

Making a case for the psychoanalytic study of education

Alan Bainbridge, Linden West

This special 6th edition of *Cliopsy* originates from a conference held at Canterbury Christ Church University, England, in December 2009. Diverse educators, psychotherapists and others – from the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, France, Italy, Turkey, South America and Australia - engaged in discussing the applications of psychoanalysis, broadly defined, to education, in its widest sense, across adult and lifelong learning, higher education as well as schooling. Such a project was not novel yet it should be noted that academic texts already related to this area could be counted in tens rather than hundreds (i.e. Appel (1999), Bibby (2011), Britzman (2009), Salzberger-Wittenberg et al. (1983) and Youell (2006)). It is also clear, at least, from a UK perspective and maybe more widely, that psychoanalytic thought, of whatever kind, has had relatively minimal presence, especially in recent years, in education and the broader education focussed academy. Indeed there is evidence of increasing hostility from many educators and academics towards its claims, aspirations and ways of knowing (Ecclestone and Hayes, (2009) and Furedi, (2009). What is disappointing about these attacks is how they demonstrate a lack of understanding of modern psychoanalytic thought and practice that is bundled up in the generic term of 'therapeutic education' (Bainbridge and West, in press).

The situation in other European countries, like France, may be marginally better. This is to a large extent due to an important tradition that has emerged in a number of universities of providing psychoanalytically informed 'clinical' workshops, in 'a Balint style', which focus on the experiences of professionals and counter-transference phenomena in locations like the classroom. This is accompanied by a focus on what is often termed the psychic qualities of such relationships, including with academic subjects themselves. This includes how subjects, like maths, or how these are to be taught, may have changed, bringing feelings of loss, even trauma in its wake, for particular teachers as cherished ways of communicating the roots of a discipline are declared to be anachronistic. Teachers in turn can act out with their pupils, in cynical and even, in terms of learning,

potentially destructive ways. The clinical tradition of intense focus on such processes is located in faculties of educational science and there is an associated body of research, using, for instance, in-depth observational methods, derived from the work of Esther Bick as well as group discussion (Chaussecourte, 2006). Yet, despite a considerable body of research and writing, under the umbrella of this journal, for instance, - academic educators like Claudine Blanchard-Laville and Phillipe Chaussecourte at Paris Nanterre and Bernard Pechberty at Université Paris 5 René Descartes - consider themselves to be increasingly marginal in the educational sciences. Notwithstanding, there is evidence from other continental European countries, of greater connectedness, relatively, between the worlds of education and psychoanalysis. This may be to do with the greater willingness in some continental academic traditions to engage philosophically with what can be seen as the rather speculative, self-referential, unobservable and not empirically testable world of psychoanalysis. There tends to be more scepticism in the Anglo-Saxon world where empiricism has been stronger. In Germany, for instance, the German Educational Research Association, unlike its British Educational Research Association counterpart, (BERA), has an interest group (Section 13.1: Psychoanalysis and Education) devoted to the psychoanalytic understanding of education and processes of learning.

Notwithstanding, the position overall, it seems, in many countries and cultures, is one in which psychoanalysis is neglected in education and its literatures, including adult and higher education. Moreover, those institutions in the United Kingdom, such as the Tavistock Clinic in London, that offer opportunities, to consider the emotional factors in learning and teaching, from a psychoanalytic perspective, are wrestling with pressures to offer more cognitive behaviourist approaches, given the support of government for these (on the grounds of them being shorter and thus less costly interventions and more susceptible to precise evaluation, as reported in discussions at the Conference). Cognitive behavioural approaches take less time for people to learn and are more easily manualised while their resonance, for educators, may be stronger given the dominance of cognitivist approaches in education. Also, to repeat, they appear more grounded in objectively measurable 'evidence-based' research findings, however questionable such research and the associated reductive stance towards complex psychic causalities of the interplay between interior and exterior worlds (Leader, 2011).

