Playing and Adults Learning

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> *"Whatever I say about children playing really applies to adults as well."*
>
> *(Winnicott, 1971, p. 46)*

This paper discusses `playing' in its broadest sense using the work of the psychotherapist and physician Donald Winnicott, who insists on the present participle `playing' rather than the noun `play'. (1971, p. 45). This is because he wants to move away from what he saw as psychoanalysts' preoccupation with play content and the focus to be on the child/adult *playing*.

I have spent thirty years of a professional lifetime teaching older and non-traditional learners and noting their educational journeys. During this time I have formed a conviction that `playing', as Winnicott uses the term, can help in the development of self and the educational progress of students. What is particularly interesting is the importance of playing to theories of learning, not only for children, but more specifically for adults as well.

A range of concepts are contained within Winnicott's complex notion of playing, which essentially commences with theorising about object relations: that is, the quality of our relations with significant others, most obviously prime care givers. Qualities of playing are deeply dependent on the responses of others. For the purposes of this paper I shall focus on transitional objects (phenomena), transitional spaces, alongside significant others.

Transitional objects, teddy bears and other special objects

Winnicott sees the importance of transitional objects (phenomena) as crucial to the healthy development of the infant: they ante-date reality testing. The term transitional in this context 'describes the infant's journey from the purely subjective to objectivity' (p. 7); the use of the term transitional object `gives room for the process of becoming able to accept difference and similarity' (ibid). The mother, largely in the form of the breast or breast substitute, is the first not-me object that the infant encounters. As Winnicott and many parents are aware, a substitute is adopted by the baby, it might be a thumb or finger in the mouth; a strip of satin or smooth material from an early blanket, or an object often associated with Winnicott, that of the teddy bear. There is no gender differentiation in this process which is the

start of a creative capability within the baby, who has thought up, originated his/her own particular object to satisfy a need, resulting in what Winnicott refers to as `The initiation of an affectionate type of object relationship' (1971, p. 2). The object must never change, unless this is brought about by the child and many a parent has reluctantly allowed a scruffy, soiled teddy its place with the infant. The object comes from outside the baby, it can be seen. Winnicott concludes this consideration by suggesting that the object `is gradually allowed to be decathected so that in the course of years it is not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo.' (p. 6). By decathected he means, of course, the withdrawal of emotional investment.

This tendency has meaning for adults too, many of whom have special objects which have the capability to evoke greater calm, security or success. It has been observed, for example, in tennis players and other sports players insisting on wearing the same socks throughout a tournament. Texture seems to be significant and part of the transitional object's essence, possibly part of the initial auto-erotic association with the breast. Many neglected and worn teddies sit on shelves in the later years of the owners, important as symbols of strong affection and object relating, their original use outgrown; worn because as well as love they have been the recipients of the anger and frustration of their owner. They have served their purpose, but as transitional objects have helped and continue to help the self with its negotiations with reality.

The potential for transitional objects is present in adult life too and, like the teddy, can remain long after the initial reason for the object relationship is lost. Transitional objects can be a valuable aid in teaching and learning, a way to extend knowledge and understanding in a secure space. As Winnicott remarks `patterns set in infancy may persist into childhood , so that the original soft object continues to be absolutely necessary at bedtime or times of loneliness or when a depressed mood threatens' (p. 5). Some adults' experiences as learners – not least in times of transition and associated anxiety – may reactivate the early childhood process. Theorising around transitional objects is an area where teachers of non-traditional older learners can recognise a pattern from infancy. Some adults attach themselves to transitional objects that have this function, a special pen, or room which is associated with a first successful piece of work may ward off the anxiety remaining from prior unsatisfactory learning experiences, as well as the interaction of this with present times. Transitional objects remain a defence against anxiety, and can manifest themselves in a range of scarcely noticeable forms: a catch phrase a teacher has used, scribbled at the top of an exam script; the notes that signify learning and understanding a topic, loss of which can bring about extreme distress. An adaptive teacher will respond with empathy to what to others might appear a trivial event.

From transitional objects (phenomena) to transitional spaces and safe spaces – the role of illusion

The infant in its earliest stages experiences the breast as part of itself, an illusion that is gradually discovered as it realises that the breast is not-me. Object relations, the problem of what is objectively perceived and yet subjectively conceived, me or not-me, is a perpetual human preoccupation. Winnicott identifies a space between them

> [It] *is the area allowed to the infant between primary creativity and objective perception based on reality-testing.* The transitional phenomena represent the early stages of the use of illusion, without which there is no meaning for the human being in the idea of a relationship with an object that is perceived by others as external to that being (p. 13) (italics Winnicott's)

A sense of security is an important part of this process, initially this is created via the adaptive mother who, when the adaptation is good-enough, `gives the infant the illusion that there is an external reality that corresponds with the infant's own capacity to create' (p. 14). The breast, in fact, was already there - an object, it is created only in the baby's inner reality.

