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Transactional Analysis Journal 2011 41: 114
DOI: 10.1177/036215371104100203

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The Nature and Necessity of Risk: Minding the Gap in Education

Trudi Newton

Abstract

This response to Eusden's (2011) article "Minding the Gap: Ethical Considerations for Therapeutic Engagement" explores ethics and contracts in education and learning, the implications of adopting a relational approach, and the potential risks and creative outcomes of doing so.

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Reading Sue Eusden's (2011) rich and moving article "Minding the Gap: Ethical Considerations for Therapeutic Engagement," I was struck by her phrase "the nature and necessity of risk" (p. 101). Whereas Eusden explores the ethics of the gap between intention and outcome in therapy, I want to respond to some of her ideas from the perspective of education, particularly what I call *relational learning*.

Let me begin by saying that I see real learning as a therapeutic process, although this is not how most education is viewed (Barrow, 2009). There are many philosophies of education (Newton, 2003) entailing various ways of relating between teacher and learner, and for each, there are levels of ethical concern: What is it that is being passed on and by what right? What boundaries and limits are held to? How do participants interact (and how do they perceive each other) in the process?

The first and second of these questions are the domain of procedural ethics, while the third is where we pay attention to minding the gap. However, in education, there may be more overlap. I will come back to this later. First, I want to think more about risk.

My own chosen philosophy of learning is the radical one deriving from the work of Paolo Freire (1972). As he wrote, "No one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. [We] teach each other, mediated by the world" (p. 53). This process requires openness, mutuality, respect, and a willingness to engage in something where the outcome may be uncertain (and will most likely be exciting or even scary). This approach has been around for a while now and has influenced much adult education and some for children. Sometimes it is accused of being "not real education," too subversive, and not grounded in the real world (by which its accusers usually mean the capitalist/market-led world of work and money making). Any educator who chooses to engage in this form of teaching (or draws on any related philosophy, such as cocreative, narrative, or constructivist teaching) takes on not only the risk of offering a real relationship for learners but the accompanying risk of challenging the system.

Education is a wide field, so I will limit my reflections to work in schools, in particular with disadvantaged or disturbed learners and to training and supervision (in any field, including coaching). Let us look first at those different levels of ethics in education. The first is the societal perspective: What is it education for? What values do we bring as educators, and what outcomes do we intend? If a society appears to believe that formal education is primarily about training an effective workforce, then the system will fail many learners. I do not need to go far for examples. In yesterday's paper there was an article entitled, "'Half of Pupils Are Being Consigned 'to the Scrapheap' by Schools" (McVeigh, 2011); another one this morning in my e-mail inbox described the ignoring and denial of a recent authoritative study on the effectiveness and value of the (government-initiated) social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) program for schools (Banerjee, 2010). Such ongoing debates and the decisions that lie behind them set the scene for ethical concerns and dictate the context within which teachers make moment-by-moment choices in their interactions with learners.

The second level concerns the rules and boundaries within which we operate. Breaches

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of ethics codes are mostly clear and obvious and known not only to professionals but, in schools, for instance, to many learners and their parents—not to mention the media. And this can be a good thing: society uniting to protect the vulnerable. It can also be damaging when used maliciously. Teachers sometimes have to exist in a tension between doing the best they can for their pupils and fearing the outcome. This is what is addressed by the EATA *Ethics Code* (European Association for Transactional Analysis, 2008) that Eusden (2011, p. 104) quotes as well as similar codes for TA practitioners, and it can have similar consequences for educators: loss of job, reputation, and livelihood, on occasion.

But it is at the third level that we can explore what we as educators can contribute to understandings of minding the gap—and what we can learn.

Contract, Consent, and the Public Space

The one-to-one relationships that Eusden gives as examples in her article take place within the therapeutic space, which is not just an emotional space but is actually enclosed (in a consulting room) and boundaried (the 50-minute hour). Here is an immediate difference. Education, in any form, is not a protected space and time in the way that therapy can be. In education, contracts will always be multiparty. There will always be witnesses. There may even be a sense of a watching public (society, media, etc.) and a need to manage distinct levels of relationship simultaneously. And it is "all the time," at least throughout the working day and week.

The contract that may be implicit in therapy must be made overt in education. The clients may be learners as well as "surrounding" parties (e.g., parents, teachers, school governors, etc.), that is, the public face as well as the clients themselves. Each contract must be two way, and it must be set in a contractual context with all the other concerned parties. What can never be ignored is the effect of each pairing in the contract on others. To work relationally, the surrounding contracts must take account of this approach. As a colleague said to me, "To help disturbed children see themselves and their world differently is a more profound experience for me than the transmission of information" (D. Wood, personal communication, 5 May 2011). If this attitude is to prevail, everyone involved must support it. Any change affects others. The potential for gaps grows, especially when the pupil is not always able to express choice.

Education is a universal process with universal implications. There are links here to the "socially-intentioned" contract (Tudor, 1997, p. 214) because of the emphasis on understanding ourselves and our clients in a social context, reflecting critically on such contracts, and therefore taking account of the impact of the changes we choose to make. Problems and pathology are located as much in the external as the internal world.

A necessary condition for a contract is consent (Steiner, 1975, p. 243). While this may be straightforward (though open to varying perceptions) in the case of adult learners, when thinking about schools we will be aware that a child cannot give legal consent but can express emotional and intellectual consent in most cases verbally and through behavior and commitment. We may need to ask if children know what is happening, if they recognize their own behavior, and if they evidence through their behavior that they are a willing participant in the process. The answer to these or similar questions identifies the possibility of psychological consent. There is a need for careful observation and sensitivity to the message the child is giving via his or her behavior so that consent can be determined by those outside the process and supported with evidence.

