
The Value of the Educational Frame in the Development of the Psychotherapist's Professional Self

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Abstract

This paper arose from my own experiences as both student and teacher of psychotherapy. It examines the nature and importance of clear boundaries and a firm frame in developing the personality, experience, knowledge and skills necessary for the practice of psychotherapy. It will consider the nature of the psychotherapist's professional Self; what it needs to know, do and be; and how this can be taught.

I'll start by being practical. Although love *is*
And everything that is not love *is not* but is
Illusory, we have to cope with that illusion.
It is the source of suffering and what we call
Evil. The illusion that we are not love or lovable
Is a fist around the heart it constricts
The awareness that you and I are one.
Like waves in the ocean, each seeming separate.
Yet merely ripples in the same eternal sea.

Adam Curle

Introduction

The joy of education is, for me, when students learn that they can lift some of the 'fist around the heart' as Adam Curle calls it and can join with another in love. Yet together with this joy go the horrors of hatred and violence described by Freud (1905):

No-one who, like me conjures up the most evil of those half-tamed demons that inhabit the human breast, and seeks to wrestle with them can expect to come through the struggle unscathed.

This was said of psychotherapy. I think it can also be said of education in psychotherapy. My journey as an educator in Person Centred Counselling has been to seek to enable students to live with the forces of loving and hating that are part of the counselling relationship and to be empowered in themselves as counsellors.

The impetus for this paper arose from my experiences as teacher, learner and psychotherapist, at a time of accountability and performance objectives. I am suggesting a model of education for the psychotherapist where the process is as important as the content and at times the process is the content. As the process has assumed greater importance, so too, has the place and nature of the frame. At times the educational processes unravelled themselves and I wondered at the enormity of the task I had taken on.

Personal Background

Before exploring my experience as an educator, I would like to share a little of my *whakapapa* in education so you can understand the context of this paper. I was born in wartime England, of middle class, professional, Anglo-Saxon stock. Both grandfathers were pioneers in their research fields, one in mental disadvantage, and the other in the forecasting of El Nino. These stars of academic brilliance both lit and shadowed the family's educational and academic expectations. Education was important for both men and women. But somehow the social mores of the '40s and '50s valued the post-educational work of women less than that of men. My brother and I were sent to boarding school, where we learnt to survive in the curiously emotionally arid environment valued by the middle classes. Family and school were essential influences in my early development of ideas and interest. Human behaviour and issues such as abortion were common family dinner table discussions in the early '60s. It is my father, a psychiatrist, that I have to thank for modelling respect and value for every human being. He was generous and energetic in his search to enable students to learn.

Failing to join the family train to Cambridge University, I followed instead my eugenically minded grandfather to King's College, Newcastle: a lively, challenging learning environment. In an attempt to remain separate, but yet connected, I chose psychiatric hospitals in which to learn and work as a social worker. One of these was Claybury Hospital in Essex, which was struggling with the concept of a therapeutic community. ECT was questioned by a psychoanalytically orientated psychiatrist, who asked us before each treatment

“Who is anxious?” A fellow student introduced me to *The Ailment* by Tom Main, as we attempted to unravel the staff dynamics affecting a patient’s need to make continual suicidal attempts. From this I learnt of the strength of the unconscious for both staff and patients, together with the crucial need to separate ‘I’ from ‘thou’ and the meaning of systems theory in practice.

I continued my formal education at the London School of Economics’ Diploma in Mental Health at a time of adherence to Freudian/Kleinian psychoanalytic principles. Behaviour was interpreted according to clearly defined rules. My ‘Self’ shrank as I sought to survive in this punitive, almost contemptuous environment, only emerging in the ambience of Winnicott’s lectures. His warmth, humanity and human connectedness shone through, even if his concepts were somewhat difficult to understand. The shaming experiences of one of my two placements remained with my being for many years, only emerging into consciousness during my studentship in Self Psychology. This has led me to a real interest in the effect of previous learning experiences on current ones and the importance of a shame-free learning environment.

On graduation I worked in the East End of London for five years, where I grappled therapeutically with the myriad of disturbances of patients in community mental health care, as well as theoretically with the nature of responsibility and with the ability claimed by mental health professionals to forecast all behaviours. I was grateful to Jack Kahn for his limited view of the omniscience of mental health professionals, which was counter to the then generally held opinion. To face the unknown and the unknowing was validated by him.