Winnicott's theory of transitional spaces proceeds from this illusion, he sees

> … the main function of the transitional object and of transitional phenomena … (is to) start each human being off with what will always be important for them i.e. *a neutral area of experience which will not be challenged* (p. 14) (italics mine)

It has to take place within a safe and protected space. In the earliest instance it is that tiny area that is present between the mother and very young infant. The safe space has to be able to contain conflicts and tensions; a parallel with the classroom suggests itself here and is further developed later in the paper. In `Varieties of Psychotherapy' (1986/90, p. 107) Winnicott refers to this situation as `holding' both metaphorically and literally, which he sees as one of the functions of the good enough mother; the same could be said for the good enough teacher. The following case study considers the role of transitional phenomena and safe places for playing in the context of adult learning.

A case study: A Teacher's Narrative and steps into auto/biography[1]

1. See work in bibliography by Merrill and West; and Stanley

Liz is a teacher in a college of further education, which traditionally, at least in part, makes education available to students post sixteen, who have failed to achieve at school. Liz's narrative traces her educational trajectory set against the cultural and political background of a deprived area on the south east Kent coast of England. The transcript from a first biographical narrative interview (undertaken as part of my doctoral study) locates her, both

literally and emotionally, within a working class family. I consider Liz's cultural background is significant in her success with `failing' students: she is someone with whom they can easily identify.

In her written response to the interview Liz gave more details of her family background

> Home was a small terraced house: front room; middle room; scullery; outside toilet; three bedrooms and a tin bath hung on the wall in the back yard. Opening the front door, I was always met with a particular smell that told me which day of the week it was: *Lux Soap Flakes* – Monday; *Robin Starch* – Tuesday; stew – Wednesday and so on.

What might be evident in the transcript is Winnicott's good enough parents creating secure spaces within the family home where a child could grow and develop, play and imagine in safety. It is only when reflexively recalling this evocative scene that she realises it occurred at a time when the family was extremely hard pressed financially. It is also interesting that her father, in the next extract and beyond, plays a highly significant role in her story telling, her sense of security as well as capacity for playing.

> I wonder at however we got through that winter. Dad was a master bricklayer and due to the severe frosts and snow he was unable to work for much of that time. Being self–employed meant that he did not receive any state...[benefit] It is an example and testimony to the protection and security my parents gave me. *They did not allow their adult world to impinge upon my child's world of wonder and excitement*. I was cocooned from harsh realities – and yet at the same time I cannot say that I was wrapped in cotton wool. (italics mine).

The key sentence – as I see it - has been highlighted in italics. Money was always scarce, but Liz's abiding memory is a sense of warmth and security. These early childhood experiences with more than `good enough' parents helped Liz to establish a clear and confident core self, that Winnicott sees as instrumental to imagination and creativity, for playing and the sense of the world as a place with which one wants to engage. She stresses that she was not `cocooned' but that her parents gave her sufficient transitional space to understand both the frustrations and realities of the world, alongside its imaginative satisfaction.

The winter referred to above was also one in which some of her most imaginative and influential memories occurred. This is the `White Horses' incident, which is detailed below. Liz, I suggest, uses this emotionally cathected narrative to create an imaginative and `transitional space' for her own students: playing in the classroom, as discussed below, was to come alive in the process.

Liz's family background is crucial to her own development. As an adult she comes across as a secure and confident person, resilient, committed to education as a means of progress and self-fulfilment. Nevertheless, she recognisably retains aspects of her working class identity, living very close

to the house she grew up in. For her, educational aspiration does not involve rejecting this earlier identity, but rather combining and integrating it in forging a securer sense of self. I would suggest that her particularly strong and secure familial background is responsible for this. I would also argue that by re-creating potential, transitional spaces in later life – for others, but fuelled or cathected by her autobiographical material - it is possible to provide potential space for those who may have lacked good enough moments in their own early childhood. These can be profoundly auto/biographical experiences, in the present.

A good enough family of origin, and the securer sense of self this may have brought in its train, may have enabled Liz to be resilient enough to overcome setbacks later in her educational biography: for instance, in overcoming feelings of rejection when failing what is termed the 11 plus exam for a grammar school place (this is a test that still exists in parts of England, including Kent, for establishing whether a child has sufficient 'abilities' to benefit from a more academic education). Rejection left her with a deficit of appropriate qualifications for academic progression to university. However, a passion for education, a love of learning for its own sake remained; the motivation to pursue education was dormant but not extinct. Part of the reason for continued motivation (including the strong emotional investment in education), in her story telling, connects to the confidence, and imaginative encouragement of her father. She describes herself as 'blessed' with her parents and family life: as a child she thought 'that's what everyone has'. Experience of teaching students from a similar background to hers had shown her how wrong this assumption was. When Liz's thirst for education re-emerged, this led her to undertake the first step, an Access to Higher Education programme, designed as a route to university for adults without traditional qualifications.

