Between teaching and

Between Teaching and Containing –

The Transition from Student to Therapeutic Professional
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Running Head: BETWEEN TEACHING AND CONTAINING

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Abstract

The present paper is of the position that acquiring knowledge in therapeutic professions such as social work takes place in an intermediate zone that exists between teaching and containing and involves terms from the realm of therapy, the main one being projective identification. The role of the teacher is to reduce the student's initial anxiety, to be able to contain expressions of anger and aggression in the face of this anxiety, to process it and to return it in a tolerable form that will enable internalization of the knowledge. This Interactive Process facilitating the transition from student to therapeutic professional.

Key Words: Teaching, Therapeutic Professions, Containing, Projective Identification
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Introduction
Teaching is an interactive process which takes place between teachers and students. Teaching therapeutic subjects involves imparting knowledge and professional skills. Interaction is a key factor in the academic training of students for therapeutic professions such as social work, professions, which not only require theoretical studies, but also require students to develop interpersonal skills, communication skills, and a capacity for self-observation. The paper suggests that there may be a link between student anxiety and the actual course material taught, which raises questions regarding the interpersonal and intrapsychical aspects of learning. If a lecturer’s course material triggers anxiety in a particular student, the teacher should attempt to reduce it, contain the anger and aggression triggered, endeavor to process the anxiety, and finally return it to the student in a tolerable form that allows the knowledge to be internalized. The paper suggests that knowledge acquisition in the learning context of the therapeutic professions takes place in an intermediate zone between teaching and containing, to which concepts drawn from the realm of therapy can be applied, the principal of these being projective identification

Affective Teaching

Research investigating the factors that enhance student understanding of teaching messages has identified several factors concerning the teachers. These include: charisma, intellectual ability, caring, appearance and verbal skills (Harvey, Royal, & Stov, 2003). Lowman (1996) has described two important dimensions for effective college teaching: intellectual excitement (enthusiasm, knowledge, inspiration, humor, interesting view-point,
clarity, and organization) and interpersonal concern / effective motivation (concern, caring, availability, friendliness, accessibility, helpfulness, encouragement, challenge).

Recent studies support Lowman's findings regarding the importance of the interpersonal dimension and identify a connection between the interpersonal teacher-student relationship and student motivation to study and success academically (Brekelmans, Sleegers, & Fraser, 2000; Brok, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2004; Brok et al, 2005). The most important quality underlying all the above is communication. The communication atmosphere in a class is normally defined as positive (supportive) or negative (defensive). A supportive atmosphere is characterized by effective listening and by conveying messages clearly. A defensive communication atmosphere is characterized by a distrustful relationship between the teacher and the students, the latter finding difficulty in understanding the messages the teacher wishes to convey (Darling & Civikly, 1987).

To examine the qualities of teaching that promote learning, the researchers studied a representative sample of 70 social work students in Israel during their third and final year of the social work program, which took place in one of Israel's biggest universities. To understand the factors for enhancing teaching message efficacy in Social Work studies, the researchers asked students before their class began if they would anonymously answer the question “Imagine you experience anxiety over the material you are studying. What qualities would you want your teacher to have to help you reduce your anxiety?” The students were told to return their answer sheets closed and with no identifying details. The students’ written answers were divided into five content categories, which the researchers agreed after reading the material individually. The selected categories and their contents are presented in Table 1

| INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE |

The analysis of the findings produced four categories of characteristics: appearance, communication, teaching style, and personality. Among the characteristics that emerged in
the different clusters were: attentiveness, tone of voice, body language, articulacy, empathy, containment, sense of humor, class control, and organization (The full list appears in Table 1). These factors form part of the dimensions included in the term 'projective identification', which Klein (1946) formulated and were revised by Bion (1957, 1958, 1959, 1962a, 1962b, 1970). In the following pages, we will review the development of this term and use examples to explain how it is functions in the interactive process of teaching.

**Development of the terms 'projective identification' and 'containment'**

Containment: A term coined by Bion to describe a situation in which the therapist gathers and absorbs threatening elements and emotions that the patient projects onto him in a process of projective identification. The therapist experiences and processes them as if they were his own. According to this conception, containment is a psychological experience in which the therapist's psyche serves as an experiential zone for processing and modifying intolerable, threatening, painful, and rejected elements of the patient’s psyche (Bion, 1957, 1958, 1959, 1962a, 1962b, 1970). Bion revises the traditional pathological meaning of the term 'projective identification' formulated by Klein (1946) and introduces the communicative aspect. Bion believed that only the therapist/mother's ability to bear, process, and contain the intolerable, terrified feelings projected onto him by projective identification allow the patient to re-internalize such emotions after the therapist's psyche has processed them.

Thus, containment in fact depends on the therapist's/mother's ability to bear and process these threatening elements. Eshel (2003) believes that the therapist must immolate himself during this process, and that the process of containment will exhaust itself only through a state of association between the therapist and the patient on the deepest level of identification. Britton (1998) sees the process of containment as an attempt to provide refuge and a safe and holding environment. Grinberg (1991) discusses the analyst who agrees to be invaded by his patients' fantasies, fears, and projections and his ability to contain them so he
can consider and experience the feeling as if they were his own. Grinberg goes on to say that in the process of containment, the analyst feels solidarity with the anxiety, pain, delusion and even hallucinations that his patient experiences. What all these formulations have in common is a view that containment involves enlarging both the patient and the therapist's psyches space.

