

The Emotional Turn in Higher Education: A Psychoanalytic Contribution

Sarah Gilmore, Valerie Anderson

University of Portsmouth Business School, Portsmouth, United Kingdom

Portsmouth Business School,

University of Portsmouth

Richmond Building,

Portland Street

Portsmouth, P01 3DE

United Kingdom

Valerie.anderson@port.ac.uk

The Emotional Turn in Higher Education: A Psychoanalytic Contribution

This article contributes to contemporary debates about the significance of emotions within Higher Education. Using a psychoanalytic lens we analyse the ways in which experiences of anxiety and tension are essential for learning. The anxiety associated with learning can stimulate meaningful and reflexive outcomes but ‘learning inaction’ (Vince, 2014) is also possible. In adopting a psychoanalytical lens we assert the agency of both learners and teachers in scholarly relationships and we draw attention to the emotions of educators as well as students. This has important implications for teacher education and academic formation activities.

Keywords: emotion, psychoanalysis, teaching, learning

Introduction

This paper contributes to the emerging literature about the emotionality of learning in Higher Education (HE). We note that the focus on emotional well-being has come at a time when expectations of HE are heightened with demands for the sector to promote employability, widening participation, educational ‘productivity’ and ‘student satisfaction and throughput’ (Schuck et al, 2008; Arthur, 2009; Gribble, Blackmore & Rahimi, 2015). However, critics of the ‘emotional turn’ argue that over-psychologised accounts of education have led to an ‘epistemology of the emotions’ (Ecclestone & Rawdin, 2016) that serves to deny the human agency in higher education and runs the risk of promoting psychologically ‘diminished’ subjects.

In the context of this debate we offer a psychoanalytically informed approach. We contend that this lens provides opportunities for insight into the emotionality of learning. Our paper offers a reflexive account of the emotional features of student and tutor responses to pedagogic change and contributes to the literature and to practice in

three ways. First, we re-affirm the link between emotion and learning by highlighting the way in which experiences of anxiety form a necessary grounding for productive learning outcomes whilst illustrating how ‘learning *inaction*’ (Vince, 2014) can occur if educators find themselves ill-equipped to ‘hold’ emotions effectively (Winnicott, 1965). Second, we re-assert the agency of both learners and teachers involved in scholarly relationships. Third, we illuminate the experienced emotions of educators as well as students, an issue that rarely features in academic formation and development processes.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The issues surrounding the ‘emotional turn’ in HE are outlined before we explain the ways in which a psychoanalytically informed perspective can contribute attention to the emotional features of learning without construing students as ‘diminished subjects’. The context, aims and analytical procedures used in our pedagogic project are then explained. Key themes emerging from the data are described followed by a discussion of the psychodynamic features identified and the implications for those engaged in teaching, ‘academic formation’ and academic development.

Learning and emotions in HE

Recent systemic and pedagogic developments have revitalised interest in emotion and learning (Leathwood and Hey, 2009; Karagiamopoulou, 2011). At a systemic level concern about emotional wellbeing has become prevalent alongside rising policy interest in learner engagement and the student experience (Woods, 2010). Initiatives to widen participation in HE also promote a range of support services for students to enable learners from a diversity of backgrounds to flourish intellectually and emotionally (Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2006). These changes have occurred as pedagogic focus has shifted from a humanist and individualised perspective to a constructivist view of learning as a socially reflexive, *collective* process (Brockbank &

McGill, 1998; Christie et al. 2008). In place of a simple knowledge transmission process HE is increasingly seen as a site for individual growth bringing together the personal and practical experiences of learners and recognising the emotional and relational influences required to energise learning and enable analytical reflection (Cramp, et al, 2012; Brockbank & McGill, 1998).

However, the 'emotional turn' in HE remains contested. First, the 'therapeutic ethos' in education has been associated with a distraction of attention from power inequalities inside and outside the system (Niemeyer & Colley, 2014). Second, student well-being initiatives have been linked with the encroachment of a surveillance-driven, standardised and monitored education system that serves only to generate effective workers and consumers in fast changing economic and technological environments to the detriment of critique and dialogue (Clegg & Rowland, 2010; Hartley, 2003). Third, critics argue that the 'epistemology of emotion' (Ecclestone and Rawdin, 2016; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2007; Ecclestone, 2004) is a consequence of competition for legitimacy by poorly theorised psychological perspectives the result of which is to recast the identity of all learners as emotionally vulnerable and diminished agents (Ecclesone & Rawdin, 2016; Furedi, 2003).

Yet there is an acceptance that the emotional and rational dimensions of experience are inextricably linked (Storrs, 2012). Although emotional arousal does not automatically lead to learning, without it, people are not able to learn (Dirkx, 2001) and effective teachers and forms of curricula knowledge address both the affective and the cognitive (Ecclestone & Rawdin, 2016; Clegg & Rowland, 2010; Youell, 2006). However, the Cartesian dualism between the rational / intellectual and emotional / experiential (Beard et al, 2007; Leathwood & Hey, 2009) within contemporary discourse about learning and teaching in HE can leave many students and tutors with

few spaces to express their feelings in relation to their learning experiences (Storrs, 2012; Cramp, et al. 2012, Day and Leitch, 2001).