Playing and significant others

While not disregarding the role of her mother, Liz's father is considered to be a `significant other' in this vignette. I want to indicate more of the formative role he seems to have played (at least in her narrative reconstruction) in creating space in early childhood for her imagination, creativity; in short, for playing. He was very much alive in her story-telling as past and present intertwined. The term `significant other', it is to be noted, from a psychoanalytic perspective, includes any person who has great importance in an individual's emotional life, well-being and self-esteem. In object relations theory, such a good object may be available to us in the present, not least when engaging with others who may struggle to see themselves as good enough students.

`…my Dad was the wisest man I've ever known' (Liz's written narrative)

Liz's father died seven years before she returned to learning and the Access to Higher Education programme. In these terms, the continuing impact of early experiences and significant others may be considerable, if also, perhaps, largely unconscious via memory in feeling. In the interview Liz stressed her father's importance in encouraging the development of her imagination and love of reading and learning, in motivating her and instilling what she now terms a transformative concept of education. This is captured and illustrated evocatively in the following passage where she recalled a moment of his imagination merging with her own, father and daughter playing together in the security of a good enough, loving relationship. This is a story of a visit to Dover beach when she was about four years old.

You've got this really rough day and he [her father] said "Can you see the white horses?" He got down, right down, he crouched down at my eye level. Of course it was the foam on the waves, and I said to him "Where?" and he said "Look, there's their manes." And do you know I could see them. I absolutely remember that...I was about 4 years old and he said "This is the place where adventures begin" and, of course, I'm this little thing looking around at the ships and the trains...they're all going out...Coal and cargo...and I remember that as plain as plain, and they are white horses, that's what they were...Yes, he was incredible – the white horses, I'll always remember that.

And the moment was alive in the interview itself, as past and present experience entwined.

Movement to the Classroom

Later, it can be suggested, the experience is developed into a transitional object for her students and enables more fulsome playing in the classroom. The transitional space created by the interview, coupled with the recollection of playing with her father and the contingency of their two imagined worlds, was very powerful. Liz continued to think reflexively after the interview and wrote her own version of the incident; she then adapted this for use in the classroom where it served as a kind of transitional object for her students.

Using auto/biography with the students

Liz adapted a version of the White Horse story as an exercise for her students, but without a conclusion; they were directed to adopt the same voice and complete the chapter; and then she gave them her own conclusion about links between past and present, significant others and learning. The students had been identified as `failing' – and saw themselves

in these terms too – coming, as noted, from one of the most deprived areas of the south east coastal region. This was a cultural background that Liz shared with the students, who, for a variety of reasons, had left school with minimal/no formal qualifications. They were in further education on a programme designed to remove them from what is termed the NEETs' register (not in employment education or training). Government was committed to this in response to a range of social problems.

Liz's written account provided rich evocative material for the students, but they were surprised it was written about the 1970s. They recognised similarities with their own social group but needed to interrogate some of the words used. But they felt included and could identify with Liz, while at the same time accepting her situation as partly other and separate from them. The attempt to continue in Liz's written `voice', different from her everyday speech, was a subtle way of teaching them the appropriateness of different registers for the written and spoken word.

The students initially had to be persuaded that it was permissible to learn creatively, they were nervous of the space created, Liz recalls: 'they could not believe the freedom...it was almost frightening for them...' Liz, however, provided them with a space for playing, which included simultaneously encouraging a more imaginative approach to their English studies. Knights and Thurgar-Dawson in their book on *Active Reading* theorise the situation in the following way

> A spiral of reading → writing→ further reading, can also, within conditions of adequate security, be used to open up questions about the cultural situatedness of the self as at once addressee and agent. (2006, p. 66).

The students' responses to the exercise were astonishingly positive, as Liz perceived it. They began to acquire a `thirst for learning', identified by Liz as a driving force in own her life. It led to the students producing their own magazine. The outcomes seem to have been transformative in the lives of some of these students: with shifts from `failing', to becoming more aspirational. When the paper was written a number were applying for university places. Liz at the very least can be seen as an envoy for the students, a messenger, however unconsciously, about the transformative possibilities of education. It just might be the case that, if interrogated in the future, such students would cite Liz as a significant other.

Conclusion

When applying Winnicott's ideas on playing to this particular teaching/classroom situation, we can observe the interplay of past and present, one life and those of others, in potentially profoundly cathected and auto/biographical ways.

There is evidence here, in Winnicott's terms, that Liz is a more than a `good enough' and `adaptive' teacher, with whom the students can identify and

with whom playing becomes heart felt, if only for a short time. The processes of largely unconscious projective identification at work may be crucial in shifting the quality of the classroom space. Such moments may be far from unique, the use of educational biographies in the classroom is well documented by Dominicé (2000) and West (1996): it is possible to trace in classrooms evidence of sufficiently empathetic, adaptive and emotionally attuned teachers promoting the capacity for playing, including with the symbolic. My own long teaching experience with non-traditional adult learners is redolent of similar auto/biographical, primitive inter-connections, like Liz's, that make playing, in a fulsome sense, more possible.

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Pour citer ce texte :
Cartlidge, J. (2011). Playing and Adults Learning. *Cliopsy*, 6, 53-60.