Training Psychologists: learning from emotions in the university context

Nunziante Cesàro A., Zurolo A., Boursier V., Delli Veneri A.

Introduction

This paper reflects on some aspects of the learning processes of students studying on a Master's level Degree programme in Dynamic, Clinical and Community Psychology. We believe that emotional, relational and personal dimensions are all involved in the specific choice of becoming clinical psychologists as well as in the training process. We also think that teaching clinical psychology cannot be only a sort of theoretical transfer of abstract knowledge since it necessarily needs self-reflection. Finally, the clinical work cannot be limited to a "practice" whether supported by theories, methodology and procedures because the clinical work is, above all, a *working-through* the relationship (between client and psychologist), in which the psychologist's personal experiences are implicated. We therefore believe that university curricula should include an experiential dimension, which fundamentally provides an *experience-based learning* (Bion, 1962) programme. By this we mean the possibility of space to experience one's emotions and to reflect upon them in order to improve one's capacity both for self-reflection and to generate deeper levels of understanding.

Intellectual functions are connected with emotional experience, and there is a profound connection between the emotions and the capacity to learn and perform the function of thought (Blandino, 1997). The focus of psychoanalysis on the apprehension of an emotional dimension has powerful meaning in the daily practice of teaching and training. Learning evokes and embodies internal tensions, difficulties and pain that we have to consider, including from the teacher's point of view, if we are to look at the whole picture in terms of what learning and thinking actually are.

Practice of psychology, practice of emotions

We want to carefully consider the cyclical nature of the learning processes taking into account all the levels of learning. In particular we wish to look at the learning process of a student on a Clinical Psychology programme. For the reasons implied above, we adjusted the academic teaching to introduce *experience-based learning* that included the student's emotional dimensions in clinical work, thus to encourage the learning process through engaging

with and working through experience. This paper will consider these implications by presenting some extracts from observations and materials collected during our experimental lessons. The work involved a group of students in clinical psychology who have some theoretical and short practical experience of the psychoanalytic methods of infant observation.

To put this into context, it is important to note the characteristics of this Master's programme and the related training requirements for psychotherapists and psychologists in Italy. The Master's programme is an academic training that lasts 5 years. It is usually followed by a one-year-long apprenticeship, such as a post-degree professional training, followed by an examination to qualify for professional practice and become a member of the psychologists' professional association. Only graduated students with an additional 4-year-long specialization can practice psychotherapy. Education, in the normal practice of clinical psychology, follows three different directions: Carli et al. (2007) suggest these are fundamentally separated: the theoretical, the practical and personal training and development.

The theoretical and practical education takes place in the university context, whereas the personal training, such as in the psychoanalytical approach, is usually realized in different contexts. It seems very difficult to bring together the practical and the theoretical dimensions of education. However, we think that by providing experiential learning, for example, through a dramatization, with a role-playing game of psychological consulting scenarios, it becomes more possible to straddle some of the divisions. We suggest that this kind of learning experience allows the students to manage concepts, instruments and notions in action, through themselves, as part of an individual and group experience.

Additionally, the teaching process that we have devised includes both theoretical and practical lessons, providing a 'creative game' in a 'potential space' (Winnicott, 1965). The students are better able to move from a theoretical position and to confront a range of clinical scenarios within the experimental sessions. Our teaching programme for students attending the last year of the Master's Degree programme in Dynamic, Clinical and Community Psychology is specifically centred on aspects of the psychoanalytical theory of gender difference: of the feminine and the maternal questions and theoretical explanation is always accompanied by guided practical experiences, structured in two phases:

• A role-playing session dramatizing clinical scenarios observed and reported by a psychoanalytical observer.

• Group discussions with the teacher's supervision, which includes all the student observers' contributions.

Clinical vignettes

The teacher proposes to dramatize a psychologist-client relationship moving from a theoretical approach towards the maternal and the childhood psycho-sexual development, which are discussed during the lesson. Two students, a male and a female, offer to participate. The student (male), taking the role of the client, talks about his difficulties in studying. He talks of his mother's excessive expectations, which prevent him from pursuing his academic studies. He goes on to say that he is undertaking the Master's Degree programme in Psychology against his parents' wishes, who just wanted him to be an attorney. He is now about to finish his course and he feels it is impossible to continue with his studies and to tell his parents that he is experiencing problems with the last examinations. The atmosphere is claustrophobic, nobody moves.

