

# *Teaching Psychoanalytic Studies: Towards a New Culture of Learning in Higher Education*

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## **Introduction**

A recurring theme in recent discussions (e.g., see Greenberg, 1999) is the tendency towards the standardisation of psychotherapy training and one can argue that the values and practices of universities have been influential in this process<sup>1</sup> (see end). The aim of this paper, however, is to turn to the academic sphere, to explore the reverse side of the coin, and the increasing influence of therapeutic culture upon the university, and discuss the process of teaching psychoanalytic studies to university undergraduates as an example of this. I do not use the term ‘therapy culture’ in this context to refer to the content and form of psychotherapy training per se, but rather to connote a broader cultural shift, in which the values, practices and emotional self reflective processes associated with the more private clinical sphere of therapeutic encounters, are now more widely used in the public sphere more generally, and in non-clinical settings such as universities. As Richards (1999a, p. 13) points out, “(therapy culture) ... is marked by, amongst other things, a preoccupation with feeling and relationships and a belief that emotional life can be better managed through a process of learning about one’s feelings and one’s relationships”.

This cultural development points to a shift in the ways in which we identify with social institutions and relate to authority. I will use different aspects of psychoanalytic and cultural theory, and in particular, the work of Richards (1999a,b) to argue that as the ethos of the therapeutic has become more influential in public life, the containing functions of different social institutions have also shifted to become less rigid and authoritarian. I draw on feminist psychoanalytic theory of Minsky (1998), Benjamin (1990) and others to develop this argument, and discuss the gendered implications of what Richards (1999a) refers to as the cultural “turn towards the therapeutic”. I will argue that in the university, as generally, this has allowed a more feminised environment to emerge in which a more fluid model of object relations can exist and grow between individuals and their external worlds. This of course mirrors the more tangible changes in the social and political relations between men and women. This has also created the possibility for new forms of psychic investment and projections that are less governed by the more rigid and defensive values of the old patriarchal moral order, and which allow for more complex and active relationships with authority to emerge, which create the space for movement, otherness and change. As I go on to discuss, in the context of the university and university learning, this more feminised fluid way of relating implies a more permissively reflexive environment and a less split off relationship to learning, and to real and imagined intellectual authorities that exist there.

To illustrate this cultural shift, and the potentials for a more feminised environment

I draw on my experience of teaching psychoanalytic studies to third year undergraduate students on the Psychosocial Studies degree at the University of East London, and explore the processes of teaching psychoanalytic studies to students in higher education and the usefulness of doing so.<sup>2</sup> In using observations taken from an undergraduate Psychosocial Studies lecture and seminar, the aim is to illustrate the possibilities of a more feeling-ful way in which students are learning as a result of the intersection of the therapeutic culture and feminised environment and their influence upon the university teaching and learning.

From the outset, one should point out that University Psychoanalytic Studies courses are distinct from psychotherapy courses in a number of ways. For example, in contrast to the latter, psychoanalytic studies courses are not obliged to contain clinical cases and material and so need to be distinguished from university psychotherapy courses which do (See Stanton's discussion of this point, 1996). As Figlio (1996, p. 44) argues, psychoanalytic studies has a different set of objectives to that of clinical trainings, "... (it) ... does not aim to train clinicians, and is free to think of psychoanalysis as a form of knowledge and to make use of it wherever it seems helpful".

Those members of staff who teach psychoanalytically related courses within the Psychosocial Studies degree have different ideas about how this should be done and what the teaching of psychoanalytic theory can achieve. Brown and Price (1999) argue in relation to this issue, that the teaching of psychoanalysis to students, alongside a more psychoanalytically informed awareness of the unconscious dynamics that occur in the classroom, *can* produce a more reflective approach to learning that is less split off from the domain of unconscious processes and affect; but only if certain supportive conditions prevail and these are all too often absent. And as Stanton (1996, p. 11) points out, there is no 'educative' substitute for 'clinical work' and no amount of intellectual reading about psychoanalysis can replace 'personal analysis'. However, I argue that it may be possible to borrow from and apply to the academic sphere certain aspects of that culture, in such a way as to encourage a more reflexive approach to both teaching and learning, despite limitations of space and resourcing.

### **The culture of therapy and the narcissistic self**

One can relate the growing popularity of psychoanalytic studies courses to the emergence of 'therapy culture'. As outlined in my introduction, the latter is associated with the contemporary preoccupation with the emotional self and the increasing representation of affects and their significance in the public sphere (Elliott, 1996; Lasch, 1991; Richards, 1999a,b; Sennett, 1977). The growth of therapeutic culture is closely associated with the rise of modernity and the loss of more traditional social structures and forms of authority that once played a key role in the construction of identity and meaningful experience (Elliott, 1996; Rieff, 1966). The development of psychoanalysis can be seen in this context, and emerged in the cities as part of a response to the disorienting pace and conditions of modernity and the metropolis (Richards, 1989).

