Using Psychodynamic Ideas in Teaching and Research

Celia Hunt, Linden West

Introduction

This article arises out of recognition of the importance of psychoanalytic theory in both our approaches to teaching and research. We demonstrate how such ideas – broadly defined as encouraging people to engage more closely with thoughts and feelings that may be hidden from the conscious mind – can be applied in many, diverse, and radical ways. But also how such an approach can be problematical both for students, teachers and researchers. In writing this paper, we suggest that entering the territory between therapeutic and educational processes and ideas can be deeply rewarding, empowering if also, at times, difficult for teachers, researchers and learners alike.

Our teaching and research

We have both used a psychodynamic approach to teaching and research in higher and adult education for many years. Celia convened a Masters programme on the use of creative writing as a developmental and therapeutic tool at Sussex University for 14 years. People took this programme to strengthen their creative writing through a deeper engagement with self, to explore life transitions, or to acquire skills to work with others in education and health and social care. Part of the work was experiential, involving self-exploration through imagery and metaphor, and re-writing of personal narratives using fiction. Whilst this was not therapy in the strict sense, there was a strong therapeutic dimension to students' studies, but they also developed conceptual understandings of their writing process, drawing on psychodynamic, literary and cultural theory. So the learning involved was both emotional and cognitive, often identifying and working through subtle difficulties in learning to write creatively. Linden has used psychodynamic ideas in Masters and Doctoral programmes in developing auto/biographical reflections and research methodology. This includes exploring the role of the researcher, professional guidance worker or doctor, in shaping, sometimes unconsciously, what the 'other' might say (e.g. West 1996; 2001; 2004; 2009).In his research, he has explicitly used psychodynamic ideas in interpreting aspects of his own life history as part of interrogating the auto/biographical dimensions of research. Gender, and experiences of selfhood, as well as the interplay of desire and resistance in

learning, have similarly emerged as important themes in his work.

Both of us are strongly influenced by object relations' theorists. Linden draws on Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott and Wilfred Bion, noting their growing influence in social theory and in thinking about transitional processes in learning; as well as the contribution they have made to understanding the deeply contingent, developmental and often defended nature of subjectivity, in contrast to the one-dimensional, cognitively driven, information processing subject of much conventional social science (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Froggett, 2002). He has adopted the term 'psychosocial' to describe this psychodynamically informed perspective, which recognises the importance of the socio-cultural in shaping subjectivity while not reducing psyche to a simplistic epiphenomenal status. Learning and the subject called the learner are, in this view, both social and psychological at the same time: social in that subjectivity, including the capacity to learn and to remain open to experience, is forged in our intimate interactions with significant others; which, in turn, is shaped by the structuring forces of class, gender and ethnicity, for instance, and the discourses of power that pervade them. Social too in that our engagement with new social networks as well as experiences of learning frequently lead to a questioning of who we are and might want to be, and whether we are able to embrace change. But psyche has its own inner dynamic, grounded in inter-subjective life. Not everyone, in similar 'objective' situations, responds in the same way to oppressive experience. Some, more than others, remain open and creative in the face of difficulties, while others may retreat into defensiveness, paranoia and even fundamentalism (Frosh, 1991; Giddens, 1999).

Celia draws on Winnicott, too, but also on Christopher Bollas and Marion Milner. Her main influence though is the German/American psychoanalyst Karen Horney, whose work explores how we erect psychological defence mechanisms against anxiety and in the process lose touch with spontaneous feelings, which Horney identifies as the core of our self-experience (Horney, 1954). Celia has used these theories in her research to understand the effects of such defences on the learning process and how exploring oneself through creative life writing can help to alleviate learning blocks and difficulties (e.g. Hunt, 2000; 2002; 2004; 2010). Horney was deeply concerned with the effects of cultural factors on the development of the personality, but she also believed that the personality could be looked at as having its own dynamic, which can render the individual his or her own worst enemy. Following Horney, Celia believes that there is a value in focusing on the individual psyche when thinking about the learning process, but that it is also important to think about how social, cultural and historical contexts contribute to individual experience.

