

Robin Shohet

OBSTACLES TO SELF DIRECTED LEARNING

If I keep from meddling with people, they take care of themselves.

If I keep from commanding people, they behave themselves.

If I keep from preaching at people, they improve themselves.

If I keep from imposing on people, they become themselves.

Carl Rogers, whose work and philosophy have been very influential on the counselling courses at South West London College, considers this quote from Lao Tsze to sum up many of his deeper beliefs about human growth. I would like here to discuss some of the obstacles to the realization of such self directed learning.

There would seem to me to be four main obstacles. The first is the model itself. Perhaps people do not learn in this way. In the Aquarian conspiracy Marilyn Ferguson talks about a humanistic environment as not being a sufficient condition for transformation/education, although it engenders the necessary trust. She says "Appropriate stress is essential. Teachers can fail to transform if they are afraid to upset the learner". 'True compassion' said one spiritual teacher, 'is ruthless'. Or as the poet Guillaume Apollinaire put it:

Come to the edge, he said.

They said: We are afraid

Come to the edge, he said

They came.

He pushed them . . . and they flew.

(Pages 321-322 Aquarian Conspiracy)

In fact the two ideas of self direction and being pushed need not contradict each other, the student knowingly and awarely putting herself in an environment where she knows she will be asked to take risks. The danger is that a student may choose to use the model to avoid facing issues, as one student who presented some work for assessment and became angry when she was given more feedback than she asked for which included anxieties about her current state of fear and secrecy. On one level there would be learning for her in doing it exactly her way (which felt very controlling but she had a right to) and on another her current state would probably be affecting her work with clients.

This brings me to my second main obstacle - the demands and influences of the world outside the course such as the college, L.L.E.A. or client groups. Taking these into consideration requires a shift in level to realizing that the counselling 'body' is part of a larger 'body' or system. Once the boundaries within which the course takes place are recognised in this way, outside factors need not be an obstacle to self directed learning. Much of the confusion, I think, arises from not appreciating that freedom to learn sometimes requires a certain discipline, like learning chords to be able to improvise. And the discipline in this instance, is to think in systems terms rather than individual terms (i.e. see the student body, the part-time staff, the full time staff, the college, L.L.E.A., the client group as parts of an interacting system). What I think often happens is that, perhaps for the first time ever, students are encouraged to put themselves and their learning needs first, and to be then asked to think in systems terms appears to them as being given with one hand and taken from with the other. An additional difficulty is that both staff and students might not be able to tolerate a period of chaos that often goes with new ways of learning, and rush prematurely into familiar ways of operating in the name of professionalism. In this way the outside world is used as a projection for anxieties. To think and operate genuinely in systems terms whilst at the same time holding on to individual needs is not easy, but can provide an opportunity for self direction rather than an obstacle.

The third main obstacle is the staff themselves. As a staff member I have alternated between standing back - trying not to come in prematurely with my own experience, expertise or power of my role in giving suggestions - and putting my views forward quite strongly. I imagine that this is quite confusing to the students sometimes. Certainly it has been for me. Just as the tension between individual and system is difficult to manage, so my desire to let people find their own way and the fact that I am affected by their decisions, have needs of my own, and have opinions about what they they 'ought' to be doing, often causes me considerable conflict. Also I am no Lao Tsze, do not give up control that easily and am faced constantly with my limits as to how far I can trust the process. Not recognising my limitations, and holding back too much can, paradoxically, hinder people by their being aware I am holding back. In fact when I do this because I feel I 'ought' to in the name of assisting self direction for the students, my body tells me something is wrong. I now find it more useful to be explicit about my views. By giving myself permission to do this, I feel there is less danger of my needs being acted out for me at the students' expense.

The final obstacle of my four is the students. They are the other half of the duet - the staff half saying, "I'm not sure how much power I want to relinquish", and the student half saying "Don't worry too much, we're not sure how much we want our own authority anyway". This dynamic is often highlighted in the third year where students present portfolios of their work for self and peer assessment, with staff not participating directly in this assessment. The same ploys of looking for outside authority are transferred to other students whose approval for pieces of work is now sought. I see my task as pointing out this process and encouraging the self part of self and peer assessment. At times the frustration at what is often a very difficult process (not only producing written evidence of counselling skills, but having this assessed by peers who can award a diploma or not) leads to a "Sod it all, I'll do it my way" which can be a good intermediary step to the genuine self directedness which is the aim. When a student does take back his/her own power and begins to work from within, the results are very striking. The ideas flow, no longer hampered by overwhelming fears of others' judgement, with the awareness that if you are really working from within, others will appreciate the quality of the work. One student described how she was writing away until suddenly after pages she thought of others and stopped dead. However she decided to trust her original flow and managed to continue.

In describing what I consider to be the four main obstacles to self directed learning, I have done no more than touch on each. However by highlighting them, my aim is that some of the paradoxes, tensions and ambiguities inherent in them can be seen as learning opportunities rather than obstacles.

As well as lecturing on the South West London College counselling courses, Robin Shohet works as a staff consultant and marital therapist. He is also writing a book on Dream Sharing which will be published early next year.