As historians and sociologists have documented, the language and reflective emotional processes associated with therapeutic practice and clinical trainings, have throughout the twentieth century moved beyond that more private context, to the broader sphere of public life and everyday experience where the values associated with therapeutic practice have become increasing widespread (Elliott, 1996; Lasch, 1991; Richards, 1989; Rieff, 1966). Current sociologists have argued that a central aspect of this cultural shift is the loss or the loosening of the traditional boundaries that once marked parameters of public

and private experience (Lasch, 1979; Sennett, 1977). The traditionally opposite territories of on the one hand, social and political relations, and on the other, the private sphere of personal experience and feelings, have lost their distinctiveness, and the emotionalisation of the public sphere has instead become an increasing feature of modern life (Richards, 1999a,b). This disruption of private/public boundaries is reflected in the permeability and cross pollination of values between different institutions and organisations, as formerly aligned with very different concerns and values, and the influence of the welfare or therapy sector upon organisations such as academic institutions (and vice versa) is a good example of this.

However, there has been a certain amount of debate as to value of this move towards the therapeutic, and the meaningfulness of this trend towards the emotionalisation of public life. Public anxieties about the ‘Dianafication’ of society, or concerns on behalf of the old establishment about what they see as the worrying rise of an ‘Oprah Winfrey’ tendency within public life provide popular examples of this. This scepticism about the value and authenticity of therapy culture or perhaps, for some psychotherapists, a fear of the vulgarisation of therapeutic discourse by association, also reflects the concerns of clinical practitioners who question the value of psychoanalytic studies courses in the ‘secular’ academic context of university class rooms. This is not surprising, as the high value that universities place on the rational mind and intellect would seem to contradict the more intuitive and reflective processes associated with the kind of training that takes place in a psychoanalytic psychotherapy training.

Academic and cultural critics have also made a link between the ‘dumbing down’ of psychoanalytic concerns and the emergence of a superficial therapy culture, which they relate negatively to the growth of narcissism as a social and psychological phenomenon. Perhaps the most well known exponent of this view is the writer Christopher Lasch (1991), who argues that the values and practices of modern consumerism, and the loss of traditional forms of paternal authority have helped to promote a particular narcissistic personality type which lacks ego boundaries and the kind of moral responsibility associated with the paternal superego. Such a personality type is unable to accept everyday disappointment and the limits of subjectivity. For Lasch (1991) (and more recently Craib, 1994) therapy culture connotes the kind of narcissistic superficiality associated with consumer culture, where the preoccupation with the ‘promotional self’ (Wernick, 1991) has become dominant. Here, as in other areas of life, it is argued that psychotherapy is often reduced to a consumer leisure activity, and as a way to flatter the subject, or to bolster up a fragile self, without exploring the more messy and even profound aspects of experience. The implications of this negative perspective on therapy culture specifically for the teaching of psychoanalytic studies are not good. For example, it would imply that such courses feed into a broader narcissistic cultural pattern, where the social and political aspects of subjectivity are ignored in favour of some pseudo celebration of the self. One could argue that in the context of the new mass higher education system, this is even more the case, where the large numbers of students would seem to mitigate against all but the most superficial readings of psychoanalytic concepts and their more challenging meanings.

### **Therapy culture and the feminisation of institutions and the environment**

However, this may be an over-simplified reading of the popular interest in the therapeutic and over-pessimistic. For example, feminist critics have pointed out that Lasch’s (1991) views are implicitly gendered insofar that they reflect a broader concern

about the feminisation of society and a crisis of patriarchal authority, something which for Lasch is related (e.g., Benjamin, 1990). In bemoaning the replacement of the old oedipal superego by the amorality of Narcissus, Lasch (1991) points to a feminised society, over-determined by primitive oral appetites associated negatively with the pre-oedipal mother. The implication appears to be that without the Oedipal father to police the boundaries of subjectivity, the self loses itself instead in the pre-oedipal maternal sphere of irrational oceanic one-ness and narcissistic gratification (Benjamin, 1990; Frosh, 1994).

As suggested earlier, one can give a more positive interpretation of therapy culture and its relationship to the feminisation of the environment. I suggested that Richard's (1999a) argument is not so much about the loss or crisis of paternal authority, but rather signifies a shift towards a mode of object relating that is less split off, and instead allows for more expressive and complex ways of relating to others and institutions in the social sphere. Here, Richards appears to be describing certainly a less masculine cultural environment in which the values and functions previously ascribed to masculinity and paternal authority have become less clearly defined as 'male' and less segregated from the values and functions associated with femininity.<sup>3</sup>

Richards (1999a) relates this process to a change in the psychosocial dynamics of what he terms 'emotional management'. He suggests different social institutions support different 'psychic functions' insofar as they invite different psychic projections. If we can acknowledge the possibility of an increasingly feminised environment, it may be that in certain contexts and situations, the kind of projections that were once governed by the paternal superego, have now become infused with affects more usually associated with femininity. For example, social institutions such as the Law or Higher Education, that once represented more rigid forms of rational patriarchal authority, have become influenced by the more therapeutic and 'nurturant' values associated with the caring and welfare professions (Richards, 1999a). This has a particular relevance for and application to psychoanalytically informed degrees such as Psychosocial Studies that aim to equip students for work professionally in social care settings, and for the more sympathetic learning environment in which it takes place. I now turn to the context of undergraduate teaching and learning.