For both of us, adult learning occupies a kind of 'border country' straddling emotion and cognition, the social and psychological, self and other, education and therapy. Here are examples of our approaches:

Celia: *I am currently writing up research into the learning process of students taking the MA Creative Writing and Personal Development. What is striking is how many people report a more open and flexible sense of themselves as a result of this programme.At the start of the study many of the students taking part identified blocks to, or difficulties with, their creative writing. These typically included difficulties with creating fictional first person narrators or third person characters out of themselves; with imbuing their fiction with felt, emotional life; or with finding a writing identity for creative writing, particularly where they already had a strong academic or non-fiction writing identity.*

Already by the end of their first course – an experiential course, within a literary and psychodynamic conceptual framework, and with a large component of collaborative peer learning – many of these students were reporting significant changes and developments in their sense of themselves as writers and learners. Anne, for example, a freelance non-fiction writer, came with a strong professional identity, which seemed to be inhibiting the development of her creative writing. She had high expectations for her creative writing, but once it was on the page, it made her 'cringe'; she didn't recognise it as belonging to her, maybe, she suggested, 'because I don't want to own it'. She also noted a certain perfectionism at work ('There's… a part of me that wants to complete all tasks! And precisely!'), combined with premature judgement on the material emerging, which was detrimental to developing a freer, more chaotic process of creative writing.

The combination of emotional, cognitive and collaborative learning in that first course helped Anne to start uncovering and finding a shape for strongly felt personal material, in particular deep and previously censored feelings about her chronically ill sister. She describes one piece of writing about her sister's destructiveness towards her as 'a statement…that has taken me my entire life, as her younger sibling, to make'. Moving out of the safe boundaries of her non-fiction identity through the use of metaphor and fictional techniques, and through developing a relationship with a small and safe group of peer readers, she began to understand that developing an identity as a creative writer involved embracing a more relational sense of herself, which was quite different from the strongly self-contained person she felt herself to be as a non-fiction writer: 'My sense of self and of myself as a writer is linked in to my roles… as sister, daughter, aunt, partner and so on'. She was not yet ready to reveal herself fully to an external reader, but felt that she was: 'learning to allow myself to write both from, and about, me, while trusting myself to read [myself] without critical judgement. This is basic scrub clearing, which I hope will lead to clarity in my writing and a warm willingness to feel freer with the notion of an external reader'.

Summing up what she felt she had learned by the end of the first course, Anne said: 'I have finally given myself permission to extend my writing beyond its tight boundaries and what I write is giving myself permission to

be me'. The psychodynamic approach to teaching that this course involved clearly enabled Anne to expand her sense of herself, beyond the narrow confines of a safe but inhibiting self-identity, and to start using more of herself, particularly her felt, emotional self, in her writing.

Linden*: I've been researching, over many years, the experiences of families living in different marginalized communities and the nature of their interactions with a range of family support programmes, such as Sure Start. Joe and Heidi, for instance, and their two children, were part of a 'biographical' and longitudinal study of a Sure Start project, which was designed to chronicle and collaboratively interpret experiences through their eyes, as well as those of other families (and staff on the ground). We wanted to know the extent to which families such as Heidi and Joe's felt supported or threatened, empowered or disempowered, by such projects. Heidi got involved in her local Sure Start project in different ways, such as attending parent support sessions, a playgroup (with the children) and adult classes.*

They were understandably cautious about seeing us, as researchers, although agreed to do so and were very reticent about talking. They eventually shared experiences, over time, in some depth. She and Joe had known each other since childhood. They had both been abandoned, went into residential homes, followed by periods in foster care. The material poured out as Heidi described being moved from one family to another. She had never been able to talk to anyone about her life history before, she stated. It was hard to explain, and she did 'not really understand myself why the things that had happened had happened, and not knowing how or where to start'.