After five years in Newham, I travelled through North America and came to New Zealand in 1970. Struck by the beauty and warmth of the country and people in Christchurch, I worked in the Psychiatric Unit of the General Hospital for six years before becoming the first counsellor in the Technical Institute. Gestalt and the human encounter movement were strong influences in the early ‘70s, and challenged many firmly held constructs, particularly those of the therapist’s need to interpret all behaviour from an analytic stance. Instead they highlighted the importance of the ‘here and now’, the interaction between client and therapist, the power of group process and the ultimate wisdom inherent in people to do the best for themselves. All of this sought to use in teaching and psychotherapy. Working in the field of non-violence during the Springbok tour taught me more of the power of those demons of fear, violence and hate, both conscious and unconscious, as families were torn

asunder by the violence of the debate. Then in 1990 I became a student on the ANZAP Self Psychology course, and many of the dangling threads of understanding from the preceding years came together, given words and meaning. The centrality of Winnicott's emphasis on interaction and of Meares' and Hobson's paper on *The Persecutory Therapist* were balm to my wounded soul. It was a rich, torrid time as I was both student and teacher in similar yet different areas, having begun to develop and teach a Person Centred Counselling course at Christchurch Polytechnic, with many attendant difficulties.

Use of Terms

The delineation between counselling and psychotherapy is unclear. Often the words are used synonymously. So in this presentation I am using the words counselling and psychotherapy, student/trainee, patient and client interchangeably. As Edwin Kahn (1989) points out, there are similarities between the theories of Rogers and Kohut. Both were concerned with the subjective, experiential life of people as revealed to them in their work as psychotherapists. Both were concerned with the concept of 'self', the enhancement of 'self-regard' (Rogers) and 'self-cohesion' (Kohut). I am here assuming a similarity of core training for both counselling and psychotherapy. As graduates of the counselling course may work with long-term trauma in private practice, the course is taught with the unconscious fully in mind, if not in view.

The Nature of a Professional Self.

What is it that the professional Self of the counsellor or psychotherapist needs to know? What can she/he do and how can she/he "be"? NZAP enumerates an expected knowledge base as a recommendation for membership. I am aware that this is a subject in its own right, and has been the source of many disagreements in the past. It was once believed, for example, that only medical practitioners could be psychotherapists. Suffice it to say that this knowledge-base now has to include human growth and development and abnormal psychology. The skills needed in the 'doing' part of the requirements includes assessment, interviewing and the interpersonal interaction. The fundamental question, answered for me in the Self Psychology training after many years of professional work was "What is it that I do as a psychotherapist that affects my client?" or "How can I do what, to help clients?" I have talked to many well-trained people who have not known this and as a result, have been less confident in their personal effectiveness as psychotherapists. They have had a

clear cognitive understanding of pathology and psychodynamic theory but less clarity about the 'I:Thou' interaction. In some cases with so much certainty of their rightness, there was no room for the essential rightness of the client if it was different.

The beingness of the professional Self is the ability to be with another human being, and to stay in there for the long haul; tolerating disturbed behaviour, if that is necessary, and the intimacy of the interaction. This demands a quality of self acceptance and self knowledge which is essential to the psychotherapist working in the intersubjective field; a quality of maturity such that the therapist's own needs are not met by the client, and they have a sense of their own strengths and limitations. Mostly they will know the difference between self and other; always they need to know that there is such a difference, even if the boundary becomes blurred at times.

They have a central ability to allow others to feel safe, because they are safe within themselves and their own emotions

(Shapiro and Rugglewitz).

The Process of Education

So how can this packet of knowledge, skills and the integration of these into the person of the therapist be learnt or taught? As educators, do we teach or do we enable learning? This is a crucial difference. Clearly there is a need for the imparting of information. Is this the only way that people learn? I think not. We learn by doing. If we believe this, teachers have to give space to students to learn by the trial and error of doing. Many adult students have a wealth of personal experiences and wisdom to draw on and I have found students learn much from each other. I suggest that a process which focuses on the student as learner and potential masterer of skills is a crucial one if the whole Self is to be educated. This has major ramifications in practice and puts value on the place of the process.

Environmental Factors Influencing the Need for Well Defined Expectations and Boundaries

Other factors are now also influencing the style of education. Throughout my own training in the '50s. and '60s, the training process was hierarchical, with exams, orals and some practical assessment. Assessment criteria were unclear. The emphasis was primarily on cognitive learning. Lecturers, tutors and supervisors were the 'experts' and somehow students were made to feel wrong

to question or distrust their wisdom. The pressures and attitudes of the '90s demand more from the educational system - the institution and those involved in it. Whereas in the '60s, I felt powerless to challenge a poor supervisor, students are less likely to tolerate a similar situation today, with the current emphasis on freedom of information and human rights. As education costs more, so students expect more from educational programmes. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority is demanding clearly defined performance objectives, learning outcomes and assessment procedures. Ethics and values must now be part of the curricula as professional behaviour is watched critically by consumers, and broken boundaries are no longer acceptable. All these influences make the existence of clear and known values and administrative processes essential, not just for the safety of the student, but also for the teacher as more students take legal action against educational institutions.

