

Dead Shrinks Society

Humanistic therapy promotes self-determination, originality, and freedom. But is the teaching of psychotherapy and counselling today truly democratic? Or does it rely on a traditional model?

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“My one pupil has begun his work with me, and I will give you a description of how the lecture is conducted. It is the most important point, you know, that the tutor should be dignified and at a distance from the pupil, and that the pupil should be as much as possible degraded. Otherwise, you know, they are not humble enough” (Lewis Carroll)¹

Charismatic Teaching and the Rhetoric of Admiration

Last Christmas my partner and I visited my stepmother in Sicily, where she now lives: it was a good break with the usual perks (eating well, resting, and chatting) and its drawbacks (eating, resting, and chatting too much). One night, sitting in front of the telly I perked up from *panettone*-induced slumber: they were going to show *Dead Poets Society*, the Peter Weir’s film I had loved when it first came out in 1989. A couple of sequences into the film though, and my zeal shrivelled up: apart from the infuriating Italian custom of dubbing foreign movies (which the result that dialogue sounds as sanitized as an official statement from the Bank of England), there was that Hollywood cheesiness that just puts me right off. Still, it was Christmas, and as I poured another cup of double decaf espresso I told my stepmother: “You’ll like this,

you know. It's a good movie, all in all". I looked at her: was she enjoying it? "Mmh – she said – these things don't happen in real life, in a real school. If you behave like that as a teacher, you'll lose your job in no time". In the movie, English teacher John Keating– played by Robin Williams - skips the syllabus, encourages his students to be themselves, to be expressive, to 'seize the day', to value and appreciate life in its fleeting glory. He teaches them something deeper and more meaningful than how to pass an exam and write a successful essay. He teaches them real poetry rather than memorized hogwash.

By this point I had stopped watching TV: Was my stepmother right? Can one 'teach' freedom, originality, and individuality? Can one be a truthful, unconventional, inventive teacher and still survive within the education system? And what about the teaching of counselling and psychotherapy?

The type of teaching portrayed in the movie is what Bordieu, Passeron, and de Saint Martin² (authors in the 1990s of a seminal research on academic teaching and learning in French universities) would classify as *charismatic*. In charismatic teaching, language becomes a form of incantation aimed at placing the student/disciple "in a fit state to receive grace"³. Seminars and lectures effectively turn into ceremonial rituals where students gaze in wonder at the knowledge and wisdom of the professors, elevated to the status of mini-gurus. Content is irrelevant within this mode, the whole emphasis resting instead on the dazzling presentation of the magnetic 'performer'. Charismatic teaching relies on *illusion*, on the presumed omniscience and authority of the tutor. We see this happening at university lectures given by well-known

scholars, but also within cultish 'spiritual' groups clustered around a figurehead, as well as in therapy courses where the guest speaker has built a reputation through authorship.

Traditional Teaching and the Rhetoric of Despair

The second mode of teaching is *traditional teaching*, one that, according to Bordieu and his colleagues, uses words to seduce, one which operates "through a process of osmosis, [one that] promotes the transmission of an already confirmed and legitimate culture and secures commitment to the values which this contains"⁴. This mode relies on an established *complicity* between tutors and students through the method of *allusion*, i.e. the very opposite of genuine communication.

Such complicity ensures that both the corpus of knowledge and the existence of the institution are preserved. It is a form of non-exchange *par excellence*, a one way-system reminiscent of the *Kula Cycle* of Trobriand islanders as documented by the anthropologist Malinowski.⁵ Twice each year, the islanders launch their canoes and visit other islands, carrying gifts and local specialities for exchange. When they arrive, the travellers give presents, barter, and are feasted by their hosts. These are not simple trading expeditions since the islanders aim to acquire, from special kula-exchange partners, bracelets of white shells (*mwali*) and necklaces of red shells (*souvlava*). Kula shells are carried from one island to another in a ring, the bracelets in one direction and the necklaces in another, in a constant cycle of exchange called 'kula'. Only bracelets go in one direction, and only necklaces

in the other: similarly, in traditional teaching, fine speeches usually go from teachers to students, whereas poor, badly recycled language goes from students to teachers. Students reuse in their essays the language absorbed in the class room making full use of what Bordieu calls *rhetoric of despair*, the jargon of the particular trade that confirms and reinstates the professorial word. It is a kind of *sacrificial rite* designed to ensure one's admittance to the professional world.

The Original Sin: the Sin of Originality

What is anathema to the traditional mode of teaching is a student's *originality*. Within traditional teaching, the very scent of originality in a pupil is almost an offence, a jarring note to the soporific proceedings of a classroom.

A colleague of mine told me that during a recent person-centred course she attended, a video recording of Rogers counselling a client was shown to students of their final year, prior to examination. Afterwards, students were encouraged to tick the questionnaire with all the requirements necessary for passing a *viva voce* in front of a panel of tutors.