She told us that the courses 'gave me more confidence to know what to do with my two children'.She suffered from mental health problems, she explained, and began to talk about being upset with her children, 'when they laugh at me'. Sure Start had been very threatening, at first: they were afraid that people might be 'checking' on them and 'that was going through our heads all the time'. They were frightened of their children being put in care, like they were. They filled the fridge with food and bought new clothes for the children, whenever a Sure Start worker, or for that matter a researcher, came near, despite being unable to afford it. But the relationship to Sure Start shifted, however contingently – as did the research relationship – from suspicion to some trust. Heidi, especially, felt empowered.

Heidi talked about the importance of contact with other mothers and particular workers: 'like one big family really'. She referred to particular people as 'the mums I never had' and felt understood and more legitimate in the eyes of significant others. There was physical relief at getting out of the house, at having a temporal structure to the week, and having access to adult conversations. These processes are not to be judged simply in

individualistic terms: time and again understanding that other parents had difficulties controlling their children, or with their own irritation and anger, provided a sense of relief and helped build self-confidence. We asked Joe and Heidi about the research and they said it was 'good' to be able to share their stories and to weave strands together, in ways they had not done previously, as they linked their own histories of abandonment with intense suspicions of authority at all levels. But they felt listened to and valued by us, too, even when talking about disturbing things, in what became, however briefly, a storytelling, meaning-making, and, to an extent, therapeutic research process. Feeling understood can work at a very primitive emotional level.

As these two examples demonstrate, a psychodynamic approach to teaching and research can lead to empowerment and a stronger sense of identity. However, it can also lead us, and those we work with, into a potentially muddled and messy territory. The process of storytelling about a life and reflexively seeking to understand it and what it feels like to be oneself can encompass disturbed and disturbing experiences.

Risks of a Psychodynamic Approach to Teaching and Research and Their Containment

As we have indicated, a psychodynamic approach to teaching and research is not without its risks. Research or teaching does not provide the long-term support available in therapeutic settings once repressed material has surfaced. Educators may not be equipped to handle certain dynamics such as transference and counter-transference or know what to do when a student encounters challenging personal material. They are clearly not there as therapists. Working in the 'border country' between education and therapy has been challenging for both of us. It has involved taking risks and learning progressively which risks we can take and which we perhaps should not. This has helped us to begin to frame some of the issues more clearly and to explore the relationship between subjectivity and inter-subjective processes. It has also helped us to understand better what is involved in creating 'containment' (Bion, 1962) or a safe-enough 'holding environment' (Winnicott, 1971).

In the MA in Creative Writing and Personal Development containment began already at the interview stage, where Celia as convener had to make judgements about who was likely to be able to manage the kinds of learning the programme involved, and to make sure people were aware that reflecting deeply on themselves might give rise to challenging material. Tutors were expected to have therapeutic training, to equip them to deal better with emotional learning. Back-up support mechanisms, provided by student advisors and counselling services, were also crucial for referring students if problems arose.

There were also important methods of containment within the teaching itself, the most important being the use of collaborative peer groups. In the first two courses people were assigned to such groups for the sharing of creative writing, and these groups remained constant for each course. At their best these small groups ' gelled' in such a way that students built trust, with the members acting as supportive audience to each other's developing writing and sense of self. The creative writing in progress itself provided an element of containment for sometimes difficult personal experience, a way of being simultaneously close to and distanced from the material in Winnicott's 'potential space' (Winnicott, 1971). Students' emerging conceptual understanding of their writing and learning process, through the study of theory, also framed and therefore contained their experience. So as the MA progressed, they were thinking about themselves and their experience both from inside and outside. Of course none of these measures can ever be foolproof, but they can reduce the potential for damage.

