

Emotional Education from a Psychodynamic Perspective ***Elspeth Crawford August 2001***

Good or bad, what happens in the practice of education of any kind is underpinned by the emotional climate in which it takes place. The emotional states of individual learners and their teachers, and the dynamics of the groups and institutions they belong to, matter a lot, whether or not anyone understands them. Emotional Education means working to educate oneself emotionally, to learn how to work within each context with its unique emotional life, whatever the capacities of people, young and old, and the kind of learning intended.

There is considerable knowledge of our emotional systems from various different fields of study. It is both exciting and rewarding that at the moment, at the beginning of a new century, neurological studies are arriving at similar understandings to those which have been reached by the 'talking cures', from psychoanalysis to counselling. From these very different approaches, we are learning to understand the complex process of emotional response. We have indeed always 'known' that emotional responses are primary, and that they are involved in other kinds of response, mental, physical, and spiritual.

Emotional Education

It is possible through experience to be emotionally sensitive to others and to have emotional intelligence, even wisdom, about people, cultures and organisations in society, so that one acts well, for human good. However, the emotional processes by which we cope with our experiences are as likely to produce insensitivity or stupidity. The processes in themselves do not hold value for good or for bad. Therefore, if we want unconscious emotional processes to occur which result in thought and action which is valued, we cannot rely on the chance of good experience occurring. We need to know how to influence the process. By "Emotional Education" I mean an education which teaches about emotional process, *explicitly*.

In practice, the understanding needed cannot occur without mutuality of respect and relationship as emotions happen while all, including the teacher, learn. I think this education is necessarily a dialogue. In the Faculty of Education at Edinburgh University, as well as other teaching, I have for ten years been running Emotional Education courses, under many titles, using psychodynamic thought as a basis for understanding 'process'. Within training programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate level (not counselling or therapeutic trainings), I offer three different courses, each of which fits within the timetable available. As outcomes are affected by matters of regularity, frequency, etc., the descriptions of the courses, and their planning, can seem very different from each other, and from other courses on psychodynamic understanding.

The Psychodynamic Contribution

"Psychodynamics" is the present day field of thought developed from psychoanalytic and systems theories and their applications to all kinds of individual, group and organisational settings and purposes. It works and is practical because it requires questioning and attending to what is really happening in the interplay of inner and outer, and it includes attention to other fields of knowledge. The unconscious, the subjective and the irrational are seen as part and parcel of everyday here-and now activities. The dialogue in the courses is mainly about participants' current professional experience (all are professionals or professional trainees). The emotional education arises from thinking about what it means to be *unconsciously* responsive to surroundings, so that each person's feeling and mood has meaning.

Reaching Students

This seems to make sense to students. Within the courses, learning is part theoretical, part experiential and always with space for evaluation, reflection and possible application of what has been learnt. A variety of ethical issues have emerged, and student groups have taken responsibility for examining these carefully. The aim of emotional education is to be more ably authentic in practical and outward facing "being in the world".

However, from experience, I have found a general pattern needs to be addressed within the courses.

(i) From the outset, a 'secure base' (emotional safety) with agreement regarding the nature of the work is essential. The first class meeting addresses engagement with personal disclosures, discussion of ethics, confidentiality and a working contractual agreement for the particular course group as well as a description of the course and the learning outcomes expected.

(ii) Some work on defences and the reality of unconscious fantasy (or unreality in some students' view), is needed, however little direct psychodynamic theory might follow. Learning about individual, group and organisational understandings, with attention to unconscious aspects of each, happens in each course. It does seem obvious, but without each form of understanding, *the learning cannot be contained and applied in everyday experience.*

(iii) Patterns of beginnings, middles, endings and breaks are attended to throughout when they apply in the here-and-now, as are issues of finding personal support, but these matters, especially personal awareness of support needs, are always addressed as explicit content in the final sessions, before course review and evaluation.

The Impact

It seems that "Emotional Education" enables functioning in a way which *increases the likelihood* that unconscious processes will be in tune with aware intentions and needs. By connecting conscious feeling awareness with thought about both conscious purpose and unconscious intent, and searching for meaning, the unconscious can be 'educated' too, however slowly. Self-awareness is used to reach clearer understanding of "What is happening here?". Alongside the ordinary ways of being, in nursery class or board room, in solitude or company, wherever, one can silently use self-experience like a barometer or thermometer to check that what aware perception says is going on is in tune with what an inner self is experiencing. The work done to set up a habitual monitoring process, is, I think, the emotional education. Once begun, though it might be temporarily disturbed by adverse circumstances, this emotional education develops to a greater or lesser degree. It is like learning to read, one can even become literate in different languages eventually.

The course evaluations are taken very seriously by students who offer critical and informative views on their experience. The overall response is that something valuable has happened, has been begun, and that it will continue. How what has been learnt will be applied, in schools, or other helping professions, remains the responsibility of the teacher, nurse or social worker. My students teach me an enormous amount about inspired and reflective practice, about separate identity and collaborative living as for a time we experience ourselves and each other as a Learning Community.

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