The female student, acting as the psychoanalyst, remains silent for a long time, whereas the student-client continues to talk of his anxieties: the anguish of being not able, the fear of abandoning his studies, the dread of a no-way-out situation The student-psychoanalyst, chuckling and shrugging, invites him to explore the origins of his anxiety, which seems linked to a relationship with his mother. The student-client says that he feels his mother to be a gigantic figure, with great powers, from which he cannot break free: "I hate my mother, she takes care of everything and I must be her perfect son, I must be everything, everything she desires". The psychologist tries to develop the discussion by looking at what the client really wants. This appears mixed up, in an ambivalent way, with his mother's desires; it appears in the background as a relational dynamic of confusion and fusion with an overall maternal figure, which leads the client to a constant and complex opposition to his mother.

After the dramatization phase the teacher invites the student group to share their impressions and to talk about themselves. Some students reveal that they have experienced similar problems, including the student-psychoanalyst: she too feels constrained in continuing her university examinations. This theme, so full of personal emotions and interests for the whole group, immediately causes the student-psychoanalyst to distance herself from the relationship and to face the client's urgency by chuckling and shrugging. In her moves she expresses the embarrassment and her impotency in a difficult situation, which she also deeply shares with the client.

The group discussion continues on themes of fusion and of the impossibility of escape from the overwhelming mother (such as in the pre-oedipal phase). Mostly, the focus is on the deep emotional interests that the role play has evoked in the students, who share both the problem of university examinations and the struggle between the adult desire for autonomy and the young (still very real) dependency on their family. Some students report their deep feelings of being taken over and paralyzed by this theme, an important aspect of the involvement on which the teacher invites them to

reflect. The student-client's involvement in the relationship with the mother seems to mirror the student-psychoanalyst's internal relations, her own problems and difficulties, which can hinder comprehension and the therapeutic process. The student-psychoanalyst also reveals that she did not know what to do and how to answer positively in relation to the pressing client's requests. The problems of being at university also seem to be highlighted in the dramatization of a second situation presented some weeks after, following a different narrative on themes of separation and loss.

The student taking on the role of the client initiates the subject of graduation and the uncertainty relating to the crucial and extremely difficult task of separating from the family, having "… found a second home" at university. The psychoanalyst-student listens to him silently and tries to respond to the client's difficulties by evoking the image of the door at home. "You are on your home doorstep and you do not know if you have to or want to enter or exit". The narration continues by developing the student-client's request to be helped in actively doing something, in deciding what to do. The student-client talks of the darkness, the empty space of an "after" that is almost impossible to imagine. The student-psychoanalyst proposes that a consultation would help him analyse the most pressing elements of his problem but this meets with scepticism in the student-client: "And then what happens? We have these psychological talks and then?" The student-psychoanalyst proposes three or four sessions but is continually pushed back by the client's questions; he insistently asks "three or four sessions? And then what happens? What will we do?" The dramatization ends after a short time, while the student-psychoanalyst is trying to open a space for reflection; a space that seems insufficient and inadequate. What kind of space is the student-client trying to compose? Where should it be located? In this situation the time of the psychological consultation becomes an undefined space-container.

After the dramatization the student-psychoanalyst's difficulties in managing the student-client's problem are highlighted and analysed while the student-client reveals that he strongly feels these difficulties: and for this reason he has asked the university student psychological consulting service to offer him four sessions. The girl who played the psychoanalyst does not participate in the group discussion – one that is centred on uncertain and precarious elements - which all the students are worried about, because of anticipating the end of their university courses. The precariousness that the student-psychoanalyst shares with her colleagues is then transferred in the dramatization of her position as a psychoanalyst. The group is mostly silent, almost overwhelmed by its own sense of destiny.

