Self-Respect, Self-Confidence and Self-Esteem: psychoanalytic and philosophical implications for Higher Education

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The role of public policy in shaping the language of education

Before discussing the potential contribution to education that can be made by psychoanalytic theory and Honneth's philosophy, we want to say something about the hegemonic role that government policy has played, over recent years, in redirecting the discourse of HE study from the pursuit of academic learning towards the student as customer – presenting the student as someone involved in buying a qualification rather than acquiring knowledge of a discipline.

UK universities find themselves subject to power struggles for control of the future of higher education - an education process that is primarily funded by public taxation but whose ownership has been claimed by neoliberal politicians in the three most recent administrations. We believe that rather than shaping universities through the application of market forces, the value of higher education should be determined by reference to widely recognised quality standards in education and training, applied to locally managed institutions which reflect the broad consensus of local and regional needs and aspirations.

This marketised repositioning of the student undermines the educational process. It denies the need for time in which to develop students' knowledge, skills and attitudes. It deliberately confuses education with training, by seeking to present knowledge in reductionist terms as 'profitable enterprise' focusing on facts to be taught and skills to be learned. It re-presents education as rote learning and avoids or denies the pedagogical insights of teachers and researchers who know that to acquire deep understanding of their academic discipline, students have to engage with troublesome knowledge.

The need for a reconceptualisation of learning

We argue for a shift away from a focus on the individual, towards a view of education as a relational activity. We also argue that HE programmes need to address values directly. This has become imperative since we have begun

to realise how urgently we need to address urgent contemporary challenges such as global warming, climate change, and depletion of the earth's resources. Societies need, more than ever, the engagement of students who understand how their discipline can contribute to solving local, regional and global challenges. This imperative requires students who are able to engage directly with a values agenda in relation to their subject. A values-free market approach to higher education denies us this opportunity. By contrast, a relational approach to education encourages students to study their discipline in ways that turn 'the abstract concept of social citizenship into a practical reality' (Bauman 2007: 9).

However, speaking up for higher education as a key player in a participatory democracy requires a commitment from educators to work towards policies, values and social practices that promote commitment to a more equal and just society. According to Giroux universities can start this process by ensuring that programmes reintroduce:

> '…educational policies, values, and social practices that help produce civic identifications and commitments, teach young people how to participate in and shape public life and exercise critical judgment…' (Giroux 2009: 253)

Exploring learning from a relational perspective challenges conventional thinking about curriculum, assessment and student guidance. A re-conceptualisation of learning is overdue because it is not predominantly an intellectual, cognitive process, but one where there is 'ever-present affectivity' (Tahta 1986). For many students there is little opportunity within their formal studies to explore their affective engagement with learning and teaching. We argue here that learning, in this broader sense, is always the result of relationships through which the subject (student) is continually being recreated by intersubjective processes that shape identification through self-other recognition.

Learning as troublesome knowledge for an intersubjective self

Learning is influenced by, and also disrupts, ego stability. Learning can be exciting when the ego is under mild threat – for example when making one's first seminar presentation or meeting your tutor for a first tutorial - but learning can be disrupted significantly by unconscious defences when the threat to the ego is too great to bear. Too little tension and the learning can be experienced as dull and irrelevant, too much and it can be experienced as overwhelming and destructive.

Students often feel that once they struggle to know something, they can never be quite the same again. And, as if this struggle were not enough, the process continually returns, refusing to offer consolation for very long. Egos are not formed, nor are desires done away with once and for all. The ego is never finished, but always incomplete (Todd 2001: 433). As Todd reminds

us, the ego is never complete and formal education settings provide a desirable site for students and tutors to rework prior experiences through Freud's 'after-education' as part of the process of ego development (Brown 2009). Education is a risky business, we approach it ambivalently: excited but fearful, wanting to be different but not always wanting to change or be changed.