Our psychodynamic approach to research builds on the life history or biographical approach - what is sometimes known, following Liz Stanley (1992), as 'auto/biography' - which embraces the idea of relationship and a dynamic co-creation of text or story. Our perception of research is in part a reaction against methods which can freeze people's experiences into pre-determined frames, sometimes provoking intense resentment amongst those 'under investigation', such as in the use of standardised instruments in psychological research (West, 1996).Jerome Bruner (1990) says that people narrativise their experience of the world, if given an opportunity to do so, yet most conventional interviews expect respondents to answer questions in the categorical form required in formal exchanges rather than the narratives of natural conversation. Using auto/biographical methods, and being sensitive to the emotional content of stories, allows deeply personal narratives into the research frame and yet it can take the researcher into difficult territory. Sometimes the people we work with are unused to being listened to attentively and material can simply pour out (West, 2006). There is a danger too of being seduced into playing the role of the therapist.

In a research context a holding or containing framework can in part be provided through the use of ethical codes or ground rules clearly explaining the purpose of a particular piece of research, spelling out rights and responsibilities. The building of an alliance is also part of the containing process, analogous to the therapeutic alliance in psychotherapy. This involves establishing trust (partly a consequence of someone feeling understood as well as cared for) alongside the clear ground rules (which will include a statement that the process is not psychotherapy, however problematical, in reality, this distinction might be).

The responses and self-understanding of the researcher are also central to containment: including the capacity to understand, process and feed back what may be difficult issues, in digestible form. And also to be aware of boundary issues: this relies on a capacity – central to psychotherapeutic

training – to be both absorbed in the other's story while also retaining a sense of detachment and the ability to think about what might be happening in the relationship and storytelling; and thus able to make informed judgments about what may appropriately be dealt with and what is best left alone. In this sense, research, like writing groups, can be seen as a sort of secure, transitional, playful space in which narrative risks can be taken, but in appropriate ways.

Questions of Defences and Interpretations

There remains a question about the extent to which, in teaching or research, attention can or should be drawn to people's defences, by, for instance, reference to what may be happening in creative writing or biographical narrative interviews. Psychoanalytic psychotherapy has identified a whole range of defences that can come into play within and between people, and in relation to symbolic activity. In psychotherapy the point of the exercise, in the context of an alliance, is to identify and challenge defences, because they have not worked for people and life may feel empty and meaningless. The therapist digests what may be happening – including attacks on the process itself – and seeks to feed this back in a manageable form, in the context of what is often a long-term relationship.

In research or educational settings it may simply be inappropriate to challenge defensive mechanisms, such as intellectualisation, denial or avoidance. On the other hand, there can be highly appropriate ways of exploring such dynamics. A student's reflective essay, for example, that is overly intellectual and distant from feelings can be discussed in terms of working in a different genre, using poetry or art. This partly depends on the spirit in which the problem is communicated and the extent to which associated anxieties are contained by the tutor's responses and suggestions. If done well, rich dialogue on the nature of learning itself and how and why we may defend against certain kinds of more imaginative activities can result.

The notion of free association may be important here, in the sense of encouraging people to say whatever comes into their head, however apparently unrelated material might be. The theory is of course that this provides access to unconscious experience that may be difficult to articulate. Letting go of conscious thought and control often lies at the heart of symbolic meaning-making processes. There is a ubiquitous need to loosen up, play and dream as well as imagine, for creativity as well as health. Winnicott (1971) talked of the importance of an intermediate or transitional space in creativity and learning; a space between dreaming and reality, self and other, me and not quite me. Such imaginative and emotional possibilities are there in adult learning too, but careful professional judgement and self-awareness are always required.