In the context of these debates we examine the emotional features of learning, for both students and educators. We adopt a psychoanalytic approach grounded in an acceptance that individuals' learning is shaped by both their unconscious motives (Barford, 2002) and the curriculum that they encounter. We re-assert the agency of both learners and teachers involved in scholarly relationships by highlighting the productive *and* paralysing effect of anxieties and tensions involved in learning over a year-long postgraduate module. Whilst the emotionality of the learner has received considerable attention we include consideration of the emotional dimension of teachers' professional and personal practice.

Psychoanalysis, emotion, learning and higher education

Psychoanalysis has always been absorbed in the study of emotion, which is seen as lying at the heart of human motivation and learning (Gabriel, 1998) with psychoanalytic contributions to pedagogic theory and practice having a long history (Mayes, 2009). Although the psychoanalytical emphasis on the subjective and the emotional work involved in coping with cognitive and emotional disequilibrium resonates with foundational work in the education literature base (see, for example, Vygotsky & Cole, 1978, Piaget, 1971) the foundational hypotheses of psychoanalysis present challenges to many of those involved with higher and adult education. The individualised and subjectivised accounts of potentially 'intense' emotional states and the focus on child development is often seen as problematic. As accounts of the emotional well-being of students become increasingly prevalent, we argue that a (re)turn to psychoanalytic theories offers the scope to understand the relational and developmental processes involved in learning in contemporary higher educational contexts. We draw on object

relations theories; specifically the psychoanalytic perspectives of D.W. Winnicott (1960, 1965, 1989) and W.R. Bion (1959, 1962, 1984). These theories conceptualise emotions as more than individual, psychological reactions to events, but as intersubjective, socially situated, collective experiences (Stein, 2000). We contend that much of their work has relevance to the nature of learning in educational settings (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 1983; White, 2002; Britzman, 2015) where participants rarely work or learn in isolation from others. In the following paragraphs we outline their approaches and contextualise their insights into a higher education context.

Winnicott places the ability to learn within a developmental model that involves an intersection between internal and *external* processes. He argues that the ability to learn depends upon the ‘navigation’ of linked internal stages that progressively enable the integration of experiences in the process of personality formation. This process is encouraged or inhibited by a literal and figurative ‘facilitating environment’ that provides a space for play enabled by a facilitating carer whose adaptive consideration underpins this process over time and is appropriately balanced between protection and overwhelming attention (Winnicott, 1960, 1965). Where this balance is attained a learner can ‘collect together the details of the experience of aliveness’ to underpin spontaneity and curiosity. However, failure to facilitate an appropriate balance of protection *and* stimulation can result in compliance as a form of defence against an environment that feels unsafe or overly-protective. Although the facilitating environment is important, the nature of care provided needs only to be ‘good enough’. Therefore, in an HE setting, whilst a higher degree of facilitation and adaptation is required by the tutor in a role that might be characterised as a ‘More Knowledgeable Other’ (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978) at the start of a teaching and learning relationship the

degree of 'holding' can decline over time because the need for it lessens as students become more fully independent learners.

This important role of tutors as external reference points providing a basis for an emotional 'holding' and adaptation features in Bion's (1959) concept of psychic containment – an important feature of the learner-tutor relationship (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 1983; White, 2002). Bion argues that exposure to new, uncertain experiences can revive unconscious processes involving an oscillation between a state of high anxiety where thinking is difficult, and a state of coherence and cohesiveness as the mind becomes gradually capable of tolerating frustration and ambivalence. For Bion, learning involves a temporary regression to the anxious state as a form of recoil in order to make a leap further forward; through which cognition and the emergence of ideas become possible.

Within a classroom setting, the tutor's role in stimulating imaginative reflection (what Bion terms 'reverie') helps students to bring together the different elements of experience into meaningful conjunctions. What is required within a teaching and learning setting, therefore, is not just tutor tolerance of anxieties but an ability to enable learners to understand the nature of their learning experiences, to digest them mentally and give them meaning. If this occurs, learners become able to internalise not only a 'container' of feelings but also a mind that can hold and generate thoughts. Ultimately, if a person has repeated experiences of anxiety being understood and detoxified by another, they can gradually come to contain those frustrations and be able to think and reason. Hence, the task of the tutor is to act as a temporary container for anxieties of students at times of stress to enable them to move forward and learn in a productive and creative way. This places demands on the professional capacity of the tutor; inevitably

involving him/her in acknowledging some of the mental pain of learning and role modelling the maintenance of curiosity in the face of perceptions of confusion (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 1983). In our case study, we outline and explore the emotional dynamics involved in learning in a setting of pedagogic change where time, toleration of ambiguity and persistence were required to seek out, probe and digest experiences in order to provide the foundations of knowing and critical reflection (Raab, 1997; Vince, 2014).

