

# Good-enough or omnipotent trainers

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## Psychopathology of everyday virtual life

This research uses a psychoanalytic perspective to analyse the application of information and communication technologies in teacher training. Research in the field of computer supported learning and teaching based on a broad range of methodologies and approaches including a psychoanalytically oriented clinical approach provides diverse results. One of the major points of disagreement relates to how researchers examine the effect of technologies on the users. For example, according to Turkle (2005), computers and video games are relational artefacts and can be considered as evocative objects that automatically offer a transitional space for users. This paper illustrates how my research – based on the psychopathology of everyday life (Freud, 1901) and everyday virtual life (Missonnier, 2006) – ICT could be considered both as a transitional or negative object (Rinaudo, 2009).

This paper is based on various situations collected in Calico, a French scientific network, where researchers from different fields (such as, computer science, psychology, sociology, linguistics, educational sciences) and with different epistemologies and different points of view come together to examine the uses of computer supported collaborative learning and online discussion groups for training. For example, when I analyse a forum using a psychoanalytical approach and observe relationships in groups, fellow researchers will, in turn, look for knowledge and professional understanding. When I focus upon the unconscious process of group mentality (Bion, 1962) they focus upon how the group approaches work. This provides a broad perspective on the complexity of the learners, and the teachers' practice with online technologies.

## Context of teacher training in France

It is important to mention some specific points about the context of teacher training in France. Presently, students who want to become teachers have to pass an examination at the end of their first year at a college of education (IUFM). If they are successful in this they become civil servants and are able to go onto the second year at IUFM. During this second year they are students at a training institute for part of the time and teachers in

classrooms for part of the time. Throughout the year teachers are responsible for one or two classes in middle school or high school. Very often, this situation leads to a tension between experience in the classroom and the activities at the training institution.

Alongside this, teachers have to pass a certificate that evaluates their ability to use computers and the Internet for teaching. It is called C2i2e for "Certificat informatique et internet niveau 2 enseignement", which could be translated as the "Certificate for computer and Internet level 2 for teaching" (Loisy & Rinaudo, 2007). In order to reduce the tension between experience in the classroom and activities at the college of education, to change young teachers' perceptions, and also to facilitate the use of technologies, trainers often work collaboratively although at a distance by using a virtual platform.. This is to help them to keep in touch with the trainees during their periods in the classroom

### **Online discussion groups**

I will now focus upon the trainers' practices using online asynchronous discussion groups at a college of education. I shall call these online groups 'didactical online discussion groups' and will describe some of their distinctive features. Firstly, these groups are closed: the groups are only for the trainees and their trainers. This characteristic is most important: these groups already exist in the real life, before they begin online exchanges, in virtual space. So, feelings and relationships are soon involved when the forum begins; and the mentality of the group in real life provides the basis for the mentality of the e-group (Leroux, 2007).

These e-discussion groups are prescribed and time limited as the group is created by the trainers and the trainees are required to participate in thematic forums. For example, the trainees debate about evaluation in classroom and especially about the use of unexpected tests. Some trainees argue that these unexpected evaluations are good for pupils because they learn on a regular basis and yet they do not interact with the discussion when the others think that these evaluations disturb the confidential relationship between themselves and the pupils.

But the most important fact for this paper is that the trainers do not often write any messages. The trainers will write at the beginning of the forum to assign work. After that, they did not debate with trainees, which created the impression that they were never online. For example, in an electronic forum, the two trainers posted two messages, at the beginning, and then the 18 trainees wrote 90 messages. Furthermore, the length of the trainers' message is shorter than the trainees' messages. However, despite the fact that trainers never write in the online discussion groups, the trainees think that they are really online and sense their presence. This could be seen when trainees address messages to them, which were nothing to do with the topic of the debate. For example, "Mr X, you said that you would contact me

before coming in my classroom. If this is the case, please contact me and I'll send you our schedule because it is a bit complicated". These types of messages are signs of the trainers' presence (Jacquinot, 2002). Trainers could be considered both as absent, because they do not write any messages, and, at the same time, present, because they probably read them. This being there/not being there position is certainly strange for the trainees.

In e-learning both distance and presence are crucial. With the development of e-learning and the use of ICT for training, researchers considered distance as an innovation. According to Henri and Kaye (1985), distance was central to the pedagogical relationship. Jacquinot (1993) listed different kinds of distance. She argues that spatial, temporal, technological, social, cultural and economic distances must be "tameable" by teachers and learners. According to her, with e-learning, engineers and teachers must find how to compensate for the loss of 'co-presence'. Recently Ardouin (2007) observed an online master's degree and in particular what students feel. He concluded that with e-learning the most important element, according to them, is presence.