The Applicability of these Approaches to Other Areas of Teaching and Research

Clearly the in-depth psychodynamic approaches we adopt in our work are not going to be appropriate to all areas of teaching and research. For example, the psychodynamic approach to teaching adopted in the MA at Sussex was built into the structure and content of the whole programme, and in certain kinds of work a therapeutic training will be essential. However, attention can be drawn to the emotional dimensions of learning in any learning context. At a basic level, providing space for people to talk openly at the outset of a course about their fears of embarking on new learning, especially when those people are entering higher education for the first time, can be beneficial in helping them to think about their learning processes and the kinds of learning they will be doing in this particular course. It is also possible to introduce a psychodynamic approach into student learning through reflecting, via writing exercises that use metaphor and fictionalising, on the role of the self in the learning process. Such an approach can create a hybrid teaching environment, both seminar and 'play space', where students can learn to put more of themselves into their essays and develop their reflexivity as learners (Creme and Hunt 2002). Making people more aware that there are different dimensions of learning, not only the cognitive, but also the emotional, imaginal and social helps to provide a framework within which the often chaotic experience of learning can be rendered intelligible and safe.

In a research context a psychodynamic approach can contribute a valuable additional dimension to qualitative work in the social sciences. As Hollway and Jefferson demonstrated in their research into the fear of crime (2000), looking at social phenomena simultaneously from a psychodynamic and social perspective can reveal how internal factors often compound external ones. This can lead to a radically different understanding of how social ills might be addressed. A similar point applies to research in education, where a psychodynamic approach combined with other perspectives can provide both an inside and an outside view of the processes involved in teaching and learning.

Conclusion

We suggest that a psychodynamic approach, carefully and thoughtfully employed in suitable contexts, can help diverse people to work through blocks or difficulties with learning and to move towards less rigid, more reflexive selves, more open to the change and development that significant learning always involves. It can help us as educators constantly to challenge ourselves to build more awareness of embodied experience and of what we are doing in our roles as teachers and researchers and in the process to

bring more of ourselves into our work and gain deeper satisfaction, meaning as well as connectedness.

Bibliography

Bion, W. (1962). *Learning from Experience*. London: Maresfield.

Bruner, J. (1990). Acts of Meaning. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Creme, P. and Hunt, C. (2002). 'Creative participation in the essay writing process', *The Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* (p.145-166), Vol. 1 (2).

Froggett, L. (2002). *Love, Hate and Welfare*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Frosh, S. (1991) *Identity Crisis: modernity, psychoanalysis and the self*. London: Macmillan.

Giddens, A. (1999*). Runaway World*. London: Profile Books.

Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: free association, narrative and the interview method*. London: Sage

Horney, K. (1954). *Neurosis and Human Growth: the struggle toward self-realisation*. New York: Norton.

Hunt, C. (2000). *Therapeutic Dimensions of Autobiography in Creative Writing.* London: Jessica Kingsley.

Hunt, C. (2002). 'Psychological problems of writer identity: towards a Horneyan understanding', in Barford, D. (ed.) *The Ship of Thought: essays on psychoanalysis and learning* (p.175-191). London: Karnac Books.

Hunt, C. (2004). 'Writing and reflexivity: training to facilitate writing for personal development', in Sampson, F. (ed.) *Creative Writing in Health and Social Care.* London: Jessica Kingsley, pp.154-169.

Hunt, C. (2010). 'Therapeutic effects of writing fictional autobiography', *Life Writing*, 7 (3), pp.231-244.

Leiper, R. and Maltby, M. (2004). *The Psychodynamic Approach to Therapeutic Change*. London: Sage.

Merrill, B and West, L. (2009). *Using biographical methods in social research*. London: Sage.

Stanley, L. (1992). *The Auto/biographical* I. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

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. (2004). 'Re-generating our stories: psychoanalytic perspectives, learning and the subject called the learner', in Hunt, C. (ed.) *Whose Story Now? (re)generating research in adult learning and teaching* (p 303-310). Exeter: Proceedings of the 34th SCUTREA Conference.

West, L. (2006). '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.

Winnicott, D.W. (1971). *Playing and Reality*. London: Routledge.

Celia Hunt

Emeritus Reader in Continuing Education
University of Sussex

Linden West

Professor in Education
Canterbury Christ Church university

Pour citer ce texte :

Hunt C., West L. (2011). Using Psychodynamic Ideas in Teaching and Research, *Cliopsy*, 6, 77-85.