Pedagogy and emotion: the case context

Our examination of the issues arising from the emotionality of learning occurs as a result of a year long, action-oriented pedagogic project. The module we describe is located within a UK university and involved study of Learning, Training and Development (LTD) within a postgraduate level professionally accredited programme. For the sixty-five adult part-time students undertaking this course success would cement their status as a ‘professional’ in terms of career progression and identity. This meant that learning outcomes were highly consequential because ‘failure’ was likely to act as a block (albeit a temporary one) on career aspirations because the qualification concerned is increasingly viewed as a requirement for entry as well as management levels in this role.

The change that was introduced replaced a didactic pedagogy which was seen to be increasingly incongruent with the professional and applied employment context and aspirations of our students where proficiency in practice – as well as the possession of expert knowledge – would be sought by employers as well as their professional body. An alternative pedagogy was introduced grounded in an experiential learning approach (Kolb, 1984) to enable a process of constructing knowledge through students working in groups to research, prepare, deliver and evaluate peer learning sessions. The pedagogic

intention was to provide the opportunities for learners to bring together the tacit and explicit features of knowledge via conversation and reflection (Ahmad & Broussine, 2008; Baker, Jensen and Kolb, 2005; Kayes, 2002), and assist in the development of 'metacognitive' learning skills via this process of sense-making (Barnett & Coate 2005; Cameron, Dutton and Quinn, 2003).

The students involved in this process were distributed across three established class groups. They had all studied together in the first year of their course and were now embarking on their second and final year of study. The tutor group was reasonably cohesive and well-co-ordinated; all five tutors had extensive HE experience and had also worked in professional roles. Although four of the five tutors had experience of delivering experiential learning, either in their teaching or in their practice outside of HE, the pedagogic change represented a new approach for these student groups and we undertook a careful and continuous evaluation of the process. Tutor and student reflections were gathered on three different occasions within the year by one of the authors who was not involved in the unit.

Research design

In undertaking this project we were grounded in a constructivist-interpretivist qualitative paradigm. We sought to examine the way tutors and students made sense of and learned through the experience of implementing the new pedagogic approach. This was an action-oriented project: we were also curriculum designers and teachers (Kember, 2000). In carrying out the evaluation we sought to engage students and tutors in ongoing reflexivity with learning guiding interpretation to feed into new practice (Vince, 2010).

A process resembling a focus group procedure was instigated with students and with tutors. Data from tutors were gathered via pre-arranged meetings followed by the

circulation of data summaries inviting further comments or reflections. Students within each of the three class groups were invited to establish smaller groups to discuss their experiences and summarise their responses on flip-chart paper. Towards the end of the sessions an oral summary was offered by each group to their peers. This gave the opportunity for their colleagues to respond to their points and it also gave the facilitator a chance to explore any ambiguities and thus ensure clarity of meaning.

The flip charts formed the basis for initial analysis of student data which occurred on each occasion within 24 hours. This involved identifying themes and issues and was undertaken by both authors who reviewed the flip charts and compared and evaluated the themes they had identified so that an agreed set of categories could be defined. On completion of the first data gathering process we identified six main data categories: cognitive (the intellectual expectations of the approach); functional (the likely practical implications); skills issues; assessment issues; the 'novelty' of the approach. Emotional responses were more prevalent than we expected and these constituted our sixth category.

At the half-way point of the module we encouraged students and tutors to revisit their initial responses and asked them to reflect on the development of their feelings about the learning process. Our initial analysis at this mid-point provided us with more data for many of our original categories, particularly the emotional responses and a further category was identified: lack of clarity. Where the final data gathering process was concerned, students were invited to complete an anonymous questionnaire based on open questions.

Research findings

In this section we outline the main features of the data focusing specifically on the findings associated with the emotional responses expressed by both students and tutors

as we recognised that this formed an inter-related feature of the learning experience by all those involved. We provide some illustrative quotations from the flip charts, notes from meetings, and extracts from the questionnaire responses. In order to preserve anonymity, the discrete quotations are labelled at group level.

Stage one: students - early to mid-point

The early data showed a mixture of positive feelings concerning greater involvement in the learning process, but concerns were also expressed about assessment. Perhaps reflecting different epistemological beliefs with implications for their expectations of the learning and teaching approach (Otting et al, 2010) members of Group 1 articulated more apprehension than the other groups. Expressions including words such as ‘worry’, ‘fear’, ‘lack of confidence’ featured on their flip chart responses along with ‘excited’, ‘positive’, ‘comfortable’ and ‘pleased’. Groups 2 and 3 were more ‘measured’ in an emotional sense but were very articulate about their cognitive expectations, identifying the potential for enhanced insight and better integration between ‘theory and practice’, and the practical application skills they hoped to develop.