### **Psychoanalytical approach**

However working with the notion of absence is a problem for scientists - what can we do when we do not have any data? As trainers do not write, I have to use a different approach. A psychoanalytical approach offers us a potentially useful perspective because it is built on the default, the blank, the what is not said as well as the spoken, or the work of the negative (Green, 1993). The psychoanalytically oriented clinical approach is perhaps the only way to have a good knowledge of the trainers' position on e-groups. My choice of a psychoanalytical approach is the result of a long reflexive process, as a result of which I believe that this theoretical and clinical approach provides illuminating concepts to use in the analysis of everyday virtual life in teaching and learning.

### **Omnipotent trainers**

It is suggested that, unconsciously, trainers try to keep omnipotent control on trainees, even if they hide this fact behind good pedagogical reasons. With an e-learning platform, trainers can extend their omnipotence. As distance is not an issue they can keep in contact with their trainees when they are teaching away from the college, just as if they were still in the college of education. This omnipotence is almost certainly not of a pathological instinct. So, in this sense, I entirely agree with Kaës and Enriquez who have shown that omnipotence is a normal drive which supports the desire to teach and care for others. But I think that information

and communication technologies increase this drive because, with the help of these technologies, control can be extended to distant situations.

We are able to see omnipotent trainers through the practices of their trainees. Trainees often write or read the forum because they do not know whether or not this online discussion is evaluated. They only know that trainers can read topics and answers in the forum and, in particular, trainers can see who is online, who is writing, who is reading, and when. The tracking of online activities shows the strategies trainees deploy. For example, some trainees, who do not usually engage with the online activities, read all the messages towards the end. This might indicate that these trainees have a tentative approach to this, particularly in relation to the real or imagined potential for observation of the trainees.

In another e-discussion group, on the last day, a young woman sent a message to her trainer on email. She said that she could not post a message on the platform but that that was strange because, in her job, she uses ICT and teaches others how to use it. She probably wanted to show her trainer that she really had participated. It could be argued that this last minute reading and writing shows trainees fear of omnipotent control. They imagine that the trainers keep an eye on them, as if Big Brother is watching them. The myths about technology (Breton, 1995) are mixed with the anxiety of trainees. The trainers' actual absence encourages the trainees' feelings about this, because the trainees might well feel alone with an imaginary trainer who maintained an omnipotent position.

I must emphasize that that young teachers unconsciously consider their trainers omnipotent. Clearly, I am not saying that trainers are literally omnipotent. However, using a psychoanalytical perspective, we might say that unconscious aims tend to create or modify reality. On one hand, the trainer's omnipotence is a normal component in teaching. On the other hand, the trainer's omnipotence also derives from trainees' feelings and, arguably, and interestingly, the technologies facilitate this omnipotence. From an omnipotent position, others are not considered as autonomous subjects but as malleable objects. However, in the normal teacher training process, this position of omnipotence is not the only one to be considered.

### **“Good enough” trainers**

From this second perspective, trainers can provide a “good enough mother” (Winnicott, 1971) who can contain and create a transitional space where trainees can play and develop the capacity to be alone. To develop this further, and reflect on the e-discussion groups, it is important to let the trainees play with open topics. Crucially, no messages can supply a good or a bad answer, because, importantly, the aim of the debate is to confront ideas, in a playing space, not to demonstrate good or best practices. This is not just a casual observation. Trainees have discussions and, perhaps, accept that others' opinions might be interesting. At the same time, each

trainee cannot clearly identify what s/ he brings to the e-group and what the other trainees give. Hence the discussion group becomes a place for mutual discourse and shared experience. Confirming, Kaës (2007) who suggested this indicates a real thinking process in groups.

The "good enough" trainers are able to accept that trainees question their instructions and play with boundaries. When the task is not clear enough, these "attacks on the frame" are frequently observed (Thouroude, 2007). They are possible because of the trainers' absence. Perhaps these attacks are easier in virtual life than in real life, but they are also possible because the trainers are "good enough" trainers who accept that trainees have the capacity to be alone in their presence. Roussillon (2008), proposes that those who attack the frame probably have the capacity to be alone because they do what the other members of the e-group dream to do. They do not feel destroyed if the trainers are not present and they are sometimes no longer of concern to them. And, at the same time, this "good enough" trainer is not destroyed by this "murder of the father". Unconsciously, the "good enough" trainer converts expelled beta-elements into alpha-elements (Bion, 1962), transforms fragments into links and helps trainees to understand their own thoughts.

## Conclusion

According to Blanchard-Laville (2001), the teachers' holding makes a group's psychical envelope. This holding is the result of teacher's discourse, voice and body. I propose that this holding could include the online discussion group, even if there is no voice, nobody in real life, but only a trainer's invisible presence in the forum, through the e-group.

In conclusion, I would not wish to say there are trainers who are in either the omnipotent or good enough positions. Every trainer has unconsciously to deal with normal omnipotence and a "good enough" position. However, I would go on to suggest that there are other areas to examine in relation to information and communication technologies. Trainers not only need to promote a good and secure environment for trainees, but learn to be able to deal with the life-drive and the death-drive which are both accentuated by information and communication technologies. But this will need to be the subject of a later paper.

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