Thomas Ogden (1994), writing about the relationship between therapist and analysand, identifies a 'third subject' that shapes and controls therapeutic settings. Borrowing from his therapeutic model and relocating it within the context of education and student learning, Ogden's insight allows for recognition and exploration of the academic discipline as the third subject. The academic discipline is a disembodied other that is often related to as if it were real: a loved, hated, mysterious, quirky and demanding, powerful other, with which tutor and student develop an increasingly complex triadic relationship. The student learns to engage with the discipline first through study and physical work in the form of attending lectures, writing essays, seminar papers, tutorial notes, and so on, and through emotional work as ego-development, with strong feelings of elation and belonging when the student senses they understand the discipline in broad and deep terms. The relationships that develop through a love of the academic discipline can promote powerful feelings of belonging to a high status and privileged group - an exclusive society defined by access to knowledge and power.

In sharp contrast to these feelings, Ogden observes that the 'third subject' can be subjugating, where study of the discipline leads to tyrannical control over subject-subject relations between tutors and students, who can find themselves powerless and manipulated, and where opportunities for thinking, feeling and acting become limited, and neither tutor nor student is able to experience self or other outside of a suffocating, narrow range of thoughts and behaviours.

In their writing Meyer and Land (2006) discuss functional and dysfunctional student relationships with the academic discipline through 'threshold concepts' and troublesome knowledge. Whilst they acknowledge the importance of Winnicott's psychoanalytical writings, they nevertheless stay much closer to the cognitive constructivist tradition, by exploring troublesome knowledge mainly in relation to cognitive tasks and the need to structure knowledge in the brain.

When the student's relationship with the discipline gets played out through a restrictive and narrow range of thoughts and feelings, students and tutors can become locked in a 'compulsively repeated perverse scenario', which can give rise to feelings of being excluded, attacked or dehumanised by knowledge, status and self-other relationships. Ogden's contribution is useful in reminding us that the student's work (to engage with and demonstrate understanding of a body of knowledge as the student of a tutor and a discipline) includes a component that connects directly to unconscious processes.

Pitt and Britzman (2003) draw on Freudian theory to explore knowledge that is experienced as a threat to self-coherence. They explore philosophical and pedagogical views of troublesome knowledge in terms of the relationship between education and social justice. They argue that there exists a:

kernel of trauma in the very capacity to know. Contemporary efforts in critical, feminist, and gay-affirmative pedagogies elaborate some of these breakdowns in understanding. They focus on understanding the interests of learners to engage critically with both narratives of historical traumas such as genocide, slavery, and forms of social hatred and questions of equity, democracy, and human rights. For pedagogical theorists, "difficult knowledge" also signifies the problem of learning from social breakdowns in ways that might open teachers and students to their present ethical obligations. (Pitt and Britzman 2003: 756)

Dominant contemporary pedagogies resist the implications that flow from knowledge as troubling and difficult. Freud saw it as impossible to achieve complete success with any education project. His observation was that:

'It almost looks as if analysis were the third of those 'impossible' professions in which one can be sure beforehand of achieving unsatisfying results. The other two, which have been known much longer, are education and government'. (Freud 1937: 248)

Applying psychoanalytic and critical theory to learning

Discussions of learning (and teaching) in higher education that focus on the relational, have the capacity to avoid, or at least to limit, pathologising the student and the tutor. Non-relational models by contrast tend to take the student's desire for granted, reframing it as motivation and regarding it primarily as an individual trait. Failure to achieve good grades, failure to manage the relationship between tutor and student, poor attendance and dropout, are conceived within a "deficit" model that confirms individuals as inadequate, where the tutor lacks knowledge, skills, training, or an appropriate disposition and the student lacks motivation, application, language and study skills, or confidence. A relational approach does something different. It brings the difficulties in learning and teaching back to the quality of the relationships between tutor and student, arguing that they are influenced not only by immediate circumstances, but also through the functioning of unconscious processes which can make unanticipated and powerful connections between current experiences and our earliest relationships.

