Freud in the Writing Center: The Psychoanalytics of Tutoring Well

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"A Writing Teacher is like a Psychoanalyst, Only Less Well Paid," Jay Parini declares in a recent essay in The Chronicle of Higher Education. One part of Parini's equation is almost self-evident to writing teachers since they know that, of the degreed professionals, college professors are among the least well paid for their efforts. The second half of the equation, the ways in which teaching writing mirrors aspects of the psychoanalytic process, is perhaps less apparent and clear. I would like to suggest that this correlation is most apparent in the interaction between tutors in a writing center and those students who come to seek their services. Unlike students who enroll in courses for a spectrum of reasons from "the course is required" to "it fits into my schedule," students come to a writing center for one reason only—they want help with their writing.

The fact that students come to the writing center wanting help and assuming they will receive it places those students in a different type of relationship with the tutor than with the instructor in a traditional classroom setting. While the teacher's role is primarily informative and focused upon the method of presentation that will best convey instruction to the class as a whole, the tutor's role often is primarily supportive and affective, secondarily instructional, and always directed to each student as an individual in a unique, one-to-one interpersonal relationship.

As in psychoanalysis, the quality of that interpersonal relationship between therapist and client, tutor and student, determines how successful the interaction as a whole will be. L. D. Goodstein, in an essay entitled "What Makes Behavior Change Possible," argues that the quality of a
therapeutic relationship is “an essential ingredient of behavior change.” And what are the qualities of a good relationship of supportive intervention like therapy or tutoring? Carl Rogers states that all good therapists or supportive interveners manifest a real concern for those in their charge. They direct to these individuals, in Roger’s terms, “unconditional positive regard” by demonstrating a basic interest, concern, and desire to help another human being. Empathetic understanding expressed as honesty or a genuine openness of character is the second quality. The more this quality is perceived or felt by clients or students, the more impact it has on them.

Rogers places such a high premium upon the nature of the interpersonal relationship between therapist and client because so many of the people who enter in therapy are “hurt”—they are suffering from negative feelings or emotions, interpersonal problems, and inadequate and unsatisfying behaviors. The same is often true of individuals who come to a writing center. They, too, are “hurt” in that they display insecurities about their abilities as writers or even as academic learners, express fear to the tutor that they will be treated in the same judgmental or abusive way that they have been treated by teachers or fellow students before, or exhibit behavior patterns of anxiety, self-doubt, negative cognition, and procrastination that only intensify an already difficult situation.

“I know you’re going to tear this paper to shreds,” they say, “but here goes anyway.”

“T’ve never been able to write. This is hopeless.”

“I know you can’t help me, but I thought I’d try the writing center anyway.”

Or maybe they are defensive: “This teacher gives dumb assignments. If he’d just give me something I could write about, I know I’d do better.”

Sometimes they are self-deceived: “I’ve always made A’s in English in high school, so I know I should be making A’s in college, too.”

Other times they are self-defeating: “Can you help me with this paper? It’s due at 2:00.”

“Well, that only gives us thirty minutes.”

“I know, but maybe you could go over it and help me write an ending.”

By and large, the students who come “hurt” to a writing center are those who suffer from writer’s block or a high degree of inhibiting anxiety associated with the process of producing writing that will be evaluated by others. These students demonstrate the principle endorsed by Rogers and other humanistic educators that learning is not simply a cognitive process. These students do not have difficulty writing because of any inherent flaws of limitations in the type of instruction they have received from their teachers or because they necessarily lack abilities as writers. Instead, they represent individuals whose talents as writers and as academic learners can be realized only within a specific set of conditions and circumstances.
C. H. Patterson, in *Theories of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, indicates that, for these types of individuals with inherent abilities but inhibiting fears, the psychoanalytic concept of information theory may provide the most productive conceptual understanding and approach. This theory "views the individual as actively attending to, selecting, operating on, organizing, and transforming the information provided by the environment and by internal sources. Thus, the individual defines stimuli and events and constructs his or her own world" (668).

For the tutor, "information-processing psychology is concerned with understanding the nature of internal events, and more particularly, processes occurring within the individual as he or she handles and organizes his or her experience" (Wexler and Rice 15-20). Achieving the goals and possibilities of this theory, or of any client-centered theory, requires an empathetic bond between tutor and student in the interventive process. When such a structure is established by the tutor, the relationship that develops is experienced by the student as "safe, secure, free from threat, and supporting but not supportive" (Patterson 498). Rogers describes this process as "one dealing with warm living people who are dealt with by warm living counselors" (Patterson 499).

Some might argue against or minimize the importance of the relationship that develops between tutor and student or claim that, even though this relationship is potent in itself, it really bears little resemblance to the relationships established in a psychoanalytic setting. Truax and Carkhuff, in *Toward Effective Counseling and Psychotherapy*, would contend, however, that fundamental and profound similarities exist amongst all the interventive processes, from therapy, to education, to the managerial interactions of employer and employee. They state the "the person (whether a counselor, therapist or teacher) who is better able to communicate warmth, genuineness and accurate empathy is more effective in interpersonal relationships no matter what the goal of the interaction" (116-117).