### **University learning and therapeutic space**

The university provides a good example of the kind of changes associated with therapy culture described by Richards. The experience of taking a new university degree such as Psychosocial Studies is very different from those in the past which were informed and underpinned by more traditional modes of authority. Clearly, the identifications and projections associated with the institutions of higher education have always in the past been mixed and contradictory. For example, universities have tended to provide spaces for students to kick the establishment and engage in generational rebellion. However, this was until recently, an experience that was on the whole, limited to the white middle-classes. Today, as in the example of the 'new' University of East London, it is impossible to describe the students in quite the same way, as they come from so many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. A high proportion of students are non-white, working class and classified as 'mature'; they come to UEL following an access course at one of the local colleges. The altered nature of the student body is also reflected in the staff, many of whom work on part time or temporary contracts and so may not be

as socialised into the university system as tenured staff of previous years, and thus bring other values and experiences to bear on their teaching.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, the non-traditional academic background of students enables them to challenge and apply the theoretical concepts in new ways. However, many of these students also struggle to cope with the demands of the higher educational system. For example, there is also less money for the luxury of studying for its own sake and the need to achieve good grades is often present in the minds of students who are wary of being bold and taking risks in their essays and so on. In this sense, one can argue that students have become more functional and instrumental in their approach to learning. However, there are also those whose personal and social lives are transformed by the experience of Higher Education. The Psychosocial studies degree attracts a considerable number of such students and provides a useful example of the kind of psychological and cultural shifts described above.

Psychosocial studies has existed as an area of teaching since 1983 and was set up by psychologists and sociologists working at the University of East London who wanted to adopt a more interdisciplinary approach to their work. In particular, the aim was to acknowledge the importance of subjective experience and a more reflexive approach to learning. A central theme of the degree is 'identity work', and the ways in which identities are shaped in the interaction between psychic and social experience.<sup>5</sup> The degree is unusual in that a high proportion of its content includes psychoanalytic theory and research, something which is more usually taught at postgraduate level on Psychoanalytic Studies MAs.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the Psychosocial students go on to work in the broad spheres of therapy, counselling and welfare and an awareness of unconscious processes can aid them in that work. Because a high proportion of our students are classed as 'mature', and through necessity are already in paid employment, interestingly, many already work in the therapeutic and welfare sectors whilst also studying for their degree. These students often refer to this aspect of their lives in seminars and therefore apply different psychoanalytic concepts to their experience of work in the course of discussions as a way of bringing that theoretical material to life. Before turning to some observations of a psychosocial studies seminar, it would be helpful to contextualise it, and give some information about the course in which it is taught, that I go on to describe below.

### **Teaching psychoanalytic studies**

The course (or 'unit') called 'Psychoanalysis and Society', runs for twelve weeks and takes the form of two-hourly lectures and a one-hour seminar group. The unit combines different theories from psychoanalysis, sociology and cultural studies, and applies these ideas to different aspects of subjectivity and society. The course draws on the different psychoanalytic schools (e.g., Lacanian, Kleinian and Object Relations) and students apply them to the social issues or cultural phenomena under discussion. Given that the students are not dealing with live patients, but rather with culture and cultural artefacts and so on, they can (in contrast to therapists) be as omnipotent and bold as they like in free associating around their objects of analysis, even if in the course of discussions, their initial 'interpretations' are raw and even a bit off-the-wall.

At the end of the unit, students have to complete a socio-cultural case-study based essay, where they produce a piece of work that enables them to think about and draw on their own experience and apply it to the topic under investigation. The kind of essay topics chosen by the students often spring from concerns that reflect the diverse cultural

backgrounds of the students. For example, in the past, students have applied psychoanalytic theory to a wide range of issues such as white racism, 'black on black' violence, female castration, the psychosocial dynamics of mixed marriages, shoplifting, the mourning of Princess Diana, and the appeal of Bingo. Students do not write in an explicitly autobiographical way, but rather, are more self aware of the connections between themselves and the topics under investigation. These connections are most obviously made during the small group seminars where students get the chance to discuss their work, and also in the individual tutorials that take place between the students and tutors.

