

Process-led experiential learning



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This is the key technique for learning at bcpc. We constantly refer to students' experience as a starting point for new learning. It is our previous and current experience that is the context in which we are meeting new material. So developing the ability to apprehend 'where am I in this moment' and 'what is being stirred in me in relation to this theory or that idea' is crucial to creating a milieu in which to engage in relational psychotherapy.

So how does this look in practice?

As an example: if we are studying birth process we would want to gather up experience from the 'field'. What is our experience already of the births we have known? Some of this experience may exist in conscious memory and some in body memory (where all our experience lies), so we would need to work out ways of inviting students to allow these experiences to become foreground so that they are available to the living research process that is process led experiential learning. Only when we have found out what we think, know, experience (through guided meditation, artwork and pair work) would we then move on to study what others say (in this case maybe the work of Grof, Piontelli, Stern). What we will also then encourage students to be interested in is their responses to different theorists and how both the theorists' and the students' 'psychobiography' (Stolorow and Atwood 1979) might influence what theory they are drawn to.

One year whilst studying Rogers' psychobiography a student (who I shall call Jeanette) was outraged by Rogers' idea that creative acts could not be graded hierarchically. To Jeanette this was ridiculous and a particular passage from the paper we were studying particularly incensed her:

'The action of the child inventing a new game with his playmates; Einstein formulating a theory of relativity; the housewife devising a new sauce for the meat; a young author writing his first novel; all of these are, in terms of our definition, creative, and there is no attempt to set them in some order of more or less creative.'

(Rogers 1967: 350)

This particular student group, who were all women, were not particularly impressed by the 'sauce-creativity' attributed to the 'housewife', but were prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt based on grounds of historical context! However Jeanette was more perturbed by the lack of differentiation in Rogers' statement. She was encouraged to explore what it was that so outraged her:

Tutor: *'So I suppose if you were to develop a theory of your own about creativity it would be important to you to differentiate between different creative acts as having greater or lesser importance?'*

Jeanette: *'You're damn right it would!'*

Tutor: *'Do you get a sense of what in your psychobiography might get touched by Rogers' thoughts about creativity?'*

She took some time to think. Eventually a smile broke over her face and she burst out laughing.

Student: *'Of course, of course. That's what happened with my brothers and sisters.'*

Jeanette went on to tell the story of how her parents, in an effort to be 'fair' to all the siblings, were always trying to be equal so that no one would feel unfairly done to. Ironically this had left her feeling unrecognised and unvalidated, and the 'shape' of this trauma had been close enough to Rogers' theory to attract her strong feeling.

This experience was hugely helpful for that particular student (and the rest of the group) in understanding psychobiography and how it plays out in all our lives (even those of theorists, who can have a 'tablet of stone' quality around them). Incidentally it does not mean that, were Jeanette to develop a theory about creativity, it would not have an element of differentiation in it; rather that such an aspect would not have this hidden force insisting on its importance to everyone else.

One of the comments we have heard repeatedly from those outside the training who have come into contact with students in the later stages of training is that they seem to have a certain solidity and maturity. I think the long immersion in personal process and the

teaching method that holds experience as of primary importance has an important part to play in this.

I almost started with these quotes, but thought it more fitting to start with our experience and end with the experience of others:

'Experience is for me the highest authority. The touchstone of validity is my own experience. No other person's ideas, and none of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my experience. It is to experience that I must return again and again, to discover a closer approximation to truth as it is in the process of becoming in me.'

(Rogers 1967:23/24).

'If there is one lesson that I have learned during my life as an analyst, it is the lesson that what my patients tell me is likely to be true - that many times when I believed that I was right and my patients were wrong, it turned out, though often only after a prolonged search, that my rightness was superficial whereas their rightness was profound.'

(Kohut 1984:93-94).

References

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