Most of what goes on in a writing center is talking and the range of interpersonal interactions available through words. In coming to a writing center for assistance, students must explain to a tutor what they want and what they hope to achieve. In the course of this type of interaction, the students make themselves vulnerable in opening themselves up to understanding or misunderstanding, judgment or acceptance, approval or disapproval.

Jim W. Corder, in an interesting essay title "A New Introduction to Psychoanalysis, Taken as a Version of Modern Rhetoric," describes psychoanalysis, from a rhetorical perspective, as "the talking cure." Thomas Szasz calls psychotherapy "iatrology," or "healing words" (29). Psychotherapy, like rhetoric, understands the power of words, especially "healing words."
As psychotherapists or tutors, we function like the old medicine man in Ceremony, the novel by Leslie Silko, who says, "That was the responsibility that went with being human... the story behind each word must be told so that there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said" (35). As psychotherapists or tutors, we share with those in our charge the responsibility that goes with being human. And in our very human roles, we share the powers of language to express emotions, to inspire creative thought, and to change perceptions of the self and others. We share the power of language to transform thought and being.

It is to psychotherapy that we owe the clearest model of the types of transformative interactions and outcomes that can occur in a writing center setting. For psychotherapy to be successful, (1) two persons are in contact; (2) one person, the client, generally in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable or anxious; (3) the other person, the therapist, is congruent in the relationship; (4) the therapist experiences unconditional positive regard toward the client; (5) the therapist experiences an empathetic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference; and (6) the client perceives, or least to a minimal degree, the therapist's empathetic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference. As a result of the process of psychotherapy, (1) the client is more congruent, more open to his or her experiences, less defensive; (2) as a result, the client is more realistic, objective, extensional in his or her perceptions; (3) the client is consequently more effective in problem-solving; (4) as a result of the increased congruence of self and experience, his or her vulnerability to threat is reduced; (5) as a result of the lowering of his or her vulnerability to threat or defeat, the client has an increased degree of self-regard; and (6) as a result of all of the above factors, the client's behavior is more creative, more uniquely adaptive and more fully expressive of his or her own values (Patterson 486-87).

If we substitute tutor and student here for therapist and client, the model holds true for the learning strategies and experiential awarenesses that go on in a writing center environment. A good psychoanalyst and a good tutor both function to awaken individuals to their potentials and to channel their creative energies toward self-enhancing ends. Within the focus of the one-on-one tutorial, the student and tutor work to interpret the cognitive strategies the student has employed to be expressive, insightful, concise, and clear. To work with the student in deciphering and assessing creative processes, in suggesting new ways to interpret data, methods of inquiry, and philosophical perspectives, and in determining a philosophy of personal expression requires from the tutor a sensitivity to the affective and intellectual dimensions of the student's personality. At the core of tutoring and psychotherapy are the interactional dynamics of a search for insight that involves an intimate transference of trust and vulnerability between two individuals intent upon and intimately involved in finding answers.
Jim W. Corder states that "human frailty sets immediate and overpowering limits":

Every utterance belongs to, exists in, issues from, and reveals a rhetorical universe. Every utterance comes from somewhere (its inventive origin), emerges as a structure, and manifests itself as a style. All of the features of utterance—invention, structure, and style—cycle, reciprocate, and occur simultaneously. Each of us is a gathering place for a host of rhetorical universes. Some of them we share with others, indeed with whole cultures; some of them we inhabit alone, and some of them we occupy without knowing that we do. Each of us is a busy corner where multiple rhetorical universes intersect. (141)

Part of the transformative power of a writing center is that it is a setting in which rhetorical universes are shared. In this way, the tutoring process, like the psychotherapeutic process, partakes in the power of language to reshape and empower consciousness. James Hillman in Re-Visioning Psychology calls words "independent carriers of soul between people" (9). Perhaps no better description of the interaction that goes on in tutoring and in therapy can be found. If it is true that words transform consciousness, and changes in consciousness transform the self, then language-based processes like therapy and tutoring provide a dynamic for self-awareness and self-actualization. To this extent, they are liberatory philosophies in the manner that Paolo Freire uses that term to describe how the power of words can empower the consciousnesses of ourselves and others.

Perhaps, when all is said and done, the old medicine man of Leslie Silko's Ceremony is a Freudian, believing in the humanness of liberation and in the power of reintegrating consciousness through the language of one's tribe. Perhaps the old medicine man works daily in writing centers across America, responding to the questions of those who come, apprentice fashion, to learn.

"Can you help me with my writing?"
"Yes, I can, but first let us start with your words."

Works Cited


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