"Would Rogers pass or would he fail?" the tutor asked. This can be interpreted in two ways. The first, which is what the well-meaning tutor intended, was to encourage students to think for themselves, to question Rogers' authority and prestige – Rogers too could make mistakes. The flipside of this, however, is that an original practitioner like Rogers would have a hard time qualifying today: too many boxes to tick, too many arbitrary and government-imposed criteria to fulfil. Rogers was an original, and it must have

had a lot of courage to be able stand his ground in gentle but firm protest to a de-humanized practise of psychotherapy.

A school is by definition a preserver, even a perpetrator of established knowledge, rather than a laboratory for new discoveries: that such distressing imperative should also apply to institutions teaching the art of counselling and psychotherapy is deplorable.

My colleague was outraged; was she perhaps being naïve in assuming that counselling and psychotherapy provide narratives of emancipation rather than schooling in the art of compliance? This is a difficult matter: an institution such as a school of therapy and counselling on the one hand preserves a corpus of knowledge, makes it available; at the same time, what was *lived experience* has now become a dead *system* on the foundation of which, however, depend the livelihood of tutors and the expectations and aspirations of students. Without a system a psychological tradition perhaps could not be kept alive. It could be that even the most well meaning of institutions, whose philosophy rests on genuine encounter (*I-Thou*) inevitably reproduces instead the objectifying realm of *I-It*. Martin Buber addressed something similar when he wrote:

“This is part of the basic truth of the human world, that only *It* can be arranged in order. Only when things, from being our *Thou*, become our *It*, can they be arranged in order. Only when things, from being our *Thou*, become our *It*, can they be coordinated. The *Thou* knows no system of co-ordination”⁶

For Buber, “Institutions know only the specimen”⁷, not the individual. And - he added – institutions are also “a complicated market place”⁸ i.e., self-serving, and mainly interested in money.

Democratic Teaching and the Rhetoric of Equality

Both the charismatic and the traditional modes are *un-democratic* ways of teaching. Democratic teaching is perhaps at best a worthy aspiration, one that is beautifully and coherently expressed by Carl Rogers. What first drew me to the person-centred approach was in fact a paper by Carl Rogers on *education as personal activity*.⁹ Having looked at various important factors, i.e. knowledge of their subject, skills in planning and presenting material, teachers’ attitudes towards students, Rogers found that the latter were of primary importance. Using the findings of a research carried out by Aspy and Roebuck in 1976, he outlined such attitudes as:

- 1) *Understanding* the meaning the classroom experience is having for the student and the ability to express that understanding;
- 2) *Respect* for the student as a separate individual;
- 3) *Genuineness* of the teacher in relating to the students.

The above task can be a tall order: I have been a language teacher for many years, and prior to that a student at high school and university and, like many people, I am well acquainted with the challenges inherent in the world of education. These settings were traditional, even hierarchical, a one-way route of imparting and receiving academic data and information. I had read Rogers’ paper eagerly and with some degree of scepticism: was anything like person-

centred learning possible at all? Was it just another utopia? To my surprise, I have found from friends and colleagues – and partly from my own experience – that democratic teaching and learning is still at best an aspiration, even in places where ‘student-centred’ learning naturally belongs, namely in person-centred counselling and psychotherapy courses in the U.K.

Culture or Acculturation?

Does contemporary training in humanistic psychotherapy and counselling provide ways to explore humanistic *culture* (vibrant, ever-changing, critical of the status quo) or does it merely provide *acculturation* (i.e., indoctrination, assimilation to a particular tradition). Genuine *culture* offers opportunities for emancipation and critical assessment, since it is designed as a co-operative endeavour between tutors and students. *Acculturation* or indoctrination, on the other hand, fosters blind loyalty to established values, encourages conformity, and crushes any stirring towards originality. Moreover, acculturation overlooks the *cultural ethnocentrism* of tutors, as well as the cultural ethnocentrism of therapy as a tradition.

One of the implications is that, in order to pass an essay, a case study or an exam, the student must recycle the information using the required jargon, ticking the proverbial boxes: a sterile and mind-numbing process; the student ends up paying with words because only words pay. “No harm in that” - one might say, it’s just learning the nuts and bolts, the lingo alongside the expertise”. But are language and syntax ‘neutral’? Don’t they carry and even *produce* mental attitudes? Don’t they reflect the dominant values of a society and of its ruling elite? And if the values taught in a particular school of therapy

happen to go *counter* to the mainstream viewpoint – as I believe is the case with the person-centred approach – its tenets become, in the process, content devoid of meaning: phrases, formulas and notions that tutors and students repeat and recycle in the self-perpetrating game of academia. In accordance to the requirements of their post and their salary, professors come up with new formulas; the formulas trickle down to heads of department, then to the students who replicate them in their essays and presentations. The perverse thing here is that, while the content within person-centred courses is that of democratic teaching, since it stems down from Rogers' democratic and non-authoritarian outlook on therapy as well as learning – the educational apparatus is traditional through and through.

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