

Learning, authority, freedom and security: a case-study of managing a hidden curriculum

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Abstract

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Introduction

This article seeks to explore some practical issues in the design of an adult education curriculum: it juxtaposes the assumptions of adult educational theory with perspectives from group relations, and investigates them with reference to the experience of students. It demonstrates both how the employment of a socio-analytic viewpoint can illuminate the “hidden curriculum”, and also how it and educational theory can provide the potential for the “binocular vision” to which Bion refers, as complementary discourses.

Although learning has probably been researched more than any other psychological phenomenon, even now little is known about how it takes place in everyday practice, and particularly about the impact of social and personal circumstances on the higher-level learning of adults (Tennant, 1997). One of the most popular models of adult teaching and learning is that of “andragogy”, put forward by Knowles (1990), following a humanistic tradition associated with the names of Rogers (1980) and Maslow (1987). It is not uncontested: it has been criticised for its political naiveté (Collins, 1991), its internal inconsistencies (Tennant, 1997), and its lack of fit with learner expectations (Hanson, 1996). It is this latter critique which provides the focus for the present discussion.

Andragogy emphasises the self-direction and self-determination of the learner: Knowles and his followers are concerned to minimise the patronisation and denial of the extent of the learners’ experience which they assume to be implicit in pedagogy, which term, as they use it, is associated with the teaching of children. In the andragogic model, the teacher becomes a facilitator of an adult student’s learning, following rather than leading the process. There is however evidence even from case-studies published under the aegis of Knowles himself, that this principle is more rhetorical than practical (Knowles and associates, 1984).

In addressing these principles of self-direction, however, the andragogic model must engage with the “hidden curriculum”, which may be defined as whatever students learn by default through sheer participation in a learning program. Explored sociologically by Becker, Geer and Hughes (1968), it was named by Snyder (1970), and its principal expression within educational research has been in work on the impact of assessment methods on students’ learning strategies (cf. Prosser and Trigwell, 1999, for a recent comprehensive account). However, the adoption of a group relations perspective reveals further dimensions to the hidden curriculum which remain hidden in more conventional views. In particular it can reveal the subtle interaction between the social experience of participation in the institution and the nature of the learning which takes place.

The most useful tool for this analysis is Bion’s model of the container and the contained, introduced in *Attention and Interpretation* (1970). The flexibility of the construct is such that it can —indeed must—be applied at a number of levels. The individual learner is a container for the learning and its associated anxiety, for example (Atherton, 1991). The role of “student” can be construed as a container for the learning individual, as can the student group; and the structure of the course as a container for the knowledge to be imparted. All of these relationships may be, according to Bion, in one of three states: commensality, parasitism, and symbiosis. Commensality is the least interesting: it

suggests that elements of the system which are containing, and those which are contained, are merely operating in parallel; their mutual effects are minimal. Symbiosis, in which each element contributes to the good of the other, seems at first sight to be the ideal—but we shall return to this later. Parasitism implies that one element destroys the other. This can happen in two ways—although Bion does not make much of this. Either the contained can destroy the container, which proves incapable of holding it: or the container can destroy the contained through the oppressiveness of its containment. As Bion points out, Jesus and Judaism may be an example of the former pattern, but there is also the (temporary) case of Galileo and the Roman Catholic Church as an example of the latter.

In the present discussion, the focus will be on the curriculum — both explicit and hidden — as container, and the student experience with its potential for growth and change (learning) as the contained. Further exploration of this system requires a view of the necessary conditions for learning to take place under this model: in other words, what counts as the survival of the contained? Winnicott (1965) postulated the necessity of “potential space” for development, growth, and by implication learning. In his view this was created by the progressive but appropriate failure of the “good enough” mother to provide immediately for her child’s needs. Bion saw the potential of the workgroup as an “arena for transformations” (Armstrong, 1998). Seen *sub specie* the containment model, the container needs to provide —at any given moment— just the right amount of space or freedom for change to take place. Too little, and the contained is stifled: too much, and as Newton (1999) argues, the container fails phenomenologically to provide the necessary security for experimentation. In more traditional constructivist educational psychology, a similar idea is furnished by Vygotsky’s view of the “zone of proximal development”. The facilitation of this optimal space is the dynamic process of managing the curriculum, both overt and hidden.