We should not forget, that there are potential problems of teaching psychoanalytic material in a non-clinical setting. For teachers and students alike, these are related to "the intrusion of unconscious material which belongs more to their personal analysis than to the classroom or lecture theatre" (Stanton, 1966, p. 11). An important difference to clinical trainings in this context, is the lack of supervisory support for lecturers, who may or may not be receiving psychoanalytic psychotherapy, or clinical supervision for their clinical work outside the university. One solution may be for the lecturer to over-intellectualise and retreat into abstract theory. Minsky (1998, p. 214) points to the tensions of teaching theories of early and 'smelly' infantile behaviour in an academic setting. As she goes on to argue, this may be why (with a few exceptions) the majority of psychoanalytic studies courses and programmes in higher education tend to draw on the more 'fragrant' discourse based theories of Lacan which seem to sit more easily with the intellectual context of academic work than Kleinian and object relations theories which address the more messy, physical and primitive relationship with the maternal body and the roots of subjective bodily experience (Minsky, 1998).

However, the psychosocial studies students are more than familiar with the kind of 'stinky' texts described by Minsky. The vast majority of students on the course are female, and many are mothers, something which often plays a significant role in the way they approach learning and actively respond to theories of pre-oedipal subjectivity, maternal ambivalence, child development and so on. The themes of femininity, together with mother/daughter relationships occupy a central place in the lecture and the seminar discussion described below. The seminar described below also shows the popularity of Freud with students, particularly in the case of those who have a cultural background that is characterised by a strong paternal presence and patriarchal authority. As my observations of the seminar hopefully show, these women are bright, witty and full of life and certainly do not 'lack' in the Freudian or Lacanian sense. However (as Juliet Mitchell argued back in 1977), Freudian psychoanalysis *describes* as much as proscribes the dynamics of patriarchal power relations and as such provides a useful set of ideas to deconstruct and critique it.

In turning to those observations, the aim is to provide the reader with a taste of what it is like to teach and learn psychoanalytic studies in a new university.<sup>7</sup> I hope to illustrate the usefulness and relevance of those psychoanalytic ideas for a group of female undergraduates and I then go on to discuss the unconscious implications of that experience. In what follows, I focus mainly upon my observations of teaching and learning in a seminar, however, in order to contextualise that experience, I begin with some brief observations of giving a psychoanalytic studies lecture.

### **Some observations of giving a lecture**

As pointed out elsewhere (Dartington, 1999), giving a lecture is a symbolic 'ritual event' which as a low-tech affair, relies upon the direct contact between staff and students. In

contrast to many aspects of the more fragmented experience of new university education, students can turn up, sit down in a communal setting and expect to be given something by a lecturer such as myself. My role in this context is to prepare and deliver a well researched and structured one hour lecture (or in some cases two, which may be delivered on the trot, with a short break for tea) from which they can take notes and use for set assignments. This functional aspect is offset by the student's wish for pleasure and intellectual stimulation and increasingly students want lectures to be amusing and entertaining. As I go on to describe below, at the initial stage of the lecture, I am often aware of adopting a rather brittle, false self in order to deal with the daunting teaching task ahead. However, in my experience of this particular course, the lectures are not empty rituals, but provide a useful and kind structured environment for the transmission of ideas that can be actively taken up and used more creatively in seminars and assignments and also more broadly within the everyday lives of students more generally.

*Today, I am to give a lecture on 'Psychoanalytic understandings of femininity and the usefulness of these theories for feminism'. I arrive at the room, having spent the previous hour giving advice to anxious students about absent grant cheques, family problems and also about more academic-related problems such as essay plans and where to find relevant books. Consequently, I have had little time to check over my lecture notes, which I prepared last week. The lecture room has a vibrant atmosphere and seems full to bursting with over a hundred students, chattering and laughing, some of whom are sitting on the floor surrounded by bags and coats. There are also a few young children in the front row with their mothers, which is not unusual, and I make a mental note to watch my language, and remembering the lecture topic for today, I wonder if there is another term I can substitute for 'penis envy'.*

*The teaching task ahead suddenly seems enormous and I meet it head on by adopting a kind of jolly 'Julie Andrews' persona, as I march over to the windows and proceed to open the blinds in the manner of a nurse letting some air into a stuffy ward. Some of the students who are sitting near the window smile as I do this and it gives me a chance to break the ice and say hello. Today I have typed out and photocopied a definition of 'feminism' from a Feminist Reader, which is so broad and inclusive (as to accommodate absolutely every aspect of feminine subjectivity and struggle), that I'm not sure that it means anything at all. I hand out the A4 photocopies and a few minutes later, everyone looks reassured that they have been given something. "Okay", I announce loudly, "let's begin!" And the four children in the front row carry on drawing unperturbed.*

*I have given this lecture many times in various forms, and so one might expect that over the years it has become somewhat jaded and even formulaic. However, today, I find that I am in touch with the material and connect with its themes in a way that surprises me. The lecture is going well and the students have settled down and appear to be concentrating hard. For example, a sure sign of engagement is that the more disruptive students at the back have stopped giggling and those in the front row, nod and murmur in agreement at certain intervals, or even click their tongues and shake their heads with annoyance, or in good-humoured disbelief at some of the more outlandish psychoanalytic ideas about feminine 'lack'.*

Following the lecture, I then facilitate a one-hour seminar group discussion (of twenty students), around the same the same topic as the lecture. All the students in this particular seminar group are female and the majority are working class and come from different ethnic backgrounds. They are meant to have read a chapter from the course set

book by Rosalind Minsky (1998a) about feminist psychoanalytic accounts of femininity. As is often the case, some will not have got round to this. However, the book is nevertheless popular with students and (as I go onto discuss below) helps to provide a tangible sense of continuity and holding for the students who find her style warm and accessible.