Education throughout the lifespan

We should make clear from the outset that these selected articles represent a perspective on education that is lifelong and lifewide. In fact we worried about the danger of a simplistic association between education and schools in planning the conference: the hegemonic language of education tends, still, to be synonymous with schooling and pedagogical interventions with children despite the growing importance of learning as a lifelong imperative (Jarvis, 2007). The worry was partly driven, in Linden's case, by a background of research in adult learning with a particular focus on transitional processes in higher education, professional life and informal learning. Such preoccupations can be marginal in the mainstream educational literature, given the preoccupation with schools and schooling (West, 1996; West, 2001; West, 2007; Merrill and West, 2009). We wanted to use the conference and the publications derived from this (Bainbridge and West, in press) to engage with education in the broader sense, without neglecting schools and the experiences of teachers and pupils. We wanted to include learning and educational processes in families, in relationships, in social, community, and professional contexts, at work as well as in higher education. Defining education more broadly, we thought, might help loosen up and energise discussion on its characteristics and purposes. This includes by making reference to the psychoanalytically informed research literature on adult and lifelong learning, which can bring into sharpened relief some of the damage done by schools in people's learning lives. Psychoanalytic assumptions, broadly applied, push us towards addressing many difficult questions, far beyond what can be a narrowly obsessive focus on accountability, 'standards' or curricula in schools. We are both Psychoanalytic Psychotherapists and have found that the language of psychoanalysis has opened up new possibilities in our research and teaching, in diverse contexts. It has enabled us to appreciate the complexity of experience – for adults, young people and children – and to view education as deeply embodied, alive with the play of phantasy, desire and resistance, across lives. It has enabled us to get beneath surface appearances, and sanitised, emotionally deadened accounts of learning, and to move towards potentially richer, deeper, whole person experiences and understanding: material that is redolent with vulnerability but also resilience in 'keeping on keeping on' as a teacher, an adult or young person.

Apprehensions

Therefore, a central preoccupation across the papers is the importance of

understanding the whole human being, the *sentio* as well as the *cogito*, the dynamics of inner/outer, the defended as well as social self, in education, across lives. And if there is some danger of pathologising learning and learners, in using psychoanalytic perspectives, there may be a greater one of sanitising education and how people experience it. Of, neglecting, in short, the experiential semantics of change, of negotiations of meaning and understanding, and of the internal conflicts that can be engendered; of movement and integration too, and the heroic dimensions of resilience – of learners keeping on keeping on – in difficult transitional processes, including mental ill health and or frightening economic instability. The neglect encompasses universities: especially alarming if, as in our own university, there is a prime preoccupation with the initial education and continuing development of diverse professionals such as teachers, social and health care workers. The gap between the lived experiences of would-be professionals, and the focus of their training, as chronicled in biographical narrative research, for instance, matters, sometimes dramatically, on a daily basis (Bainbridge, this volume; West, 2009). Even high achieving graduates can struggle, desperately, when working in difficult schools, faced as they may be, with disturbed, and disturbing, young people, or with social pathologies, like racism, finding their way into the heart of classrooms (West, 2009). The relative absence of psychoanalytic understanding means that such would-be professionals can be denied access to a whole repertoire of ideas and potential insights that could help them negotiate the messy swamp of classrooms, seminars, schools and colleges. It matters that those at the receiving end of ‘education’ – learners in schools, universities, adult education and diverse training contexts – may struggle confusedly in the relationships that are education, with relatively little help, when appropriate, or understanding of why (West, 2009). Psychoanalysis, however, takes these troubling aspects of experience seriously, concerned as it is with basic questions about the nature of the selves at the heart of learning and how a self comes to be, at all (Frosh, 1991). In such approaches, the emotional, inter- and intra-subjective, are given space while the more unconscious dimensions of learning are explored.

We were apprehensive about the initial conference for other reasons: how many delegates would we get in such times and what notions of ‘education’ might emerge? Ultimately the attendance exceeded our expectations with over 100 delegates presenting papers, coming, as noted, from all over Europe and beyond. And education was in fact conceived in the broadest terms, including in professional settings and lifelong contexts; and it was also viewed through the diverse modality lenses that psychoanalysis now

provides. We should emphasise here that psychoanalysis, like education, is a broad church, as the papers make clear. The success of the conference at Canterbury may indicate a desire to re-claim a space where the dynamic unconscious – which retains a central place in most theorising – provides a conceptual framework that is as valid as any dominant instrumentalist discourse. Significantly, the conference has already been a catalyst for a number of developments, including this present volume: for a major collaboration between Canterbury Christ Church University and colleagues in the Faculty of Education Sciences at Paris West University Nanterre La Défense. We both serve on the scientific committee of Cliopsy, while Linden has been Visiting Professor at Nanterre, and there is collaboration in doctoral student supervision and assessment.