The Program

The PGCE/Cert. Ed. (Post-Compulsory Education) at De Montfort University is the latest version of a course which has existed in various forms for twenty years. The present discussion arises from research undertaken to explore modifications which might be required in a new version of the Program to replace the one validated in 1996.

It is a two-year, part-time program, with a total intake of about 70 students per year. The students are all serving teachers (mostly part-time) within the broad area of post-compulsory education, which in the UK covers all education of people over the age of 16. The range of subjects taught has ranged from Arabic to skiing, from flower arranging to law. Unlike training for schoolteachers in the UK, teacher training at this level is not subject-specific.

Participants’ previous qualifications range from informally acquired competence in information technology, to doctorates. Their age range is from mid-twenties to late fifties. Some are actively encouraged — if not actually required — to attend by their employers, while others have to take time off from work to attend. Some even have to do both.

Curriculum design considerations

In the words of the Program Handbook:

...the Programme is itself an *example* of post-compulsory education as well as being *about* it. In designing it, we have had to make some professional judgements about curriculum,

content, methods, and assessment, and part of your learning is to examine these and how they affect your learning. We have also had to make some compromises, as everyone does in the real world. We look forward to a constructive dialogue with you about the Program as it goes along: you may even persuade us to modify it.

One of the early decisions of the planning team was that the Program had to be reflexive: it could not proclaim one set of values about post-compulsory education, and embody another. It had to operate at two levels, as a model as well as a description of what the team believed to be best practice. It is the tension set up between these two levels of the program which constitutes the main theme of this discussion.

Another way of putting this is to say that there should be no “hidden” curriculum. The method in 1996 was to draw on the experience of earlier versions of the Program, to identify the “messages” implicit in its structure, and to ensure that every aspect of the new version (within any constraints of University procedures) was designed to send the “right” messages to the students. In a sense, this decision is a moral stance. The team believe that the values to be embodied in the Program are not simply expedient but *right*. Whether this is really the case is of course endlessly debatable, and not the main issue in this discussion, although as Armstrong (1998) suggests in relation to schools;

“‘Values’ [...] are referred to as if they were names whose meaning is already known and determined, rather than hypotheses whose meaning here and now is always open to exploration and evolution.”

The values are made explicit in the Handbook:

1. That you, the students [...], are competent adults, already acquainted with the field of work and study, and having more or less clear ideas about what you need to learn to improve your knowledge and practice.
2. That those ideas [...] need to be respected, even when it is necessary to show their limitations and to go beyond them.
3. That you will learn most effectively when you are both involved in and have appropriate control over your learning experiences.
4. [...]
5. That [...] the ability and motivation to learn from continuing experience through disciplined reflection is a defining characteristic of a professional, and should be fostered by the program.
6. [...]
7. That a program which purports to teach good educational practice must itself embody and model such practice, and lay it open to scrutiny.[...]

Flexibility

In accordance with value #1, the Program recognises that its students are not merely mature people, who may be expected to have the motivation and skills to manage their own study program, but also that they are very busy. The demands on full-time teachers in further education in the UK have increased dramatically in the last few years, with teaching commitments of up to 1,000 hours per year not uncommon, not counting preparation and assessment responsibilities. The majority of the students are women, and the reality is still that they tend to have more onerous domestic responsibilities.

The 1996 version of the Program had several features to deal with such other commitments. There was no formal attendance requirement, for instance. There was

however a specified outcome associated with each module which required students to demonstrate their ability to work together with colleagues; this was most easily met by attendance. In practice, this aspect of the Program caused few problems. Group working is a feature of most of the modules, and the students display considerable commitment to their small groups, including making arrangements to meet outside course hours to work together. Whether this is the kind of displacement described by Newton (1999) in relation to commitment to syndicate groups on an MBA program is open to discussion: however, the circumstances would appear to differ substantially.