### **Some observations of a seminar**

*On this occasion, the students drift in with cups of coffee and we arrange the seats into a circle. I take the register and ask if they have done the reading as outlined in the unit guide. They nod and sit there expectantly, waiting for me to speak. I ask if there are any questions they wish to ask about the lecture and they say nothing. Then suddenly, a student produces a newspaper and points to a sexist article in it about why mothers make bad employees. Perhaps not unexpectantly (as many of the women there are working mothers), the students begin to collectively tut. For some twenty minutes or so, nobody refers to the psychoanalytic theories as raised in the lecture, and instead they discuss in quite a heated manner the social and political inequalities that still exist for mothers. What appears to upset them most is that the newspaper article was written by a woman.*

*Then a young female student suddenly interrupts and asks if we have watched Ally McBeal on the television, as she points out: "I mean it's your lecture in a nutshell! I mean it's all in there!" she says excitedly. This is news to me and I'm not sure that I want my lecture to be put in the same nutty nutshell as Ally McBeal.<sup>8</sup> I ask the students if they watch Ally McBeal and the majority nod and laugh and say that they identify with her insecurities. As three of the younger students go on to point out, a strong theme in this context is the way that Ally is often criticised by other women for wearing short skirts and for showing her vulnerability. I ask who these 'other women' are? "Oh", they say, "you know, the ones who say they're feminist". Another student then goes on to describe an episode in which a working mother tries to sue her boss for unfair discrimination and this causes upset amongst the single working women who believe they work longer hours in the office. The student is ambiguous as to who it is she sympathises with; is it the mother who wants equal pay, or the single women who believe they work longer hours in the office? From her tone, I suspect it is the latter.*

*The collective sympathy we felt at the beginning of the group about sexist attitudes to working mothers appears to be fragmenting and I point this out to the group. More privately, I am concerned that I have become associated with the fantasy of the feminist bully, and that I am being too pushy about setting a feminist agenda for the students. I am also aware that a split has opened up in the group between the older students in the group who are mothers, and this younger group of non-mothers. An older Afro-Caribbean woman then says "but it's hard to stay at home, what with this government and everything!" Her friends around her nod and one Swedish mother says angrily, "yes but this only happens in the UK, in other countries men can take leave from work!" This piece of information provides an extra dimension to the conversation and produces some sense of movement to the discussion and a feeling of relief as everyone appears to agree with the need for some form of benign paternal help and support.*

*Following on from the discussion of social inequality and the lack of good-enough fathering, I ask the students if they find Nancy Chodorow's (1977) explanation of feminine subjectivity a useful and convincing argument? There is a pause and most look*



down at the set course book and begin to turn pages a bit pointlessly and nervously. I tell them not to worry about quoting or using the book, but rather to think a bit more about the Chodorow's basic argument about the centrality of mothers in the acquisition of gender. After more silence, I briefly sum up again the feminist object relations perspective and then wait for someone to respond. Then the young single student who identifies with Ally McBeal tells us that her mother much preferred her brother to herself and although she was accomplished at sports, her mother never came to watch her play. I ask her if she would like the seminar group to form a psychosocial studies cheerleading support group and while she smiles with pleasure, to my relief she says no.

Another woman then reminds the group that the psychotherapist Susie Orbach points to research that mothers feed boys more than girls and that girls are weaned earlier than their brothers. Then another student tells us that her mother hated her and loved her brother. This slightly shocking revelation is made all the more powerful because this woman is normally more of a listener and rarely speaks of herself in the context of group discussions. However, the discussion now feels more connected as the student calmly speaks of her difficult relationship with her mother. None of this feels gratuitously confessional and unsafe.

The discussion then takes another turn. One of the young mothers laughs and says (with a certain amount of confidence and pleasure) "oh dear! I feel really guilty, cos since doing this course I know that I'm really narcissistic because I have two boys and I'm really proud of them!" This particular student is from the self-named 'Epping Posy' who are all single mothers from Epping and share lifts to Barking. She laughs again with flirtatious pleasure and says "yea, Freud really got it right didn't he! I mean about babies as penis substitutes, I feel so proud of my boys and they know that, ... Are they my narcissistic objects?" I'm not sure what to say here. Her good humour is infectious and she is clearly not speaking from a position of lack. Another older Afro-Caribbean student mother say in more serious tones, "but like Freud said, what else is there? I mean in my culture the men are everything, you do as they say, they get very angry if you go out and make something, they want to do it; it's okay if we are mothers, but that's all".

