the IRRAPT training we had already worked as a team and had formed a strong bond that we didn’t want to relinquish when we left Holland House for the last time. As our time at Holland House had come to an end, we wondered whether the conference could present an opportunity to work together again and we were delighted when we were informed that our theme of resilience had been chosen. Our reciprocal role procedures could perhaps be described as overwhelming to excitedly anxious. Our zone of proximal development and windows of tolerance had been broadened by IRRAPT, in terms of planning and putting together presentations, but this was certainly a new venture. We invited our colleague Malinder Bhullar to join us in the conference organisation, who, like us, had never organised a conference before. So, together in a giant step forwards we were helped along the way by the scaffolding and framework that is the well-oiled machine of ACAT.

In offering the theme of resilience our aims were that the conference would provide a variety of learning opportunities to support practice and facilitate both professional and personal development. In addition we wanted to offer a safe haven and an environment in which an important dialogue could develop. We hope that ACAT’s choice of venue, the University of Exeter, with

its tranquil views of the Exe Valley and beautiful gardens, would help to foster this dialogue. The conference theme resonated with the challenges we face in our work settings and the world at large and so was close to our hearts. We acknowledged that the counter face of the concept of resilience was one of frustration and anger at being expected to be ever more productive and efficient whilst witnessing resources and services diminish. The conference coincided with the EU Referendum poll, which dominated breakfast time conversation. We felt it was important to simply acknowledge that for all of us the outcome of the Referendum ushered us into new territory. We hoped the conference community could be supporting of all there, and respectful of differing opinions and perspectives, in the spirit of acknowledgement and validation.

Organising the conference was a steep learning curve, with some left field curve balls thrown in along the way. We were in regular contact with one another and Maria Cross, the Conference Administrator, either via email or through telephone discussions. At times, our contact with one another was daily, sometimes weekly, but this appeared to lessen as outstanding jobs were completed as we approached the start of the conference. Following the submission of conference abstracts, the three of us met up in Manchester to review these, to devise a provisional conference programme, as well as to formulate a

to-do list so we could share out tasks. This provided a great opportunity for us to get together socially as well. Organising the conference offered opportunities for learning yet more about our own reciprocal role procedures and of course we were faced with managing occasional uncertainty and disappointments, these relating to inevitable glitches and a hope that, given the volume of work and service pressures, people would find ways to attend. The difficulties people experience in self-funding and taking time out of work to attend the conference were thrown into sharper focus, many delegates balancing these practical realities against a wish to be part of the conference community. We were heartened by the numbers of people who could be there and missed those who could not join us.

The plenary sessions were differently spectacular with contributions from Professor Jeremy Holmes, Dr Nicholas Sarra, Rene Bosman, and Liz McCormick and Steve Potter. Anna Jellema, Steve Potter, Jason Hepple and Liz McCormick kindly provided a panel for questions following Jeremy’s presentation. Dr Stella Compton Dickinson offered a research presentation to open the conference on day one followed by a clinical case study presentation by Clive Turpin. Clive’s presentation provided an opportunity for a client’s voice to be present within the dialogue, and we would like to thank both Clive and his client for sharing their work with the conference. Jason Hepple

provided a thought provoking and interesting presentation on 'Greed and Gratitude' to end the conference, giving much food for thought. All contributions provided a rich collection of both CAT and non-CAT voices to stimulate thinking and dialogue amongst us all. The workshops were a hive of creativity and relational engagement and attunement. These included a range of creative approaches for thinking about how we can work with promoting and enhancing resilience including EMDR, music therapy and mindfulness. We would like to extend our thanks to everyone who offered to chair the workshops on Friday and Saturday.

We were also very grateful for the level of support we had as clinical organisers, both from the ACAT team, Maria, Alison and Susan, and also from the delegate group. University staff Rosie Hawkins and the IT team were wonderful in ensuring we had technical equipment in place, and that refreshments were provided on time. Entertainment was provided by Taylor and the Made Gentlemen and we understand that dancing went on after midnight. Rhona Browns support as our social media go to person was invaluable in promoting the Conference and raising its profile generally. The Conference also saw a first time video booth to capture thoughts and views of delegates on CAT and its strengths. Our "techie" skills increased in experimenting with the video booth and we're sure this will be a feature at future ACAT events. Thank you to Penny Waheed who supported these endeavours. We Tweeted and Tweeted and again came to recognise the useful place of social media in spreading the CAT word and making connections with the wider world and those unable to attend the Conference. We would like to thank everyone who

contributed to making the conference a success, from presenters, workshop facilitators and all the delegates who took time out of work to be present and share the experience. In addition, we thank the University of Exeter and Professor Eugene Mullen for welcoming ACAT to such a beautiful setting. As clinical organisers we were offered warmth and positive feedback as well as helpful criticism on what might have worked better.

By working in collaboration with you all, not only did we make new friends but we re-connected with old ones. For us, organising the conference was true to the theme, requiring resilience, but one that was fulfilling and rewarding. Would we do it again – yes – and this time we would be helped along the way by a lived experience 'to do' list (see below), formed from our learning in 2016 which the three of us have produced.

Reflections from the "sidelines"

Clinical organiser: Malinder Bhullar

I have chosen to contribute a separate brief piece as regretfully, I was unable to join everyone in Exeter owing to a string of delays that commenced across the pond that left me in New York the evening before. Like many have before me, I blamed Brexit! First and foremost, I want to thank Andrea, Mandy and Maria for making it all happen.

It was a challenging time to accept Andrea and Mandy's invitation to contribute to the organisation of the conference. Other than being a period of significant personal change, I felt "out of touch" with CAT having not directly practised for some time. Admittedly there were moments when I wanted to "resign" but our passion

for the theme, the excitement we felt when we pored over the submissions and exchanged ideas over a tangle of email threads, and reminding ourselves of what we wanted to achieve soon overrode those moments of uncertainty. I wholeheartedly echo Andrea and Mandy's reflections that organising the conference was a steep learning curve and threw many testing scenarios our way. This was particularly the case towards the end when the sense of chaos seemed more acutely felt. Owing to mounting pressures with work, the impending start date of the conference and a sense that with every request there was so much left to do and not enough time to do it all in.

Having a clear set of expectations and/or a "to-do" list would be invaluable for future organisers and so, as Andrea and Mandy have said in their reflections, this is what we have produced between us. Had this been available to us, I might have arrived at a more realistic appraisal of whether I'd be up for the task. That said, navigating through the many challenging moments embodied the essence of the theme and what it might truly mean to be in the helping professions in a climate that seems ever more depleted not only of resources but of compassion, hope, and space to think and feel.

I am grateful for the opportunity to be part of putting together a conference that many found informative, thought-provoking and ultimately, relevant. I also join Andrea and Mandy in thanking everyone who contributed to making the conference the success that it evidently was. I sincerely hope everyone who attended and participated will feel its impact for some time to come.

**Working Creatively in CAT with Dreams and Stories
offered by Catalyse 30th November 2016, Manchester**
www.acat.me.uk/event/883/