In the same spirit of flexibility, the 1996 Program had no deadlines for submissions. Practical requirements of marking and moderation dictated that submissions be received two weeks before assessment boards met, but there was no penalty for not meeting them; consideration was simply deferred until the next assessment board. The whole Program had to be completed within five years.

There was a progression requirement: all first year modules had to be passed before a student could start the second year. However, the assessment board had the discretion to allow students to progress with only two out of three modules credited. This became routine: in 1998, 70% of progressing students had only two modules passed, and most of those had not submitted at all for a third module.

At the completion stage, all modules have to be credited, and 80% of students complete within the two years. The record of students completing after they have left the program is not clear, because it has only been running for three years, but it is a reasonable inference that for some of them — deprived of the support of their group and regular attendance — completion is unlikely.

Did this apparently student-friendly approach therefore ultimately do them a disservice?

Outcome-based Assessment

The assessment approach was based on providing evidence to meet specified module outcomes. In order to provide consistency and ensure the validity of the assessment, the learning outcomes of each module were specified in some detail. There were typically between ten and fifteen such outcomes per module, and students were required to produce evidence that they had met them all, in order to be able to claim credit for the module. The form of the evidence was very flexible—it could be a portfolio of work which had previously been prepared for other (usually teaching) purposes, or a project especially written for the assessment, or a combination of the two. There were no grades: either the submission met the outcomes or it did not. Recognising the anxiety which might be generated by such a system, provision was made for students to outline their proposed submission in advance and to get the relevant tutor to approve it. This form of learning contract effectively bound the tutor to an agreement that, “If you produce the material you specify, in a form which meets the level criteria for your award, you will get credit for it.” (*cf.* Anderson, Boud and Sampson 1996)

The practical consequences were three-fold:

- ? First, students did not seem to believe the system they were being presented with. They continually asked tutors, “What do you *really* want us to do?” as if the published scheme were just a front for a much more conventional method (Atkin, 1999)

- ? Second, the more academic students (those on the PGCE version of the Program) were uncomfortable with the absence of a grading system. Despite receiving quite detailed feedback on each submission, they wanted the concrete label of an “A” or even “D” grade, before they thought that they knew how they were doing.
- ? Third, the size of the submissions proved to be almost unmanageable. Projects of 20,000 words, accompanied by a further 20-30 pages of evidence in appendices (and occasional videos, audiotapes and computer discs) submitted in lever-arch binders were not uncommon. When asked about the size of the submissions, students confessed to being unsure whether they had included sufficient evidence—so they added more and more “to be on the safe side”. There may also have been a normative component, as they compared the size of their submissions with those of their colleagues.

The quality of many of the submissions was impressive (as the external examiner agreed), and there were notably few complaints about the workload involved in preparing them. The introduction in the past year of self-assessment questionnaires, included with the submissions, gave some indication of how the students felt about the assessments: individually, many commented on how useful they had found the exercise—but publicly they complained about them.

These two issues—of flexibility and the assessment scheme—will be taken as the key themes in the following discussion. The re-validation process raised several other issues, but the underlying processes can be explored adequately through these two examples.

The research process

In order to gather information to inform any proposed modifications to the Program, material was gleaned from many sources, including evaluation questionnaires, reports from student representatives to the Program’s management committee, the external examiner’s reports and comparison with similar programs in other institutions, and informal conversations. For present purposes, however, the material is primarily drawn from a number of group discussions convened to discuss the Program and its revision. The sessions were audiotaped or in one case noted in writing because of the objection of one of the members to audiotaping.