I turn to them and say, "So you think that Freud provides a more useful explanation of femininity and your situation?" She and several others nod and then the proud mother of the two boys says, "yea, I think it's true about the power of the phallus and that language and culture is patriarchal". She tosses her long black hair again and laughs flirtatiously, "but I'm really proud of my boys, that is where I can be proud, yea, ... but is it narcissistic? I think Freud is right about that, is that a bad thing?" Seduced or rather caught up by the woman's own pleasure of her own achievement, I murmur something to the effect of "no, no, of course not ...", and another student says, "I think it's down to language ... I mean that is how we see ourselves", ... and then another asks "but how can we escape it?" This student holds the textbook in her hands, opens it and searches through a few of the pages as if looking for the words she is trying to find. As she goes on to say, "I mean as Lacan says, as soon as we say it, I mean that pre-oedipal thing that we want which is outside language, it's lost".

At this point, I am reminded of the character of Ally McBeal and her seeming inability to utter a whole sentence without falling over her words. In psychoanalytic terms, it is as if she is frustrated by the limitations of language to describe the dilemmas of feminine subjectivity. The problem of finding the right words to articulate feminine experience is

explored by the French Feminist psychoanalytic school (*Ecriture Feminine*) who, following Lacan, argue that women are forever consigned to the margins of language, which is governed by patriarchal laws (Marks and de Courtivron, 1981; see also Minsky, 1996, 1998a). However, in contrast to Lacan, this perspective urges women to challenge patriarchy by subverting the sign system and tuning into and celebrating the pre-oedipal rhythms of the maternal body. In referring to the latter, one student says, "I think I know what Cixous is on about; I mean I love music and so does my daughter, and it does get you nearer to something, you know? Like nearer to God ... is God a woman?" Some of the students laugh and say yea! The musical student returns to her theme; "yea, but men can do this too, I've seen them! Men can get in touch with that too"; "yes", says another, "but you should see my husband dance!" (more laughter from the group).

At this point I remind the group of the French psychoanalytic feminist Julia Kristeva (see *Moi*, 1986) who argues that men can also challenge patriarchal culture and imagine another way being by tuning into the 'semiotic' pre-oedipal rhythms and sounds of the maternal body. I ask the group about the implications of her ideas; for example does Kristeva say that men can 'do the dance' in the same way as women? More laughter ensues and then a more serious student says "I think what she's saying is that these are, well, qualities that are not normally allowed in the other, ... I mean, men and women, are only allowed to be different ..." The student's face reddens slightly and there is now an uncomfortable feeling in the room. Perhaps she reminds us of the difficulties of trying to imagine something beyond the dualities which underpin the ways in which we think about ourselves and our relation to others. "Yea, but we're not that much different really are we!" says the young Ally McBeal fan flushing slightly with annoyance, swinging the sides of her red bobbed haircut emphatically, as if to ward off some threat to her independence. The seminar has been running for over 50 minutes and it is time to bring it to a close to allow enough time for tea and cigarettes before the next lecture in ten minutes. I remind them of the seminar reading for next week and we all murmur our goodbyes and get up to leave.

### **Discussion: new spaces for learning**

The teaching process involves an interplay of unconscious projections and phantasies and a central facilitating factor in this process is the containing environment in which it takes place. A central tenet of psychoanalysis is to live with uncertainty and not knowing, something that contradicts with the functional requirements of academia. Yet, psychosocial students are assessed mainly by continual written assessments, which means that they take an instrumental approach to learning. This in turn affects the form and processes of teaching and learning. Given the lack of time (units are only twelve weeks long), and the pressures of assessment, it is tempting for the lecturer to instigate a one-way feeding process, whereby students are fed and crammed full of the information necessary to complete an essay. In contrast to the smaller seminar groups, little space is given in the lecture period itself for interaction between teacher and student and there is a danger that a maternal transference is set up which is over-determined by feelings of dependency or helplessness on the part of students who may feel overwhelmed and impinged upon, or who respond passively and follow the lecture in the manner of taking dictation. In this instance, the teacher/student relationship is overdetermined by the instrumental environment of the university.

However, drawing on the above observations of the lecture and seminar taken together, it is possible to take a more complex and positive view of the psychodynamic implications of the teaching and learning process in this context, together with the environment in which it takes place. The ideas of D.W. Winnicott (1974) are useful here and in particular his ideas regarding the role of the maternal transference and the facilitating environment in helping creative learning to take place. Winnicott and other theorists of the British school of psychoanalysis, increasingly focused their attention upon the earliest months of life as being crucial for later development of the individual. In doing so, they saw the relationship between mother and baby as having primary significance and so moved away from the earlier Freudian emphasis on the child's relation to the father. Rather than the paternal role, the maternal function became the focus par excellence for this school of psychoanalytic thought. The latter has a particular relevance when applied to the broader context of therapy culture and the feminisation of the environment and institutions. I shall now turn to his ideas about the transitional psychic space where the self is created and affirmed and where communication takes place between mother and child.