**The ‘Potential Space’ of the Teaching Realm**

The terms 'projective identification' and 'containment' apply to the interaction between the therapist/mother and the patient/infant within the therapeutic realm. As Winnicott (1971a) makes clear the interaction between therapist/mother and the patient / infant creates the area of the ‘Potential Space’. In order for the potential space to have significance, the infant / patient must experience sufficient trust in the mother/ therapist. “The mother’s or therapist’s love does not only mean meeting dependency needs, but it comes to mean affording the opportunity for this baby or this patient to move from dependence to autonomy” (p.127). We wish to broaden the use of these terms and apply them to the interaction between the lecturer and the student in the teaching realm as is shown in Figure 1. This realm only arises when the lecturer, just like the mother or therapist, is able to absorb the distressing emotions that students may experience when dealing with new material that recalls past experiences.

[ INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The containment ability is especially essential when teaching therapeutic subjects whose contents can trigger two types of anxiety (see Table 2): primary anxiety – material relating to personal content from the student's life, and secondary anxiety, when the material is difficult to understand and process, but does not elicit a direct sense of vulnerability. In both instances, the lecturer-student interaction determines whether the teaching atmosphere will allow the student to acquire the professional knowledge. Consider the student who
Between Teaching and experienced incest in her childhood and takes a seminar on sexual abuse within the family. If the material triggers primary anxiety, the student may feel overwhelmed and devastated, and consequently attack the lecturer over the content and his method of presentation. In turn this could cause the lecturer to feel inadequate as a teacher. However, if a student who has experienced incest has processed her hurt and feels in control of her life, any offense will relate to the material she finds has difficulty processing, and her criticism will relate to the material and problems with understanding it, and not necessarily the lecturer.

On the subject of interaction, the lecturer, who serves as a vessel for the student’s projections, has a crucial role in processing the student’s experience. It is important to bear in mind that the lecturer’s response ranges along a continuum, where at one pole is located the lecturer who survives the attack, and at the other, the lecture who does not survive it. For illustration purposes, we will only present these dichotomous poles at either end of the continuum.

In the first instance, a lecturer who is alarmed by the personal attack and reacts by retaliating or refusing to relate to the student will increase the latter’s primary aggression. Conversely, a lecturer who is capable of containing this emotional material and only later returning them can advance the student’s personal integration. The first step in this process will involve absorbing the threatening content and containing it so that the student senses security. The process continues by the lecturer processing the material to make it tolerable to the student, and ends when the processed material is returned to the student. The result is less application of the splitting mechanism in the student’s attitude toward: the learning material (easy / difficult), the lecturer (good / bad) and her self identity (has academic ability / lacks academic ability). This helps the student to reach a higher degree of integration and personal growth, which is essential in therapeutic professions.
In the second example, a lecturer who is not empathic to the complex feelings that the material he is teaching triggers will exacerbate the anxiety felt by the student. The student will no doubt master the curriculum on a technical level, but probably tend to isolate her emotions to avoid her pain. However, if the lecturer listens, genuinely hears the student's difficulties, and tries to explain the material more subtly, the teacher will seem 'good enough', allowing the student to acquire the data and offering her an opportunity to process the emotions the teacher triggers.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

**Summary**

It is important not overlook the lecturer's personality in teaching. Therefore the article extends the interactive dimension of projective identification to the lecturer-student relationship, focusing on teaching therapeutic professions. The term 'therapeutic realm' coined by Winnicott (1971b) is reconceptualized and applied to the 'teaching realm', enabling us to present a clear picture of teaching that enhances personal integration and growth and facilitating the transition from Student to a Professional.

This contrasts with teaching that blocks personal integration and growth and increases the student's primary aggression. In both the therapist-patient relationship and the lecturer-student relationship, the personality variables of both actors in the interaction form the basis for the communication that will evolve. When teaching therapeutic subjects, the lecturer's personality is essential not only to enhancing the student's motivation to learn, but also and especially for decreasing the student's anxiety. This can be achieved only by containing the threatening material, holding it, processing it and returning it to the student.

The four dimensions that emerged from the study: appearance, communication, teaching style, and personality are the four corner stones of this process. Developing them is of great
importance for training lecturers in general and especially for training lecturers who wish to teach therapeutic subjects.

References


Table 1

Teacher characteristics that lessen potential anxiety from studying therapeutic subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appearance</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Style of Teaching</th>
<th>Personality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dressed in a pleasant</td>
<td>Confident body language</td>
<td>Has reign of the</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fashion</td>
<td></td>
<td>material</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-provocative appearance</td>
<td>Attentiveness</td>
<td>Non-judgmental</td>
<td>Positive self-image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neat</td>
<td>Pleasant voice</td>
<td>Accepts varied</td>
<td>Sense of humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>opinions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direct contact</td>
<td>Pace of teaching</td>
<td>Self-mastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Legitimacy to bring</td>
<td>Not arrogant</td>
<td>Friendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>forth difficulties and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>anxieties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Verbal skills</td>
<td>Focused</td>
<td>Creative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Organized</td>
<td>Containment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table 2

Lecturer-student responses in a data acquisition context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of student's anxiety</th>
<th>Student's behavior</th>
<th>Lecturer's reaction</th>
<th>Product of the data acquiring process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Attack on the lecturer</td>
<td>Containment</td>
<td>Internalization, differentiation, personal growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dis-containment</td>
<td>Increase of the schizoid-paranoid experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary anxiety</td>
<td>Attack of the curriculum</td>
<td>Containment</td>
<td>Acquiring of data and emotional processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dis-containment</td>
<td>Technical study, emotional isolation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. The ‘Potential Space’ of the Teaching Realm