However, by the mid-point of the module most of the responses across all three groups expressed frustration that the approach took up “too much time” and concerns began to be expressed. These were accompanied by heightened anxieties across all three groups particularly concerning the module’s summative assessment – a three-hour examination. Data were suffused with comments such as: “Limited learning on topics; not having enough for the exam” (Group 1); “Exam concerns – help!” (Group 3) and were accompanied by anxieties about ‘not knowing enough’ and a lack of notes. At this stage all groups expressed emotional states; expressions such as: ‘worry’, ‘scared’ ‘frustration’; ‘fear’; ‘tearful’; ‘panic’; ‘concern’; ‘anxious’; ‘unmotivated’; ‘bored’ were

prominent. Some positive points were made by students at the mid-point stage particularly by members of Groups 2 and 3 such as: “allowed for ‘food for thought’ rather than ‘memorising’ what we were told” (Group 2) and “active learning – we benefit when we are involved in a group” (Group 3) but such positive observations were the minority.

Stage one: tutors - early to mid-point

Divergence of experiences between students and tutors became apparent at the mid-point of the module. Tutor responses reflected a very different set of understandings and emotions. At the beginning of the module tutors shared the ‘nervous enthusiasm’ of the students. At the mid-point, however, levels of enthusiasm were maintained with greater engagement with pedagogy: ‘Instead of thinking about content and then thinking about learning and teaching, the emphasis seems to have changed and I am thinking about learning and teaching as well as content in a more interrelated way’. Tutors also reflected positively about student progress and the classroom environment: “Engagement levels are good and certainly higher than last year and the assignment shows more, better work and less of a tail”. Tutors were pleased with the improved achievement levels in the coursework assignment and felt energised by the experience-based pedagogy.

Stage two: the mid-point onwards (students and tutors)

As researchers, curriculum developers and members of the team we did not expect this divergence of experience and emotions. It was disturbing to us: on the one hand we felt it was important to articulate and acknowledge the views and the feelings of our students but, at the same time, we were committed to the pedagogic change; a not uncommon dilemma for those involved in management education (Vince, 2010). As we

were struggling with these issues a planned change-over of tutors from within the teaching team was implemented. From this point onwards we found that differences of views between the student groups became more pronounced. Group 1 was prepared to work with their new tutor to maintain the approach, amending it where necessary to meet student needs. Group 2, however, demanded a return to more 'traditional' pedagogy and following an intervention by the course manager, an uneasy compromise was initiated. Group 3, which retained their tutor, also strongly advocated a return to previous learning and teaching modes and the tutor adopted the same strategy as Group 1: essentially maintaining the experiential learning approach but working with the students to ensure that their needs and concerns were recognised and met wherever possible. This involved regular recapping as to what had been learned and providing a few links to research papers for students to read and explore. Additionally, time was given at the end of sessions for mock exam questions on the material they had covered either than day or over the previous couple of weeks. In this way 'good enough' support was provided: the experiential learning mode continued but student concerns were listened to and, using a light touch, were generally addressed.

However, the emotions articulated at this stage affected student-tutor relationships in all three groups. During this period, some students in Group 2 established their own study groups (something that was only revealed to us after the end of the module). Although this can be interpreted as an expression of the attainment of group-learning skills, the students involved had a very different perception; they indicated that the groups were formed to circumvent reliance on their tutor, with whom productive relationships had broken down. Their actions, at the time and when they revealed them after the conclusion of the module were described as a criticism of the module rather than a positive outcome of a learning process.

Stage three: end of the module

By the end of the module highly emotional states were evident amongst students and tutors. A final tutor focus group was organised after the teaching and assessment processes had been completed and, despite the difficulties, tutors reiterated their views that the new approach remained appropriate. None-the-less the emotional toll of the process was evident and included a ‘distancing’ between tutors and students (Gregory and Jones; 2008), which led to a sense of undermined confidence. One tutor disclosed that that they had felt increasingly unsure how to cope: “this approach, if it is to work ... needs a more co-ordinated, involved teaching approach so that ...tutors don’t feel isolated when faced with very difficult students”.

Students’ perspectives at this point are harder to evaluate. Emotions were so volatile by this point that we felt the focus group process would be inappropriate; instead individual questionnaires with a short number of open questions were used to elicit student views. The response rate to the final questionnaire was poor and is likely to have reflected the experiences of those with extreme views. Some of the responses described the learning approach as: ‘good’, ‘useful’, ‘the balance was nearly there – certainly semester one worked’, “I got a buzz from seeing people learn”, and “I found it a very rewarding experience”. However, other comments communicated an intense frustration:

‘I became more dissatisfied as the semester went on...we had tried to give constructive feedback to improve the service we were receiving (and paying for) ... This feedback was largely dismissed by both [the module tutor and unit co-ordinator]. They took a critical parent role and ‘blamed’ the students for the failings of the course rather than responding in an adult way and actively exploring how concerns could be addressed”.