The format of the sessions was the same in each case. They were advertised to the students as “focus groups” to discuss the Program in general prior to the re-validation. The discussion centred around a pre-determined series of consultation questions or propositions. An important feature of the sessions was the informed quality of the discussion. Because the participants were students of education, they were familiar with the curriculum issues raised, at both theoretical and practical levels. It is recognised that the status and process of the groups themselves could be taken as a further research theme, but for present purposes member contributions will be treated at “face value”.

Results: Flexibility

The rationale of Program flexibility, as it has been set out earlier, was generally acknowledged, but opinions were divided over the proposition that, “the Program should have a minimum attendance requirement.” One participant agreed with the present position:

1. “If I had thought that I had to commit myself to attend every week, or almost every week, or else I wouldn’t have been able to pass the course. I wouldn’t have enrolled in the first place.

My life's just not like that. I try to come every week—but the thought that I could have done all the assignments (sic.) and still not passed because one of the kids was ill ... that wouldn't have been fair.”

Another supported the policy from a different angle:

2. “Look—we didn't have to come! I mean, we're all here because we wanted to do the course, right? [Silence] Well, didn't we? [Laughter] You—we—I—don't sign up intending not to come. It's treating us like kids, if you impose attendance. It's patronising.”

But she immediately provoked a response from the other side:

3. “Sure—but you've come practically every time, except last term when [...] But what about some of the people who are almost never here? [Protests] OK—well you know what I mean. I mean, they are going to get the same qualification as the rest of us—but they haven't put in the same work [Another member comments that they have to have done the “assignments”] Yeah, but they weren't here for the discussions and the exercises [pause] and even the lectures [laughter]. I learned a lot from them, but if you can get the qualification without coming to the course why bother?”

This theme of “equity of effort” appeared in one of the other groups:

4. “I have to come thirty miles to attend, and I had to give up on the chance of some extra hours because I was coming here. Don't get me wrong, it's been worth it, but it annoys me that some people only have to come round the corner, and they're not here as often as I am, and I haven't learned anything from them and their experience, because they haven't been here when we've been discussing things and they are going to get the same Certificate as I am—I hope!”

A tutor commented at this stage that there was a normative approach to assessment implicit in this comment. (Normative assessment is the model of competitive examinations and other methods, where the top grades go to, say, the top 10% of the group, and so on, regardless of the standard reached against other benchmarks.) Another member responded:

5. “OK, but it devalues what we have come for, doesn't it, if not everyone does the same amount of work but we all end up with the same award? I suppose I've found it quite easy [...] I know some people have really slogged their guts out over these two years to get stuff in on time—but some others seem to have just thought, ‘Yes, I'll do it when I feel like it if I haven't got anything better to do’ —and then you give them the same certificate. And there aren't even any grades or distinctions or whatever to recognise all that effort...”

This provoked a riposte from yet another member:

6. “But this isn't about *effort*, is it? It's about achievement. Either you can produce evidence that you can meet the outcomes or you can't, isn't that right? [Directed to the tutor]”

The “effort” versus “achievement” argument, which was also one about relative versus absolute standards, dominated the discussion of this point. At the emotional level, there was clearly an undercurrent of resentment about those members who were not present. The facts, however, were rather confused. The lack of an attendance requirement absolved the tutors from having to keep a register, but non-attendance had not been perceived as a problem within either of these groups (being more of a problem among first-year students who were not represented in the discussions reported). It *had* been a problem the previous year, which had prompted the initial question to the group.

Discussion: Flexibility

The argument reported above represents what Whitaker and Lieberman (1964) called the “focal conflict” of the group: the discrepancy between the importance of the issue in the real world, and the emotional charge which it carried in the discussion in both of the groups reported, tend to support the view that it touched on an issue which was important within the course as a whole. The discussions took a similar course in each of the groups reported (and there is evidence from notes of other discussions of similar issues in the other meetings).

There is an overlap here with the issue of assessment discussed below. Throughout this run of the program there had been a vocal and articulate sub-group, associated in particular with the more academic members of the program, which had argued strongly against the assessment scheme. It appeared that within the culture of the course group there had evolved a construct of “working hard” versus “not working hard” which was at variance with the assessment strategy construct of “passing a threshold” (defined by the designated outcomes) versus “not passing the threshold”.