Selection of Students

I strongly agree with Wheeler (1996) that among other important constituents of the teaching process, the selection of students is crucial. Guy (1987) lists some of the aspects of a person that make them either suitable or unsuitable to be a psychotherapist. His functional qualities include: "curiosity and inquisitiveness, the ability to listen comfortably in conversation, emotionally insightful, introspective, capable of self demand, tolerant of ambiguity, capable of warmth and caring, tolerant of intimacy, comfortable with power, able to laugh". I would like to emphasise the need for a strong sense of self-care and respect; determination; perseverance; humour and creativity (Cade 1982); ability to deal with loving and hating (Tan 1997); and the ability to remain intact in the face of others' projections. Guy's dysfunctional qualities include "too much emotional distress, vicarious coping methods, loneliness and isolation, the desire for power and vicarious rebellion". Any selection process has to include a consideration of these personal qualities. I have discovered to my great discomfort that if these are not valued at this stage, the education process has to fail. Students cannot learn without a cohesive core self. Education can't do the work of a personal therapist. So we have a long selection process to ascertain the suitability of the applicant for the course and whether they think the course is suitable for them.

The Role of Being a Student

Bennis, Bennis and Chin note that as a student, each individual faces the task of continuously re-organising, remaking and relating his/her internal worlds.

Alonso and Rutan recognise the regression in the learning process. They point out that adult learners will have to tolerate confusion and ignorance for a while, and that having experienced themselves as highly competent practitioners in other fields, they will find this an anxiety-provoking experience.

“The tension generated in the system can be easily a source of potential embarrassment and humiliation for even the most competent clinician before it is resolved.”

The supervisory/tutor relationship triggers off transferences from archaic parental and educational figures. I mentioned earlier my own transference of experiences as a student at the London School of Economics in the '60s. It would have been helpful if this had been able to be recognised earlier. In an attempt to do this for others, I have designed a small exercise to enable first year students to at least recognise that this may exist for them, in the hope that they may become increasingly aware of the size and shape of their transference as the course progresses. It seems to arise particularly in reaction to assessment tasks. Some important learnings have taken place as they deal with their differing responses to tutor/assessor and tutor/enabler of learning.

For students coming into this work there is also a need to see if they like it and are suitable for it. They may need to experience this before deciding. Selectors also make mistakes: indeed it is the ability to admit personal imperfection that may be considered a key attribute to being a successful supervisor or educator. Is the purpose of a training programme to pass everyone that enters, regardless?, or is it to allow students to discover if this work is really for them? Can tutors/supervisors allow students to fail, or see other paths? In a training programme accepting inexperienced people, an atmosphere which supports another choice of career, if appropriate, seems crucial. Many have stayed in the field when they could have been happier elsewhere, having been kept in the programme by expectations. I have supported students to leave and go into other fields, facing the annoyance of administrators, as they have wanted everyone to finish and 'pass'. This leaving is a potentially shameful experience and our task is to support the core Self in its wisdom.

I remember my first class of social work students. Deciding that to practise what I preached I had to believe in student wisdom and self-fulfilment, I let them pass/fail themselves and said I would support whatever decision they made. I had a sleepless night before the decisions, probably more so than the students, one of whom failed herself. Although I do not now see this method as appropriate for assessments, I consider it has an important philosophy

behind it. Successful trainees in psychotherapy have to have claimed their own authority, owned their own power and faced their ability to succeed and fail. As they grapple with these polarities, they also grapple with issues of powerlessness and power and are more likely to be comfortable with their limitations and skills as a practitioner. In fact we find that students on the counselling course only meet the assessment criteria for their final audiotapes when they know within themselves they will do so. If they are still waiting for an authority figure to 'pass' them, they are not ready and do not pass. This leads on to the difference between supervision and the classroom as educator.

Supervision and the Classroom

The traditional model of supervision has been the place where inner conflicts and confusions have emerged. In psychoanalytic training supervision was the key element of the training programme whose task it was to focus on the person of the therapist, and the integration of knowledge in practice. Teitlebaum (1990) wrote:

In this model the supervisor was viewed as an overseer, a more knowledgeable expert and one who could be helpful because he or she possessed supervision. The emphasis of the supervisory session was traditionally on deciphering the patient's material and/or arriving at a better understanding of the analyst's unresolved personality issues or over reactions to the patient, that is countertransference, which interfered with the successful handling of the case.