Learning, emotion and the psychoanalytical lens

Our paper contributes a timely reminder of the emotionality that learning involves.

Before adopting a psychoanalytical lens we first consider alternative explanations of the challenges faced by students and tutors in our module.

First, we acknowledge that anxiety is more likely to be present when change in pedagogy is implemented – especially within contexts such as ours where learning outcomes are consequential for careers. General concerns about our new approach were expressed from the beginning of the module by both students and tutors and, in common with other accounts and explanations (see, for example, Elliot, 2008; Cramp et al, 2012; Storrs, 2012; Otting et al, 2010), we found that concerns about ‘lack of clarity’ became increasingly prevalent during assessment periods as students became more concerned with the disjuncture between the experiential pedagogy of the classroom and the summative assessment – an individual examination. The tension for HE students between lecturers’ expositions of a desire for students to make knowledge their own and develop their own answers and approaches whilst seeming to privilege ‘right’ answers at the point of assessment is well documented in the education literature (see, for example, Laurillard, 1998; Kegan et al, 2001). For students this can make personal understanding seem ‘risky’ as it may be associated with the possibility of failure – something our students were keenly aware of. This meant that the added layer of professional body requirements became a complicating factor in this case and added to student discontent and anxiety. In this way, pedagogic (mis)alignment becomes additionally significant and our case highlights how that can be emotionally as well as intellectually problematic for learners and tutors alike (Otting et al, 2010).

Second, it is possible to argue that the difficulties we encountered resulted from wider group development processes (Tuckman, 1965) characterised as a ‘conflictual’ or

‘storming’ stage’. However, our students were undertaking the second year of their part-time programme; they were working in groups with colleagues with whom they had developed group relationships in the first year of their course. Similarly the tutor team had worked together over a period of years and could be considered as a normally functioning group. Indeed our data suggest that, although our students initially experienced and described themselves as *generally* being sufficiently able to adapt to a new learning mode, over time some of them found the anxieties it generated too much to bear although for others it was strengthening, particularly if they were able to draw on a sense of ‘good enough’ support from the teaching and learning environment and especially from their tutor (Abram, 2007: 173).

Therefore, we contribute to the ‘emotional turn’ by deploying the psychoanalytic approaches outlined earlier to examine the emotions of both students and tutors involved in the learning process. We argue that the expressions of emotion that pervade our data go beyond cognitive disequilibrium; we illuminate how anxiety may be interpreted as a sense of ‘danger to the self’ arising from internal sources as well as the external world (Freud, 1926). The anxieties provoked by our pedagogic change may well have taken individuals back to other associated, negative experiences lodged in the unconscious but with the ability to exert a long-term influence (Antonocopoulou & Gabriel, 2001). Should the requirement for containment of anxiety fail to be recognised, as we failed to do in this case, then even the best-intentioned changes can become highly problematic. In implementing our pedagogic change we dismantled familiar didactic pedagogic structures, which may have served as a defence against anxiety for our students (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994; Otting et al, 2010). As a result the potential benefits of the new approach, for which support had been evident at the beginning, were set aside by students as they became increasingly frustrated.

The desire to return to previous methods was strongly articulated and can be interpreted psychoanalytically as a phantasy of an escape from anxiety (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 1983; Anderson & Gilmore, 2011). During this time information, ideas and possibilities generated by the new learning process remained, from the perspective of students, incongruent, fragmented and not ready to be 'absorbed'. In Winnicott's terms it was necessary for them to hold a state of paradox between knowing and not knowing without resolving it through a flight to split-off intellectual functioning (Winnicott, 1965). Whereas, in some circumstances the 'not knowing' might otherwise have been tolerated until generative learning could emerge (Bion, 1984) our students found themselves reaching out for a premature 'knowledge' expressed in the desire for a return to traditional ways of working. As tutors, once the emotionality of the change became more intense, we also felt drawn to the idea (which we resisted) that it would be easier to revert to familiar pedagogy. In Bionian terms, we became caught up in a state of mind with very limited tolerance of frustration and of 'not knowing'.

Although we endorse this psychoanalytic approach to understanding the learning process we refute the view that anxiety is inexorably linked with the inhibition of learning and cognition or with a diminished sense of human agency. For some students their tutors were able to act as a 'container' in an emotional sense and were able to engage in imaginative reflection or 'reverie' that we argue is distinct from Vygotsky's characterisation of a 'More Knowledgeable Other' (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). In these circumstances some of our students were able to engage with and achieve an effective learning process anchored to a sophisticated and rational level of thought and behaviour (Bion, 1961). Where tutors found this process too difficult to engage in, students displayed basic assumption behaviours of flight-fight. Where this occurred we witnessed hostility towards the tutor and course manager and attempts to instigate a

‘rebellion’ and to recruit other students from other groups to support the demand for a ‘return to the traditional pedagogy. The formation of study groups outside the class may represent a form of containment within this student company, but one that was resented.