Looking at the full picture, we can imagine three concentric circles: the outer represents the container of the overall contract (what is this about?), the circle within is the relational contract (and it is here that the quality, focus, and outcome are determined, that is, this is the psychological contract), and the inner circle is the actual content (the work being done in the moment to meet the immediate need). The outermost circle holds sufficient safety and sets the boundaries for the relational work, the inner circles provides purpose and the heft of achievement or change, but it is the middle circle where the real cocreative interchange occurs.

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Often it happens through playfulness and discovery.

Curiosity, Play, and Relational Learning

In education, as in therapy, relationship is the ground for change. This means looking at what we really mean by mutuality in the learning process and how the "teacher" can be personally challenged and changed while still holding the boundary—the "one foot in, one foot out" approach Eusden (2011) describes (p. 104).

"How we work is who we are" (Shmuckler, 2010). We can see the learning process primarily as offering a relationship. This may be not only a dyadic relationship, but one conducted in public or in a group wherein the immediate contact between "teacher" and "learner" is significant both for this learner and for all those witnessing it. Equally important is contact with the group as a whole with all the dynamics of learners' interactions. How do we manage that, being mindful and ethical and also responsible for safety, a very real concern with kids who have been rejected/abused? Considering "minding" as an essential part—the most essential part—of how we work challenges many ideas about education. To see the learning process as a two-person endeavor, to be willing to be changed by it, to understand that a learner's aggression, passivity, or despair is both cocreated and open to repair through the relationship is very different from traditional or even most progressive teaching.

I find it vital to refer to "minding" rather than "mind" (Eusden, 2011, p. 101); this highlights the ongoing, moment-to-moment process of relating, of minding who we are and who we are for the other. This has poignant implications for educators, especially those working with marginalized and emotionally damaged children (who inevitably bring their perceptions of the world into their relationships with teaching staff) or with adults with accumulated assumptions or prejudices about teachers. Perception, in the sense of noticing what is really going on, is the most important of the five Ps (permission, protection, potency, perception, and practice) for educators (Clarke, 1996, 2000). How can we mind this gap with learners who have already acquired negative feelings about teachers, whose most intimate relationships have been damaging emotionally and/or physically, who have limited choice in deciding their educational context, and who, most significantly, have not yet learned to trust?

Hargaden and Sills (2003) wrote, "The defining feature of his [the practitioner's] work resides in the capacity for continuing sensitivity, a capacity that is influenced by the degree to which he is conscious of his own Child ego states. . . . This will be reflected in how he is as a person" (p. 115). This sensitivity enables openness and responsiveness to the unspoken need and models a different kind of relationship for the learner. As Eusden (2011) writes, "In a two-person psychology, the focus is on authentic relating as offering a corrective relational experience" (p. 106). In a school, ideally, authentic relating will be part of a culture in which staff support each other and visibly treat one another in the same way that they treat the kids. Children see adults being playful and curious; they also see them addressing potential ruptures early—within themselves, with other children, and with each other.

The ability of teachers to play and to engage in the rough and tumble of ideas with kids is enormously important. It offers learners something they may never have experienced before and is profoundly permission giving. At the same time, ensuring safety is paramount in offering children a different response to their dangerous behavior. This is not a one-person endeavor; it requires a common understanding among staff and the ability to work together for the benefit of the children. This means creating a school culture that is congruent and promotes autonomy and thriving at all levels. And such a culture provides is a place where sharing the language and values of transactional analysis can be a significant factor.

A Note about Supervision

Supervision, in both training and ongoing practice, is, I think, the archetypal example of the learning experience, one that involves learning through reflecting on experience. So, it is a fine place to look at the ethics of minding the gap. Supervision is where we enact, through parallel process, whatever is going wrong in

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the work. It is, in itself, a place where minding the gap is paramount, not only a place where we can reflect on the gap in the practice. This is the essence of properly functioning supervision, and the effect is that growth and healing occur for practitioner, client, and supervisor too. I see this as a therapeutic encounter, but it is not therapy. Close attention to this boundary is the ethical responsibility of the supervisor.

Discussion and Conclusion

As I have been writing this response to Eusden 's article, several things have been happening. The first is the events in Japan, with the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear reactors breaking down. My attention is drawn over and over again to the latest news. What is happening a world away from my area affects each of us profoundly and brings home to me yet again that every action has consequences, something we should all learn as children of five but that as an international community we do not seem to have realized fully yet.

Second, I have been supervising a Certified Transactional Analyst candidate's written exam, someone who is a teacher in a special residential school. The impact of this will be apparent in the perspective of my article. This has, for me, formed a microcosm for the "big issues," an important fractal and a place for learning if we pay attention to the meaning.

Third, I have been reading a book called *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error* by Kathryn Schulz (2010). It is a wonderful book, and while I do not have the space to describe it here, I want to share her conclusions, because "being wrong" is what we are doing when we do not mind the gap. We need, Schulz says, to foster the ability to listen to each other and the freedom to speak our minds, to create an open and transparent environment, to encourage everyone to speak up when they see the potential for error. This is a prescription for identifying and addressing mistakes at every level, and it is also a prescription for democracy (p. 311).

In the education field, minding the gap needs to be part of a learning culture, embodied in a multiparty contract, and shared with learners. This takes courage and a different vision of what education means. It is all about change: enabling change for our clients, for ourselves, and for society.

Trudi Newton is a Teaching and Supervising Transactional Analyst (educational) and a writer, researcher, and consultant working nationally and internationally with educators to facilitate radical learning and community development. She can be contacted at Langley Cottage, Chelmondiston IP9 1HS, United Kingdom; e-mail: trudi.newton@btinternet.com .

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