Rather than offering a pathology of student learning or failure of tutor skills and techniques, psychoanalytic pedagogy and Honneth's theory of recognition relocate failures, crises and difficulties within the relationships that the student establishes with tutors, peers, the institution (as a disembodied other) and the discipline under study (law, economics,

medicine, design, dance, fine art, …). From this perspective student learning is seen as embedded and embodied within interpersonal (subject-subject) relational dynamics. Since relationships can be worked at, started and ended, nurtured or put on hold, the opportunities for creating good quality learning are dependent only on the ability to relate to real and disembodied others .

Axel Honneth (1995) has developed critical theory by building on the work of the Frankfurt School and by drawing on psychoanalytic theory, in particular the psychoanalytic work of Klein and Winnicott in the Object Relations School. Honneth argues that an understanding of social relations is predicated on an understanding of the intersubjective relationships of recognition. His approach has the potential for re-affirming the purpose of higher education as an intellectual activity intended to advance knowledge, skills and values in academic disciplines whilst recognising that the complexity of learning includes self-referential engagement and the existence of unconscious mental processes.

Honneth identifies three distinct levels of self-relation:

- self-confidence;
- self-respect;
- self-worth.

Self-confidence is achieved when subjects recognise for themselves their physical needs and desires and can articulate them to self and others. A second level exists when subjects recognise their own moral accountability and the value of their personal judgment: Honneth calls this level self-respect. The third level, what Honneth refers to as self-worth and what we have referred to in this paper as self-esteem, is achieved when the subject recognises and celebrates the certainty of their own capabilities and positive qualities.

The crucial element of Honneth's theory is his argument that these levels are achieved only through self-other recognition. Self-confidence develops when one is recognised by significant others in terms of love and care, as an individual with needs and desires, possessing a unique value to others. Self-respect develops out of recognition by others that one is just as responsible for one's actions as are all others in society – one is recognised by others as a morally accountable member of that society. Self-esteem emerges from the gaze and recognition of others who acknowledge one's capabilities and qualities as making a significant contribution to a community. Honneth links this to a sense of community solidarity – a sense of wellbeing founded on respect and recognition of the contribution being made to common goals.

Honneth sees psychoanalytic theory as making an important contribution to the development of self-recognition theory. Honneth also sees critical theory as something which connects, 'everyday human concerns about identity and respect to broader struggles over exclusion' (Murphy 2008: 2).

Earlier we argued that education pedagogy needs to recognise student learning as a lengthy engagement with troublesome and difficult knowledge. We believe this is a necessary conclusion to be drawn from a study of psychoanalytic and critical theories as applied to education.

'… learning occasions an 'ontological' violence, [with] ethical relations implicated in pedagogy and curriculum. [where] pedagogy is rooted in a demand for students to alter their egos, and, thereby, draws attention to the delicate nature of the teaching-learning relationship'. (Todd 2001: 431)

Todd argues that educators teach in the belief that learners will change. For Todd the ontological trajectory is best represented by phrases like, 'learning to become': learning that it is possible to become, and learning what to do with the resultant becoming. Accordingly, there are benefits offered by change but also a high price to be paid, 'in terms of the coercive nature of subject formation (ibid 143). According to Todd this tension is reflected in the descriptions that students offer of their experience. They see the possibility of a different ontology through developments with new ideas, concepts, and relationships to other people. Todd views education as being powerfully implicated in student development: creating challenges to self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem through the coercive power it exerts while also offering the opportunity to learn to become other, by moving beyond previously imagined limits. A psychoanalytic pedagogy must acknowledge the centrality of unconscious processes, and with this the implication that our learning is the condensation of fragments of experience that return to us in the present when we least expect them, often with surprising results. 'Something about education makes us nervous' (Britzman 2003: 1). Freud's view was that education inevitably produces discontents on which we can work at a later date and change in some way, by recognising repetitions in our thinking and behaviour and finding ways to avoid acting out by working through the challenges we face. All education is therefore: play between present and past, between presence and absence, and then, by that strange return that Sigmund Freud (1914) describes as deferred: it is registered and revised by remembering, repeating, and working through. (Britzman 2003: 1)