Winnicott describes how initially the infant is not aware of the mother as a separate entity and has an illusion that it is creating the good things that occur (e.g., the good feed). This, for Winnicott, is part of a necessary developmental period of omnipotence. If that omnipotence is prematurely disturbed, there is an experience of impingement, something persecutory. Rather than having the illusion of creating something, the infant can only react. Too much of this leads to a compliance with the outside world and ultimately the formation of a 'false self', which is forever governed by a sense of inauthenticity. In healthy development however, the period of omnipotence gradually and un-traumatically gives way to an acknowledgement of external reality as the infant creatively finds that which paradoxically, was already waiting to be found.

In order to facilitate the transition from the experience of the object as something subjectively perceived, to one that is objectively perceived, there is the utilisation of 'the transitional object'. Winnicott described this (e.g., an old piece of blanket, a teddy bear) as being the first not-me object, yet one that at the same time remains a possession of the infant and that can in part be treated with the same omnipotent qualities that governed the relationship to the primary mother. As the relation to the external world becomes more of a feature in development, the role of the transitional object diminishes and gradually falls away. From then on, the transitional area will spread out into the whole cultural field in which creativity and the relation between subjective and objective experience are in constant play and interplay. Through her adaptation to her baby's needs, the mother creates and indeed *is* the facilitating environment in which omnipotent illusion can at first exist and then gradually give way to an awareness of externality and individuality. These processes of infancy retain their relevance throughout life. The facilitating environment, at first a maternal adaptation to the infant, becomes in later life, the place in which there can be discovery, creativity and learning (see Day Sclater, 1998 and Yates and Day Sclater, 2000). It is a space that can exist between two people in a relationship, or in a more cultural context, one that in the right circumstances, can exist in the educational institution, and it is here that my present focus lies.

One can apply Winnicott's ideas to the lecture and seminar group described above, to explore the different elements that help to create a good enough environment in that context. Here, one can argue that the ideas that are being discussed and developed in the seminar and that have been described in the previous lecture, are helping the students to think about themselves in new self-reflexive ways. In the first instance, it is the ritualistic

form and content of the lecture and the course book, which is the facilitating environment, and provides the kind of maternal provision described by Winnicott that enables learning to take place. The theoretical ideas given out in the lecture and course book, are part of what holds the students and helps transition to occur. If the lecture is to do its work, then the students need to actively possess and play omnipotently with the material they have been given and make it their own. The seminar student who thinks she already knows what I have said, because she has heard it before from Ally McBeal is perhaps a good example of this process at work. The transitional work, which lies at the heart of creative learning, can then really take shape in the seminars where students take the ideas of the lecture or the set reading, transform them and feed them back in the context of shared discussion. In this sense, and as Wright (1999) has argued in a different context, ideas can be likened to transitional objects, which in the continual and dialectical movement between self and other, are able to move one into another realm of experience, whilst affirming the possibilities of the self.

Another important aspect of a good-enough holding environment is to allow for not-knowing, which is akin to Winnicott's concept of 'unintegration' (see Abrams, 1996). However, being able to not know is quite a feat in the context of the university, where everyone is supposed to know. Not knowing is about tolerating uncertainty, and being open to the unexpected, something that sits uneasily with traditional models of scientific thought which is about mastering the unknown. However, knowing too much can be read as a defence, and as a form of compliance. For Winnicott, not-knowing is a pre-requisite for learning, for discovering and using the object and provides a space for something else to emerge, where students can create and ask their own questions. The form and content of psychoanalytic studies can help to mitigate against the more instrumental forces in academic learning which in the contemporary climate of uncertainty and change, respond by increased standardisation at institutional and classroom levels, thus closing down avenues for critical thought.

### **Conclusion: towards a new culture of learning**

I have argued that today, there has been a cultural shift in which the values and concerns associated with therapy culture have entered those arenas such as Higher Education where previously the more rigid values and ways of relating associated with patriarchal authority held sway. For example, in the past, students would have had little access to psychoanalytic concepts of the unconscious and certainly would have had little space to relate the more subversive and poetic concepts of French psychoanalytic feminism or those of the British school of Object Relations to their own subjective experiences. The psychoanalytic content of the lectures and seminars can more directly facilitate the kind of creative processes described by Winnicott. This is because it directly addresses the sphere of emotional life, something that resonates with students and gives them a language to talk about themselves, something to which arguably everyone is receptive.

However, the value of learning psychoanalytic studies and its relationship to therapy culture goes beyond the benefits associated with its content. One can also point to the *form* of the teaching and learning (as described above), which together with the environment in which it takes place, is analogous to the processes described by Winnicott in his model of healthy creativity. When using his ideas, one needs to be wary of infantilising the students, and of setting the lecturer up as the good mother. However, Winnicott's concept of the maternal environment and care, can be used metaphorically in the context of higher education to describe a pattern of relating in the lecture or

seminar room, that in contrast to the more rigid forms associated with patriarchal authority, (and a transference relationship governed by the superego) is by nature of the transitional phenomena he describes, more fluid and provides a less compliant relationship between subject and object (e.g., student and theory, lecturer and student) than might otherwise be the case.