Conclusions

As shown above, through this kind of learning the student can encounter the difficulties in the psychoanalyst's position, directly experiencing the role

played by subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, in the clinical sessions. The role-playing seems to create a potential and transitional space (Winnicott, 1971) in which usual roles have to be suspended and the boundaries between reality and fiction dissolved and confused. In this case, the experiential dimension allows learning from the experience of one's subjectivity in a guided and protected space. It seems to act as a transitional space: facilitating feelings of new possibility and spontaneity, where everyone can simultaneously act 'me and not-me' at the same time. In fact, the creation of a transitional area where the boundary between the subject and the role being impersonated is not so clear, allows aspects of the role of psychoanalyst - that need to be identified and analysed - to be brought into the room. This area then contains both personal and group aspects, which stimulate the need for reflection. This dimension of practical experience evokes processes of group mirroring which sometimes accompany persecutory anxieties: "I felt I was the student that could not take examinations", the student-psychologist says in the first vignette. Another student in the group then adds "I thought he was speaking about me".

Therefore, the space of dramatization also becomes a container for original and precocious elements, for anguish and anxieties that are taking place in the others' narration. The possibility for sharing through the group experience allows emotions to be experienced, but also for thinking about less symbolized elements, which demand to be named and given meaning. In fact, the space of dramatization, as a creative transitional playing zone, also allows indigestible elements, needing to be digestible, to emerge. Finally, psychoanalytic theory is brought alive by the group experience: we can find diverse aspects that need to be integrated through a difficult and laborious work, which is both necessary and potentially transformative.

In this situation, the teacher can help the students recognize the emotional dynamics which may beset them in their work as psychoanalysts, and interfere with their ability to listen to and understand the other, their client. From this perspective, the educational process that we have described appears to be an experience where it is possible to be in contact with one's subjectivity, which can either enable or disturb listening and comprehension. What the student-psychologist feels in the dramatization is partially linked to her/his inner world and to what the student-client deposits in him/her self. The concept of projective identification becomes a real notion that is like a mark on the skin for the student: it can be felt and understood through this experience.

Moreover, these role-playing experiences provide evidence of the difficulties associated with the psychology based practices and professions. The student is able to learn from her/his own experience some of the risks, the anxieties, the issues emerging in clinical work and the importance of all those aspects that define the internal and external world of psychological settings. Finally, there is an anticipatory dimension: these role-plays enable

students to experience, at first hand, some of the tensions and difficulties inherent in the role of a professional psychologist. The student is able to learn from her/his own experience, aspects of these risks, of the anxieties, and a range of issues emerging in the clinical work; and of their importance in defining the psychological setting.

References

Bion, W.R. (1962). *Learning from experience*. London: Heimann.

Blandino, G. (1997). 'Apprendere gli errori, dall'esperienza. Dimensioni emotive nell'apprendimento', *Rivista del servizio di Sostegno della scuola media*, 15, 18-32.

Blandino, G. & Granieri, B. (1995). *La disponibilità ad apprendere. Dimensioni emotive nella scuola e formazione degli insegnanti*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina.

Carli, R., Grasso, M. & Paniccia, R.M. (2007). *La formazione alla psicologia clinica. Pensare emozioni*. Milano: Angeli.

Kaës, R., Anzieu, D., Bejarano, A., Scaglia, M. & Gori, R. (1976). *Désir de former et formation du savoir*. Paris: Dunod.

Kaës, R., Anzieu, D., Thomas, L.V. & Le Guerinel, N. (1979). *Fantasme et formation*. Paris: Dunod.

Kirman, W.J. (1982) 'Modern Psychoanalysis of learning in the classroom', *Mod. Psychoanal*., 7, 87-98.

Saltzberger-Wittenberg, I., Henry-Polacco, G., Osborne, E. (1987). *The emotional experience of learning and teaching*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Winnicott, D.W, (1965). *The maturational process and the facilitating environment. Studies in the theory of emotional development*. London: The Hogarth Press.

Winnicott, D.W. (1971). *Playing and reality*. London: Tavistock.

Adele Nunziante Cesaro
University Federico II of Naples, Italy

Anna Zurolo
post doc researcher
University Federico II of Naples, Italy

Valentina Boursier
University Federico II of Naples, Italy

Alessandra Delli Veneri
PhD in Gender Studies,
psychologist and psychotherapist
University Federico II of Naples, Italy

Pour citer ce texte :
Nunziante Cesàro, A., Zurolo, A., Boursier, V. et Delli Veneri, A. (2011). Training Psychologists: learning from emotions in the university context. *Cliopsy*, 6, 87-92.