Our education is clearly nonlinear, though some policy makers may prefer to represent it in linear terms of syllabus, curriculum, progression, that is built around time-bound programmes and assessment patterns. Rather, our education continuously unfolds and is reworked in our present - a turbulent mix of conscious and unconscious processes, dream work and the unanticipated conjunctions of affect, deferral, the re-working of old learning, and unexpected unconscious stirrings triggered by present life experiences. Working within a psychoanalytic pedagogy means acknowledging this flux of past and present, where sensitivities to self and others emerge in ways that provoke the reworking of previous experience into what Freud termed an after-education. After-education refers us back to an original flaw made from education: something within its very nature has led it to fail. But it also

refers to the work yet to be accomplished, directing us toward new constructions. (Britzman 2003: 4)

The psychological work needed to achieve self-realisation within a relational context is fundamental to post-Freudian psychoanalytical thought, (Klein 1946; Winnicott 1991 [1971]). In his paper *The Capacity to be Alone* (1958) Winnicott sets out the stages of this increasing capacity, beginning with dependence, leading to being alone together and moving towards self-realisation and autonomy.

Klein's (1946) contribution to psychoanalytic theory was to draw on Freud's work with adults and extend it to the analysis of very young children as well as adults, giving her an enormous breadth of experience which led her to identify the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions from which we relate to others. This work allowed Klein to demonstrate that powerful developmental infantile processes remain active throughout adulthood.

Feelings of detachment, being marginalised and disconnected from immediate learning activities can lead to students relating to tutors and peers from a paranoid-schizoid position: not relating to the whole person but from a fragmented viewpoint, feeling vulnerable and seeing others in 'black and white', as helpful and useful, or unhelpful and dangerous, godlike or evil. According to Klein, only when we regain sufficient self-coherence to defend against being overwhelmed, can we relinquish paranoid-schizoid anxieties and move towards the depressive position, experiencing ourselves and others as more rounded individuals, and recognising in self and other a fuller range of human qualities including strengths and flaws. Only then, free from a fragmented sense of our own self and our qualities, able to recognise others as deeper and more complex, less dangerous or potentially destructive to our ego, can we become present to the other in ways that allow for healthy mutual recognition and the development of autonomous behaviour.

We argue in this paper that education is in essence an experiential process of self-other recognition – of 'coming to know' oneself through encounters with higher education, constructed through self-other recognition. Higher education offers a particularly valuable site for reworking earlier learning, from its position as a formal set of structures and activities (lecture, seminar, tutorial, workshop, private study, assessed work, conferment, graduation, alumni) with a socially loose framework that offers a curious variety of opportunities for intimacy, distance, collaboration and isolation, power and transformation.

Intersubjective recognition requires a self that can survive as a bounded but permeable entity: too strong a separation from the external world and we lack availability, awareness, sensitivity, openness to opportunity and any sense of really 'being in the world'. We risk remaining distant, separate, unknowing of others and (through a diminished quality of self-other relating), we know ourselves less than we realise. Too permeable a boundary and we may experience an overwhelming flood of other people's

desires and energies. The experience of losing our sense of self in a sea of otherness, can led to the splitting of both self and other and to the adoption of Klein's paranoid-schizoid defensive position in an attempt to defend against perceived attacks and overwhelming demands. We can regain Klein's depressive position by gaining sufficient ego strength to take the risks associated with seeking to make ourselves more vulnerable to others and less persecuted by unconscious fears that provoke defensive behaviours. We literally learn to tolerate the selves we become: through a heightened awareness of our own becoming and an acceptance of the risks inherent in being open to the unpredictability of the other.

This is the possibility offered by after-education, achieved through inter-subjective relating and recognition, and which can be summarised by that apparently simple phrase 'the student experience'. Through Honneth's work we can see how the experience of education can strengthen self-recognition and how self-respect, self-confidence and self-esteem can be enhanced by the relational dynamics that operate between the student, peers, tutors and the subject discipline.

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