Whitaker and Lieberman go on to discuss the potential emergence of *restrictive* or *enabling* solutions within a group. The terminology is self-explanatory, but they suggest that the initial “knee-jerk” response to a problem is likely to be a restrictive solution, and that only if that can be held in abeyance or contained can the enabling solution be reached. In this sense, increased regulation of the program—the introduction of the attendance requirement—can be seen as a potential restrictive solution.

Results: Assessment

7. “I hated it at first. I just didn’t know where I was. I mean—you’re confronted with this great long list of outcomes—and you don’t really know what an outcome is—and then you are supposed to meet them. What does that *mean*? Just where do you start? [...] I can’t say I’m comfortable with the approach now [...] I can see the logic of it, I suppose—but it’s just so unlike anything I’ve had to do before.”

This student’s contribution could stand for a substantial proportion of the comments made in the discussion groups, although the persistence of the discomfort into the second year of the program is perhaps stronger than that of others (cf. Atkin, 1999: his discussion is based on the same programme on a different site).

The other main angle in the discussion was voiced by a student whose own teaching was mainly on competence-based programs. (The competence-based model, which is more rigid and performance-oriented than the outcomes approach, is the basis of National Vocational Qualifications in the UK (Golkulsing et al., 1996)):

8. “It wasn’t *that* unfamiliar to me. OK, I’m used to competencies and performance criteria and range statements and all that, and it was the inclusion of all the theories I found difficult [...] I could see where it was all coming from, but I have to admit that I wasn’t sure whether what I was producing was what the tutors wanted.”

The main characteristic of the responses to this component of the discussion was a reference to the confusion and uncertainty which was engendered by the unfamiliarity of the assessment approach. “Unfamiliarity” is a key word: this approach did not allow students to make much use of the skills which many of them, especially the graduates, had painfully acquired in playing the game of academic assessment:

9. “Look—just give me an essay title, a word limit, and a reading-list, and I’m happy [...] I know where I am, then. I may not be able to produce an ‘A’, but I can put it all together and I know I’ve got some flexibility. [...] I can even handle exams, but *this!*”
10. “That first assignment was rubbish. I was really surprised when it passed, and I thought, ‘Well, standards can’t be too high on this course!’ How wrong can you be? I thought I’d cracked it then, and then the second one was referred. The comments said it was a good essay, but it hadn’t addressed the outcomes. That threw me.”

In an interesting counter-point to the established research evidence on how assessment reaches back into student learning strategies on the modules (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999), the inability to make use of established techniques at first inhibited learning from the modules. In the session recorded by notes, for example:

11. Impact of outcome assessment on learning—ref. to early modules—confusion: not sure how to “take” sessions—not clear enough about objectives [...] Call for clarity—contested by other members—accusation of wrong expectations—explained in handbook—doesn’t get over at start [*Expansion: although everything was explained in the handbook and by the tutors, the students are not able to take it in at the start of the program.*]

Similar points were made in the taped discussions:

12. “The problem was that I just didn’t know how to tackle the module at first. I took all these notes, and they didn’t seem to add up to much, and I thought, ‘How am I going to make an essay out of these?’ and then when I got into it, it was difficult, but for all kinds of other reasons—I’m not used to putting *myself* into assignments. I was always at [tutor’s] door! He must have been fed up with the sight of me! [...] I think I’d got the wrong idea—that the object was to pass the module—not to be a better teacher.”
13. “I’d better confess. I haven’t put any work in yet [Cries of “Shame!”]. No, I think I may be right. It’s not just about the modules, is it? I mean, it’s about teaching, isn’t it? It’s about making a difference to our teaching—so I’m seeing how it works out in practice, first. Well, that’s my excuse, anyway. [Laughter]” (This student was a direct entrant to the second year.)
14. “I was thoroughly confused at first, but after the module on assessment I understood what you were getting at. There isn’t necessarily a relation between being able to write a good essay and showing that you know how to use ideas in practice [...] That’s what it’s all about, isn’t it? I think it’s an excellent scheme—you ought to keep it. Now, when do we get the results for the last module? [General laughter]”