Gaps between languages: getting lost in translation

We have struggled in all these developments with problems of language, and whose language to use. In the developing relationship between Canterbury Christ Church and Paris Nanterre, we often work in both French and English. There are many reasons, including an awareness of what can be lost in translation, alongside the cultural impoverishment of monolingualism and the importance of engaging with writers in their mother tongue. There are important academic reasons too: post-structuralist sensibilities have taught us how language is forged in and by culture, but also vice-versa. Language constitutes as well as represents 'reality'. The territory that is the preoccupation of psychoanalysis may, partly at least, be shaped by the very language used: and important expressions may not have an obvious equivalent. Words that seem so equivalent – like agency in English, and agence in French – can be troubling faux amis. In English the word can be used to denote small shifts in the experiencing self while the meaning in French is rather more mundane: to do with a place of business. We can struggle at times to find equivalent expressions (like pouvoir d'agir?). Managing such difficulties between languages, and in translation, has been a major editorial preoccupation in developing these papers as French, Italian and Turkish worlds have been re-presented within a world nuanced by the English language. This has meant giving many hours to exploring and negotiating meanings as well as to worrying about what might be lost in translation. Words matter: language is a prime means by which otherness, relationships as well as the law, in Lacan's sense, are mediated. However, difficulties can be negotiated as well as being problematic and the richness of what is offered derives as much as anything else from it being a product of an international collaboration.

What is presented then, in this special edition of *Cliopsy*, is a bricolage of an internationally informed academic exploration of a rich and diverse dialogue that is possible around education and psychoanalysis. In doing so we ask readers to be sensitive to the challenges of translation and how the worlds of others are interpreted and represented through a language that is not their own. We offer, at this stage, no overarching theories or synthesis of ideas. Instead, we seek to draw the readers' attention to the vibrant and authentic diversity of human educational experience, and its interpretation, presented here. If we are to make any claims, they are to show how psychoanalytic thinking can help make more sense of the complex inner/outer dialectic of education; of why education can be such a troublesome business; and of the importance of viewing education as lifelong and lifewide, as a site of a perpetual, deeply ambivalent struggle to be and to think.

Bibliography

- Appel, S. (ed) (1999). *Psychoanalysis and Pedagogy*. Westport, Connecticut: Bergin and Garvey.
- Bainbridge, A. and West, L. (in press). *Psychoanalysis and Education: Renewing Connections*. London: Karnac
- Bibby, T. (2011). *Education – An Impossible Profession? Psychoanalytic explorations of learning and classrooms*. London: Routledge.
- Britzman, D.P. (2009). *The Very Thought of Education: Psychoanalysis and the impossible professions*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Chaussecourte, P. (2006). Une observation d'enseignante inspirée de la méthode d'Esther Bick. *Connexions*, 86, 49-65.
- Ecclestone, K. and Hayes, D. (2009). *The Dangerous rise of Therapeutic education*. London: Routledge.
- Frosh, S. (1991). *Identity Crisis: modernity, psychoanalysis and the self*. London: Macmillan.
- Furedi, F. (2009). *Wasted: Why Education Isn't Educating*. London: Continuum Books.
- Jarvis, P. (2007). *Globalisation, Lifelong Learning and the Learning Society: Sociological Perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Leader, D. (2011). *What is Madness?* London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Merrill, B and West, L. (2009). *Using biographical methods in social research*. London: Sage.
- Salzberger-Wittenberg, I., Williams, G. and Osborne, E. (1983). *The Emotional Experience of Learning and Teaching*. London: Karnac.
- West, L. (1996) *Beyond Fragments: adults, motivation and higher education*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- West, L. (2001). *Doctors on the Edge: general practitioners, health and learning in the inner-city*. London: Free Association Books.
- West, L. (2007). 'The radical challenges of families and their learning', in West, L., Alheit, P., Anderson, A. S. and Merrill, B. (eds.). *Using Biographical and Life History Approaches in the Study of Adult and Lifelong Learning: European perspectives*. Hamburg: Peter Lang pp. 221-239
- West, L. (2009). 'Really reflexive practice: auto/biographical research and struggles for

a critical reflexivity' in H.Bradbury, N. Frost, S. Kilminster and M.Zucas (Eds).
Beyond Reflective Practice. London: Routledge.

Youell, B. (2006). *The Learning Relationship: psychoanalytic thinking in education*.
London: Karnac

Alan Bainbridge

Senior lecturer

Canterbury Christ Church university

Linden West

Professor in Education and Director of Research

Development in the Faculty of Education

Canterbury Christ Church university

Pour citer ce texte :

Bainbridge, A., West, L. (2011). Making a case for the
psychoanalytic study of education. *Cliopsy*, 6, 7-13.