Alonso and Rutan write:

The supervisor is expected to teach, mentor, to evaluate, to encourage, and contain the learning regression so that the safety and development of the students, patients and training institutions are ensured.

An enormous load for the supervisor and one which should be more evenly shared by the training institution in the person of the tutor.

I am aware the idea of the classroom being a place of interactional learning is foreign to some teaching institutions. Education in universities and medical schools has a history of teaching information by lecture and dialogue. The classroom/lecture theatre has tended to be a place for the passing on of cognitive material, not a safe place for the exploration of the self. Social work education diverged from this by involving its students in discussion and more recently, as psychodrama and Gestalt gained a greater influence, in experiential learning.

Bennis, Bennie and Chin (1961) point out that the teaching/learning process is a human transaction involving the teacher, learner and learning group in a set of dynamic inter-relationships. The relationships among learners and between teacher and learners have a great deal to do with the ultimate learning. The target of education is change and growth in the individual and his/her behaviour, and thus in his/her worlds. This is a deeper and broader goal than cognitive learning only. Whatever their previous professional training, the development of an assured, realistic, confident self in the therapist working in the intersubjective field is essential, and a core theme in psychotherapy education. I suggest that both supervision and the classroom can have much to contribute to this, particularly when the lines of communication between them are good and trusting.

Supervision and the Classroom as Play Space

Nahum (1993) writes of playing within the boundary of supervision. I suggest that this concept can be broadened to envisage the classroom as 'play space'. This is different from group therapy. I have no doubt group 'therapy' per se is as inappropriate in the classroom as personal therapy in supervision. However, there is a place for exploration and learning from the ongoing life experiences of the students, when they are able to share these. The realities of grief, stress, trauma, and chronic illness are some of the day-to-day issues faced by students. Their responses to each other have wonderful learning potential if handled with respect and tact. Students have to learn how to function as professionals. This means learning how to contain emotions inappropriate to the client relationship; when it is important to withdraw and have a period of self-care; how to deal with their loving, hating and conflict with each other. In other words, they must learn how to deal with the countertransference.

The 'play space' is also the place where it is possible to affirm the creative, effective Self of the student. The classroom can also become a place of group work, and part of the development of any healthy group is an increased independence from the tutor. It entails wisdom and courage on the tutor's part to be demolished, to carry many of the projective images of students and keep the frame. But this is also the work of psychotherapy. If the process of the classroom interactions are made overt, they become very powerful conditions of learning in the 'here and now' what happens in the psychotherapeutic relationship. It is only possible for the classroom to be a 'play space' if it is just that. So either the summative assessments have to be done by non-tutors, or the boundaries around a particular assessable event have to be rigid, clear and

adhered to, e.g. written assignments having well documented learning outcomes, and assessment criteria clearly stated.

The Role of Tutor

The authority and functions of the tutor are complex. The tutor is supporter, encourager, affirmer of the core Self, and boundary keeper. As direction indicator the tutor assists with the map of possible learning resources, papers, articles, books, etc. He/she needs to keep abreast of new knowledge. The tutor, like the supervisor, also has the task of supporting the preconscious parts into consciousness. One way of doing this is to recognise and value both verbal and non-verbal behaviours. An example of this was a student giving a seminar on the resistant client. She arrived late and left her script at home. She was aware of the consequences of not giving her seminar. Would I delay the presentation? "No", I said. I thought she was giving a brilliant demonstration of the topic. She went home in the lunch hour, arriving back one minute late. She gave a very clear, concise, integrated seminar, including her own experience in the presentation. I was aware that I needed to maintain the frame for the integration of her learning to deepen.

Another example was facing the powerful forces of hatred and envy in the class. We in New Zealand are struggling with meanings and ramifications of a bicultural environment: the place of Maori as *tangata whenua* and the meaning of this for Pakeha. We have all learnt to talk about this in a politically correct manner. It was only when the tutor suggested that a Maori student had the right to present and be assessed for her seminar according to Maori tradition, involving more time, that the rest of the class had to face their anger and envy at being treated differently. The Maori student was given more time, but also had to face the daunting expectations of culturally appropriate assessors! The Pakeha tutor's job was to standardise these very demanding expectations of the visiting Maori assessment team with those applied to other students.