It seems that the “message” finally got through to most of the students, although not to all of them:

15. “I just don’t believe it. [What?] Well, all this stuff about how this is the only way to do valid assessment. If you really wanted to go down that route, you would make it all competence-based and come and observe us all the time. [Discussion of practicality] Yes, but all this outcomes stuff. Is it really better than conventional assessment? Couldn’t you do the same with a well-designed assignment title? I guess what I’m really saying is, it isn’t worth the extra hassle.”

This argument, not supported at the time, is important. One may suspect that it would have commanded more support if the tutors had not been present in the discussions, and there is some evidence in that direction from informal conversations. The other contributions cited have a sub-text of, “It was bad at first, but now I have struggled through all that and come out at the other end, I have to believe it was good for me”, which is the classic formulation of resolved cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

Discussion: Assessment

The key issue in this aspect of the Program is the anxiety which is engendered by the assessment scheme, and the question posed in the final quotation—whether it is worth it. This is not the place to discuss the educational rationale of the choice of the approach: the issue centres on its impact, and hence on whether, at the level of the hidden curriculum, it promotes or inhibits learning.

Salzberger-Wittenberg (1983) argues that learning inevitably creates anxiety. (One of the questions which has to be asked about this evidence from students, indeed, is the extent to which their comments are influenced by the discomfort of anxiety, which they wish to minimise.) Apter (1989), building on the work of Hebb, suggested that there is an optimum level of arousal associated with performance and hedonic tone. If there is an optimum level for learning, does the formal rationale of the assessment scheme—even if it is “right”—end up by inhibiting learning? The evidence from research on deep and surface learning, after all, is that this can happen all too easily.

Overall Discussion

One model which offers a useful perspective on the systemic features of this debate is that of the container and the contained, as put forward by Bion (1970). Originating from his discussion of the potential patterns of relationship between the “mystic” or “messiah”, and the group, he generalises it further, suggesting that there are three fundamental forms which the relationship can take—commensality, parasitism, and symbiosis.

At a more mundane level, what is the relationship between the program and its students’ learning? The major danger is that of parasitism, such that the program—for all its high ideals—inhibits or even destroys the learning. However, symbiosis is not the answer, because of its implication of permanence and interdependence. The students have to leave the program and practice without it. Drawing on Bion’s better-known work (1961), the programme needs to mobilise work-group dependence on the part of the students, but also an element of sophisticated flight at the exit boundary. This problem is perhaps not so pronounced in the case of a part-time programme as it would be were the students full-time, but there remains the issue of how they may internalise the learning and carry it away from the programme institution.

In group relations terms, the effect of the andragogic model is to minimise the possibility of basic assumption dependence, and to emphasise the authority of the learner—indeed, it flirts with the danger of denying the learners’ realistic dependence. It seeks to emphasise the learner’s authority by weakening the institutional container and blurring boundaries, and yet the comments of the participants reported above suggest that this may not help: it merely serves to increase anxiety and perceptions of “unfairness” as fellow-members exploit the potential weaknesses of the structure (perhaps on behalf of their more “law-abiding” colleagues).

This analysis would suggest that there is an optimum strength for the container, to be determined by its capacity to deal with anxiety, and yet to permit learners to “break out” with their learning intact. While symbiosis may be an appropriate overall label for this relationship, it needs to be seen as a dynamic process, requiring constant re-adjustment and balancing. The programme revision has incorporated some tightening of the regulations, in the qualified belief that the changes do not constitute a restrictive solution, but provide a framework for the maintenance of this optimal and dynamic containment. Whether it works or not, we shall see.

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[Main text: 4,900 words]

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