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Learning and therapy: oppositional or complementary processes?

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The idea that post-school education has been influenced by a 'therapeutic turn' in recent years has been subjected to critical scrutiny by a number of commentators (see Hayes, 2003; Ecclestone, 2004a). Learning initiatives which are dominated by objectives linked to personal and social skills, emotional intelligence and boosting self-esteem and confidence have been labelled as reductionist, serving to divert attention from serious and genuine education and training goals. Contemporary educational aims linked to such strategies have been attacked for encouraging a 'victim culture' which marginalises learners and replaces the pursuit of knowledge and understanding with the development of personal qualities required for a life of social and economic risk and uncertainty (see Furedi, 2003). In relation to vocational education and training (VET) and post-school policy trends in particular, Hayes (2003) has argued that preparation for work has abandoned vocational/occupational knowledge and skills in favour of providing learners with personal characteristics suited to emotional labour in low-level service jobs.

If such criticisms are correct, they deserve to be taken seriously. But has there been such a therapeutic turn in post-school education and, if there has, does it amount to anything more than giving due attention to the affective domain of learning which should always have a legitimate role in aims, strategies and processes?

Post-School Therapy

In Kathryn Ecclestone's recent article in *Adults Learning* (2004b) she expressed concern about the growing popularity of such notions as 'self esteem' and 'emotional intelligence' in educational circles. Most of the examples she gave to support this claim, however, were drawn from the popular press and the field of counselling. It is true that these concepts now feature more prominently in textbooks on post-compulsory education and training (PCET) but this is vastly different from showing that they actual *influence* learning, curriculum and assessment in schools and colleges. Ecclestone regrets the replacement of 'optimistic Rogerian ideas about humans' innate potential and drive for empowerment' with 'pessimistic images of

people locked in cycles of social deprivation caused by emotional problems'(ibid; p.13). If this were true it would, indeed, be regrettable. However, it seems to me that – apart from a highly theoretical, inspirational impact akin to that of Freire on adult literacy tutors – Rogers has never had any *practical* influence on the English PCET sector. I would argue that the pessimistic perspectives are no more influential.

If the argument is about the subversion of the traditional aims of education and training – the reduction of knowledge and understanding to personal qualities – then it merits attention. However, such traditional aims of post-school education and training have been comprehensively and grossly mutated in recent years by the rise of skill-talk and competence-based education and training (CBET). The alleged therapeutic turn pales into insignificance alongside the damage wreaked by CBET and the behaviourist outcomes movement, bringing with it the serious de-skilling of countless occupations, the downgrading of vocational studies and the dominance of a perversely utilitarian and economistic conception of the educational enterprise in general. Emphasising self esteem and emotional intelligence is far less dangerous than suggesting that all that matters in education and training is the achievement of narrow mechanistic skills required for employment.

Hayes (2003) suggests that:

All that society can offer is therapy and therapeutic organizations and initiatives to help adjust to the low expectations they are now expected to have. This explains how the government can focus so much on improving 'basic skills', an ill-defined idea that often includes personal qualities and attitudes. Talk about 'basic skills' means: 'Get used to having limited expectations and no aspirations' (p.55).

It may be appropriate to challenge the current official manic obsession with basic skills, but it seems clearly mistaken to equate this with inculcating low expectations in students. For learners, young or old, who achieved little at school and associate learning with anxiety, grief and failure, a 'therapeutic' concern with foundational skills, personal qualities and attitudes may be just what is necessary. No one could endorse the abandonment of knowledge and understanding as primary learning aims, but none of these aims would be achieved without due attention reading and writing and to the motivational and emotional factors which underpin all learning activities.

Learning and Therapy

Claims about the reduction of post-school education and training to something akin to therapy may be tested either empirically or philosophically. Given the fact that most learners in the post-16 sector are, either studying for (increasingly *re-sitting* these days) GCSEs/ Advanced Levels or pursuing vocational qualifications, the notion that such programmes are more than marginally concerned with building self-esteem or emotional intelligence is difficult to accept. On the contrary, it could be argued that such learning is grossly *deficient* in precisely this affective area; it does not connect or engage sufficiently with the emotions, values and wider interests which learners bring with them to post-compulsory institutions.

It is a ludicrous notion that a sector which has been dominated for the last decade or so with skill-talk and behaviourist competence outcomes is somehow obsessed with affective objectives. True, such competence-based learning has been perversely (mis-) matched with progressive, student-centred strategies, but this pedagogic absurdity no longer fools anyone working in the sector. Moreover, it is difficult to make much sense of Hayes' idea that basic skills – a self-evident pre-requisite for learning of *any* kind – is an example of the reduction of education to therapy. In the absence of appropriate research surveys and case studies, the case for the therapeutic turn – or, indeed, *against* what this is alleged to entail – has not been proven.

Claims that there is 'little agreement amongst psychologists about what self-esteem is' and 'virtually no evidence about its effects' (Ecclestone, 2004b,p.13) are not exactly justified. It is true that 'self esteem' is sometimes confusingly conflated with 'confidence' but both concepts have a central place in the learning theory research and literature. There are many studies which demonstrate the importance of self esteem and related concepts to effective learning (Bandura, 1986; Heckhausen & Dweck, 1999), and our own work with post-school trainee teachers at Bolton Institute (Norman & Hyland, 2003) showed clearly that building confidence needs to go hand in hand with mainstream learning objectives. Without task-specific interventions to overcome problems of confidence, even well qualified students with extensive work experience can fall by the wayside. In the case of disaffected youngsters with little experience of success and achievement at school, such 'therapeutic' strategies become absolutely vital.

What of the conceptual/philosophical connections between learning and therapy? As Wilson (1972) has argued, there are many links and overlaps between education (the preferred term before 'learning' became the ubiquitous, universal concept) and therapy. He suggests that:

Education involves initiation into activities, forms of thought, etc., which conceptually must be…worth while or justifiable. Different types of justifications, or different descriptions of the mode in which they are worth while, may apply to different activities or groups of activities. Thus some may be called 'therapeutic', others described as 'enlarging the personality'…These justification phrases may be said to represent the 'aims of education'; and 'therapeutic', or 'contributing to mental health', may represent one such aim (pp.91-2).

Moreover, both learning and therapy involve the development of knowledge, understanding, reason, skill and insight, and both may be equally necessary for accessing work, social relationships and wider communities of practice.

Learning, Therapy and Social Capital

The twin pillars of current lifelong learning policy and practice are the development of vocational skills for economic prosperity and the fostering of social inclusion. Although links are made between the two, economic capital is always given pride of place and social capital lies overlooked and hidden behind slogans about social justice, diversity and citizenship. An important way of re-asserting the importance of social capital is through group activity – and the social learning allowed by current work-based initiatives has been useful here (see Hyland, 2003) – and this goes right to the heart of the hidden curriculum of affective objectives in post-school learning. Bloomer & Hodkinson (1997) have argued forcefully for the notions of 'studentship' and 'learning careers' as a way of allowing post-school students to make sense and take ownership of whatever programmes they are engaged in. Without this non-formal, extra-curricular dimension of learning, formal objectives may remain remote, incoherent and meaningless for many students. If it is decided that the label for such processes and activities is 'therapeutic', then I am a fervent advocate of a therapeutic education which is both inclusive and non-intrusive.
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Notes

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