A further interpretation of the deterioration of student – tutor relationships is offered by the psychoanalytic concept of projective identification (Klein, 1952). This is a mental mechanism that serves to ‘get rid of’ a part of the self and to project these elements into another (Bion, 1959). These impacts can be positive when we split off, idealised elements, and one of the lecturers was seen by some students in these terms. However, where anxieties build; it is more likely that what is projected may be negative feelings that seem overwhelming. We contend that our case illustrates the process of projective identification by students (where the anxieties were projected onto tutors) and by tutors in their categorisations of severely anxious students as ‘militant’, ‘joyless’, ‘instrumental’ and ‘manipulative’. In such a situation it was necessary for tutors to be willing and able to adapt their pedagogic approach to take account of student concerns in order to ‘hold’ these projections to enable students to work through them to achieve more productive learning outcomes. We came to realise that, in a classroom environment where emotionality is often unacknowledged (Vince, 2010) tutors, like students, had no clear way to hold such feelings or to surface them for collective discussion (Neumann, 2006). Had we achieved this it may have led to profound learning for all concerned, something that we only came to appreciate after the conclusion of the module.

However, some tutors in this instance were able to provide a sufficient continuity of care, to clarify student needs and demonstrate a degree of adaptation: making a creative engagement with the teaching and learning process possible (Winnicott, 1960). Such occasions represented thinking being used to manage and

‘bear’ tension and all its inherent difficulties as a prerequisite to the development of a capacity for thought (Bion, 1984; Clegg and Rowland, 2010).

Conclusions

Using a psychoanalytically informed analysis, this paper highlights unconscious resistances to learning in an HE context during a period of pedagogic change. We argue that teachers as well as students can achieve improved levels of learning at such times but only when defensive behaviour by both parties is reduced and when the occurrence of anxiety is recognised as an opportunity for learning rather than becoming a stumbling block.

We offer three contributions with regard to the ‘emotional turn’ in this HE. First, in the light of critiques about an over-psychologised ‘epistemology of emotion’ in contemporary HE (Ecclestone & Rawdin, 2016) we contend that the psychoanalytic lens contributes a richer understanding of the learning process. Psychoanalytic approaches highlight how learning involves more than cognitive accommodation and assimilation (Piaget 1971); learning involves students’ and teachers’ deepest hopes and fears, loves and hates, all of which make up ‘the subjective curriculum’ (Mayes, 2009).

Second, our approach re-asserts the agency of both learners and teachers involved in scholarly relationships. We illuminate the role of anxiety in stimulating productive and generative learning outcomes but we also show how learning may be unproductive as a result of conflicts and emotions created from and reinforced both individually and collectively (Vince & Saleem, 2004). In addition to ‘learning inaction’ we also witnessed ‘learning-in-action’ where individuals were able to work through challenges and anxiety (Vince, 2014).

Our third contribution, results from our illumination of the experienced emotions of educators as well as students. We highlight the difficulties involved in withstanding

and containing student anxiety and hostility. Although all members of the teaching team were experienced teachers their 'professional formation' left them mostly unprepared to work through intense feelings and experiences. Our paper contributes the view that a psychoanalytical approach can contribute to effective academic professional formation (Moore, 2006; Britzman & Pitt , 1996).

To conclude, we propose that the ideas and experiences outlined in this case potentially apply to other university contexts where student anxieties might be high and where the outcomes of 'failure' are consequential. Our paper highlights how the emotional issues usually associated with higher education in an undergraduate learning context are also important for postgraduate learners, particularly those for whom professional identity formation processes form part of their learning experience (Trede, Macklin and Bridges, 2012). In addition, in a context of widening participation policies, we contend that modes of frustration and anxiety witnessed in this case study might apply particularly to 'first generation' students such as black and ethnic minority students, students who come from low income families or students whose nuclear and extended families have not engaged in higher education. Viewed in this way, we argue that a 'psychoanalytic turn' has much to offer to pedagogic development in contemporary universities and the challenges of providing 'good enough' learning environments that foster deep connections with learning.

References

Abram, J. 2007. *The language of Winnicott: a dictionary of Winnicott's use of words.* London: Karnac.