I began this chapter, by pointing to the anxieties about standardisation of psychoanalytic trainings. One could also point to a similar trend in Higher Education, especially in the new universities, where the culture of accountability and league tables, together with the financial pressure to recruit high numbers of students has become an increasing reality. This has helped to create anxiety for both students and staff, who are trying to protect a teaching and learning environment that is not quantifiable. One cannot (some might say unfortunately) separate the rise of psychoanalytic studies courses from this context of consumerism. Students are now fee-paying consumers and as with psychotherapy trainings, universities are increasingly subject to the economic pressures of the market. This paper has barely addressed the commercial aspects of therapy culture, but given the popular and commercial interest in therapeutic concerns, it is perhaps not surprising that psychoanalytic studies courses have grown in number. However, I have argued that it may be, that far from helping to reproduce the more superficial narcissistic traits of therapy consumption discussed earlier, psychoanalytic studies can help to mitigate against the less challenging, consumer-friendly, standardised content of much contemporary university education which fails to challenge the common-sense of the those engaged with it (Hall, 1996).

Psychoanalytic thinking is, at its best, about challenging the obvious and disrupting the normative models of subjectivity that limit experience. It should usefully disturb and unsettle the mind in such a way that students and lecturers are reminded of the different and transient layers of experience, thought and feelings that are always in process and which mesh together unevenly in the course of one's life. In troubling the boundaries of thought and knowledge in this way, the aim is to help students to problematise the tensions of difference, inherent in the boundaries between self and other (as in the lecture on femininity). The kind of learning and insights it can produce, can feed into and help to create an intellectual culture that is able to incorporate the more hidden and reflective qualities associated with 'insight' rather than those more traditional models of learning associated with logos and male rationality (Minsky, 1998). Students can then take these skills, insights and ways of relating into the workplace, to influence that environment. In this sense, and as Schwartz (1999) argues, the university is able to facilitate a broader cultural process which enables people to think beyond and challenge the more limited models of the self, and those definitions of subjectivity which for commercial or scientific purposes either reify the heady business of objectivity or sentimentalise feelings of the 'heart'.

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## Notes

- [1] These influences have taken a number of forms; for example at a more concrete level, one can point to the academic links that have been made between psychotherapy training organisations and universities, in terms of MA accreditation and so on. This development is also connected the emphasis that is now often placed upon the end of training essay, where the work (anecdotal evidence suggests) is now assessed more according to academic criteria. It may be that this willingness to take on the values of academia is related to commercial pressures and a growing insecurity amongst training organisations about their validity within a cultural climate that has grown increasingly hostile to psychoanalytic psychotherapy more generally, and where more accessible, short-term forms of therapy trainings (for example counselling courses) have gained in popularity.
- [2] There are parallels to be made here with the arguments made by Heather Price (2000), who applies the work of Winnicott to argue that the gendered superiority of girls' reading abilities in the classroom at infant school is at psychological and social levels of experience, related to the more immediate feminised nature of the school learning environment and also to the vibrant and playful 'girl's culture' that exists more generally and which feeds into it.
- [3] The gendered duality of emotional experience involves an interplay of cultural and psychological factors in this process; for further discussion see Day Sclater and Yates (1999), Lupton (1998) and Minsky (1996 & 1998).
- [4] With reference to the increasing numbers of lectures who have other jobs and contracts outside the university and who bring a different experience and cultural capital to teaching, see Rustin's recent article (2000) who relates this phenomenon to post-fordism and 'the network society'.
- [5] The concept of 'identity work' was used by Michael Rustin in a recent UEL Department of Human Relations staff meeting.
- [6] The department of human relations (of which the Psychosocial Studies subject area is a part) also runs a Psychoanalytic studies MA at the Tavistock clinic in North London.
- [7] These observations of the lecture and seminar are not systematic scientific recorded studies, and the method does not derive from any established scientific or therapeutic method (as for example in 'infant observation'). Instead, the accounts given are highly subjective and are written from memory after the events described. The narratives are inter-dispersed with comments of my own which are drawn from my considerable experience as an academic lecturer in the field. The aim is not to provide a word by word verbatim account, but rather to convey a mood and give a flavour of the experience of teaching and learning psychoanalysis in a particular university setting. The names and descriptions of students are anonymous and disguised.
- [8] For those readers not familiar with the American Channel 4 television series, the character of 'Ally' portrays a scatty young lawyer in a high-powered U.S. legal firm of competitive men and women. Ally is depicted as struggling with a number of feminine dilemmas, and is portrayed as often unable to cope with the contradictions of her particular post-feminist heterosexual identity (i.e., the wish to be accepted as waif-like and pretty, to be desired and loved by the perfect man and succeed in a tough professional career).

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