Similarities Between the Psychotherapeutic and Educational Frames

Lyndsey Fletcher, writing on the frame in 1989, says this:

The ground rules of the frame continue to be defined in much the same way as Freud suggested. It seems to me that what has changed is the way in which we conceptualise the frame and the deeper appreciation we have of its essential, integral role as the frame delineating boundaries, to a more three-dimensional concept of a vessel with holding and containing

connotations. To this graphic we could perhaps add a shadow area to represent a fourth dimension—the illusory, unknown, unconscious aspect of the frame. The basic ground rules are no longer just seen as a set of tenets to safeguard the transference and to preserve the integrity of the therapeutic relationship. The frame in itself is seen to embody important therapeutic experiences. If this aspect of the frame with its multi-dimensional qualities can be more fully appreciated, then it is easier to understand and accept why it is so important to respect all aspects of the boundaries in maintaining the frame.

I would like to attempt to translate this into the educational field. There is a need for ground rules, for assignments, attendances, etc, which clarify expectations of performance and standards of behaviour, engendering an atmosphere of safety, trust and certainty. The known, in which the unknown may emerge. The educational frame is more than the ground rules of assignments and exams. It is also the expectations of the nature of the student-teacher relationship: education, not therapy. It is the safety net under the tightrope between trusting the process to allow the students to learn all they need to know, and the need of the tutor for the content to be covered. It seems important in the current climate of concern for learning outcomes and performance objectives, to remember the power of the 'teaching moment'. But there is a place for the learning of information and lecturing. It seems to me possible to combine the two, given wisdom and confidence.

What is the balance? I have no answers, only questions. But of one thing I am certain: the relationship between teacher and student needs to be out in the open and clear. A group contract needs to be entered into and kept. Administrative procedures have to be well documented and adhered to. The shadow self needs space and it will be contained within this space only if all the human connections can be acknowledged and valued. This integrity of the educational relationship is as important to preserve as that of the therapeutic relationship. Boundaries and rules are needed to define the limits and that which is off limits, what is contained within and that which is outside. Picket fences are easier to see than ha-has, those ditches of England built to preserve the view, but when stumbled into, producing humiliation and injury. We need sturdily built picket fences, maintained by tutors, so that students are clear when they are being unsafe for themselves and their clients.

Looking back at my placement at the London School of Economics, with the wisdom of hindsight, how could it have been a different, non-shaming experience for me, and probably my supervisor? It transpired later that my

supervisor had countertransference issues with my family and was severely depressed. She was very anxious, and dealt with this by refusing me information about the clients I was to see. Her depression did not enable her to affirm my work in any way. We needed a super-supervisor. She needed a choice in taking me as a supervisee, and I needed clear guidelines as to what to expect from a supervisor and a person to discuss it with. I needed to have my appropriate expectations as a student clearly delineated. We both needed clearly defined boundaries and a frame.

Components of the Educational Frame

Some elements—such as fees, length of course, number of hours, resits and content—are set by the training institution's own academic requirements and assessment criteria. The tutor has more/less input into these depending on the particular institution. In a polytechnic in New Zealand, for example, assignments must have clear marking criteria and named assessors. The separation of functions is a crucial factor in safety both for students and tutors. The British Association of Counsellors has very clear ethical guidelines on this, and holds to a policy that the tutor should not also be supervisor or counsellor to the same students. Educators should be clear as to how these different functions operate in practice. If one is teaching a class where personal material is shared, this sometimes becomes very difficult, and a fine balance needs to be maintained between recognition of the existence of archaic emotional material and exploration of this. I have found that most students enter personal therapy during the course, but it is not the business of the tutor to know this or whom they are seeing. I suggest that educational boundaries are more easily maintained if there are no other social relationships clouding the horizon.

Conclusions

Teaching is both a difficult and rewarding task, particularly when one focuses on process as well as content. It is a place where I have experienced the magic of interpersonal connection, shame and horror. As tutors we have to be at times judges of safe practice. We have to be able to use our power, authority and expertise and to stand our ground. The demands of this task require us to remember the needs of teachers. We too need 'holding'. While we need to be held accountable when the process and boundaries are not kept, we also need a functional institution where those in authority will trust us. We need to know that if there are complaints from students in the midst of transference learnings, the tutors' side of the story will also be respected. And we need the support and validation of colleagues.

But the last word belongs to the students, who are essential for our teaching. As we celebrated her achievement in passing the course, a student paid me the highest compliment "Thank you for staying with me, as I gained my confidence. For not doubting me, for hanging in there and for sharing of yourself at times, not perfect, just human". She knew she was 'love and lovable' and powerful. What more could I ask?

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