- Ahmad, Y. and M. Broussine. 2008. Pedagogic implications of anxiety and loss of agency in public services managers and leaders. *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 2, no.4: 340-352.
- Anderson, V. and S. Gilmore. 2010. Learning, experienced emotions, relationships and innovation in HRD. *Journal of European Industrial Training* 34, no.8/9: 753-771.
- Antonocopoulou, E.P. and Y. Gabriel. 2001. Emotion, learning and organizational change: towards an integration of psychoanalytic and other perspectives. *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 14, no 5: 436-451.
- Arthur, L. 2009. From Performativity to professionalism: Lecturers' responses to student feedback. *Teaching in Higher Education* 14, no. 4: 441-454.
- Baker, A.C., P.J. Jensen, and D.A. Kolb. 2005. Conversation as experiential learning, *Management Learning* 36, no. 4: 411-427.
- Barford, D. 2002. Is anything more interesting than sex? The Freudian perspective on learning and teaching. In *The ship of thought*, ed. D Barford, 41-63. London: Karnac.
- Barnett, R., and K. Coate. 2005. *Engaging the curriculum in higher education*. Buckingham: SHRE and Open University Press.
- Beard, C., S. Clegg, and K. Smith. 2007. Acknowledging the affective in higher education. *British Educational Research Journal* 33, no.2: 235-252.
- Beatty, B., and C. Brew. 2004. Trusting relationships and emotional epistemologies: A foundational leadership issue. *School Leadership and Management* 24: 329_56.
- Bion, W.R. 1959. Attacks on linking, *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 40: 308-315.
- Bion, W.R. 1962. *Learning from experience*. London: Karnac.
- Bion, W.R. 1984. *Second thoughts*. London: Karnac.

Britzman, D.P. 2003. *After education: Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, and psychoanalytic histories of learning*. Albany NY: State University of New York Press.

Britzman, D. and A. Pitt. 1996. Pedagogy and transference: casting the past of learning into the presence of teaching, *Theory into Practice* 35: 117–123.

Brockbank, A. and I. McGill. 1998 *Facilitating reflective learning in higher education*.

Britzman, D.P. 2015. *A psychoanalyst in the classroom: On the human condition in education*. New York: Suny Press.

Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Cameron, K.S., J.E. Dutton, and R.E. Quinn. 2003. *Positive organizational scholarship: foundations of a new discipline*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Christie, H., L., Tett, V.E. Cree, J. Hounsell, and V. McCune. 2008. A real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions: learning to be a university student. *Studies in Higher Education* 33 no. 5: 567-581.

Clayton, B., C. Beard, B. Humberstone, and C. Wolstenholme. 2009. The *jouissance* of learning: evolutionary musings on the pleasures of learning in higher education.

Teaching in Higher Education, 14, no. 4: 375-386.

Clegg, S. and S. Rowland. 2010. Kindness in pedagogical practice and academic life.

British Journal of Sociology of Education 31, no. 6: 719-735.

Cramp, A., C. Lamond, L. Coleyshaw, and S. Beck. 2012. Empowering or disabling?

Emotional reactions to assessment amongst part-time adult students. *Teaching in Higher Education* 17, no. 5: 509-521.

Crosby, A. 2008. A critical look: the philosophical foundations of experiential learning.

In *The theory and practice of experiential education*, eds. K. Warren, M. Sakofis and J.

Hunt 159-169, Bubuque IA: Kendall/Hunt.

- Day, C. and R. Leitch. Teachers' and teacher educators' lives: the role of emotion. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 17, no 4: 403-415.
- Dewey, J. 1938. *Experience and education*. London: Macmillan.
- Dirkx, J.M. 2001. The power of feelings: emotion, imagination, and the construction of meaning in adult learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 89: 63-72.
- Ecclestone, K. 2004. Learning or therapy? The demoralization of education. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 52, no..2: 112-137.
- Ecclestone, K. and D. Hayes. 2009. Changing the subject: the educational implications of developing emotional well-being. *Oxford Review of Education* 35, no. 3: 371-389.
- Ecclestone, K. and D. Hayes. 2007. *The dangerous rise of therapeutic education*. London: Routledge.
- Ecclestone, K. and Rawdin, C. 2016. Reinforcing the 'diminished' subject? The implications of the 'vulnerability zeitgeist' for well-being in educational settings. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 17, No.1: 1-17.
- Elliot, C. 2008. Emancipating assessment: Assessment assumptions and critical alternatives in an experience-based programme. *Management Learning* 39, no. 3: 271-293.
- Freire, P. 1994. *Pedagogy of hope*. New York: Continuum International Publishing.
- Freud, S. 1926. *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety* S.E. 20. London: Hogarth.
- Furedi, F. 2003. *Therapy culture: creating vulnerability in an uncertain age*. London: Routledge.
- Gabriel, Y. 1999. *Organizations in depth*. London: Sage.

- Gregory, J and R. Jones. 2009. Maintaining competence: a grounded theory typology of approaches to teaching in Higher Education. *Higher Education* 57, no. 6: 769-785.
- Gribble, C., Blackmore, J. & Rahimi, M. 2015. Challenges to providing work integrated learning to international business students at Australian universities. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning* 5, No, 4: 401 – 416.
- Hartley, D. 2003. The instrumentalisation of the expressive in education. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 51, no.1: 6-19.
- James, K.T. and T. Arroba. 2005. Reading and carrying: a framework for learning about emotion and emotionality in organizational systems as a core aspect of leadership development *Management Learning* 36, no.3: 299-316.
- Karagiannopoulou, E. 2011. Revisiting learning and teaching in higher education: a psychodynamic perspective. *Psychodynamic Practice* 17, no. 1: 5-21.
- Kayes, D. 2002. Experiential learning and its critics: preserving the role of experience in management learning and education. *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 1, no.2: 137-149.
- Kegan, R., M. Broderick, E. Drago-Severson, D. Helsing, N. Popp, K. Portnow, and Associates. 2001. *Toward a new pluralism in ABE/ESOL classrooms: Teaching to multiple 'cultures of mind'*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Education, National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy
- Kember, D. 2000. *Action learning and action research: improving the quality of teaching and learning*. London: Kogan Page.
- Klein, M. 1952. The origins of transference in Klein, M. (1975) *The Writings of Melanie Klein*, vol. 3 (London: Hogarth).
- Kolb, D.A. 1984. *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

- Laurillard, D. 1998. *Rethinking university teaching*. London: Routledge.
- Leathwood, C. and V. Hey. 2009. Gender-ed discourses and emotional sub-texts: theorising emotion in UK higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education* 14, no.4: 429-440.
- Lynch, K., M. Lyons, and S. Cantillon. 2007. Breaking silence: educating citizens for love, care and solidarity. *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 17, no. 1-2: 1-19.
- Mayes, C. 2009. The psychoanalytic view of teaching and learning, 1922-2002. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 41, no. 4: 539-567.
- McGettigan, A. 2013. *The great university gamble: Money, markets and the future of higher education*. London: Pluto Press.
- Moore, A. 2006. Recognising desire: a psychosocial approach to understanding education policy implementation and effect. *Oxford Review of Education* 32, no.4: 487-503.
- Neumann, A. 2006. Professing passion: emotion in the scholarship of professors at research universities. *American Educational Research Journal* 43, no.3: 381-424.
- Niemeyer, B. and Colley, H. 2015. Why do we need (another) special issue on gender and VET? *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 67, No. 1: 1-10.
- Obholzer, A and V.Z. Roberts. 1994. *The unconscious at work*. London: Routledge.
- Otting, H., Zwaal, W., Tempelaar, D. and Gijssels, W. 2010. The structural relationship between students' epistemological beliefs and conceptions of teaching and learning. *Studies in Higher Education* 35, No. 7: 741-760.
- Perry, W.G. 1970. *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Piaget, J. 1971. *Biology and knowledge*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Raab, N. 1997. Becoming an expert in not knowing – reframing teacher as consultant. *Management Learning* 28, no. 2: 161-75.
- Robson, C. 2011. *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers*. Oxford: Wiley.
- Salzberger-Wittenberg, I., G. Williams, and E. Osborne. 1983. *The Emotional Experience of Teaching and Learning*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Slaughter, S. and G. Rhoades. 2004. *Academic capitalism and the new economy: markets, state and higher education*. Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Schuck, S., S. Gordon, and J. Buchanan. 2008. What are we missing here? Problematising wisdoms on teaching quality and professionalism in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education* 13, no. 5: 537-547.
- Stein, M. 2000. After Eden: Envy and the defences against anxiety paradigm. *Human Relations* 53, no.2: 193-211.
- Storrs, A. 2012. ‘Keeping it real’ with an emotional curriculum. *Teaching in Higher Education* 17, no.1: 1-12.
- Trede, F., Macklin, R. and Bridges, D. 2012. Professional identity development: a review of the higher education literature. *Studies in Higher Education* 31, no. 3: 365-384.
- Tuckman, B. 1965. Developmental sequences in small groups. *Psychology Bulletin* 63, no. 6: 384-299.
- Vince, R. and T. Saleem. 2004. The impact of caution and blame on organizational learning. *Management Learning* 35, no. 2: 131 – 152.
- Vince, R. 2014. What Do HRD Scholars and Practitioners Need to Know About Power, Emotion, and HRD?. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 25: 409–420

Vince, R. 2010. Anxiety, politics and critical management education. *British Journal of Management* 21, no. 1: 26-39.

Vygotsky, L. S., & Cole, M. 1978. *Mind in Society: the development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press.

Weber, R.P. 2000. *Basic Content Analysis*. Sage: CA

White, J. 2002. On 'learning' and 'learning about': W.R. Bion's theory of thinking and educational praxis. In *The ship of thought*. Ed D. Barford, 65-105. London: Karnac.

Winnicott, D.W. 1960. The theory of the parent-infant relationship. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 43: 37-55.

Winnicott, D.W. 1965. *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment: studies in the theory of emotional development*. London: Hogarth.

Winnicott, D.W. 1989. *Holding and interpretation: fragment of an analysis*. London: Karnac.

Woods, C. 2010. Employee wellbeing in the higher education workplace: a role for emotion scholarship. *Higher Education* 60, no. 2: 171-185.

Youell, B. 2006. *The learning relationship: psychoanalytic thinking in education*. London: Tavistock Clinic Series.

Zepke, N., L. Leach, and T. Prebble. 2006. Being learner-centred: one way to improve student outcomes? *Studies in Higher Education* 31, no. 5: 587-600.