

TRACEY MOLLINS



“I just want to write a letter to my mum...”

A therapeutic encounter with words

by **Olivia Sagan**

**This article is an introduction to the wealth of ideas in psychoanalytic studies as applied to education. I am aware of the risk both of simplification of these concepts and, on the other hand, estrangement of the reader not familiar with them; I will endeavour to be as clear as possible. As a teacher, counsellor and researcher my particular standpoint is that cross-disciplinary ideas and debate can be of value to education. Psychoanalytic insights, some of which have formed now widely accepted and acknowledged practices in preschool and primary school settings, have not been similarly attended to in the field of adult education.**

**Thought feeds itself with its own words and grows. Rabindranath Tagore**

There is a growing body of work in the United Kingdom concerned with the link between health

and literacy, some of which includes mental health as well as, or as distinct from, physical health (Aldridge and Lavender; Bee and Martin; Bynner and Parsons; Hooper; James; Wertheimer). Policy and government reports indicate a growing awareness of the issues surrounding providing access to learning for people with mental health difficulties (DoH, DfES, DRC, FEFC). Links are being drawn between mental health, literacy and social capital, as the Blair government's policies continue to shift the emphasis away from equality towards inclusion, and away from state support towards making individuals more self-sufficient through community self-help. Alongside this work is a tradition of exploring learning that owes much to psychoanalysis—or at least a conscious accrediting of the unconscious in learning—and to sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics (Britzman 1998; Horsman 1999; Coren 1997). My interest and curiosity lies primarily in this area, while keeping a critical eye on the political agenda and how

education and literacy are knitted into a social inclusion discourse that is increasingly denuded of reference to class and economics.

## The background

This is a short story about Timothy<sup>1</sup> based on a longer case study (Sagan 2002). It describes how he and I both grew in a number of areas. Two of these areas could be defined as

- a teacher/learner relationship of a particular kind (container/contained, drawing on Bion's 1962 work) which will be described later on; and
- an area of *potential space* (Winnicott) in which there was the trust, time and reflective quality of being wherein learning could take place, be expansive and nurture a confidence with words.

My work with learners such as Timothy raised questions for me that I felt could not be adequately addressed through educational theories. Psychoanalytic theories seemed to resonate more with the kinds of dense, intransigent learning barriers I encountered. While neither suggesting that practitioners become versed in these theories nor that they undertake psychological assessments of learners, I would like to share the conviction that complex problems often require complex solutions, and that educational research and practice can benefit from a wider reading of the learner and his or her inner world.

In the high security wing of the psychiatric hospital where my teaching took place, Timothy loomed as a *gentle giant*. Maintained on high levels of anti-psychotic medication, he was diagnosed as having a non-specified learning disability, Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) with comorbid depressive illness, suspected Asperger's syndrome and bulimia nervosa. He was a compulsive self-harmer and needed twenty-four-hour-a-day observation. He was being held under Section 3 of the Mental Health Act of 1983 (compulsory admittance in England and Wales is only legal under a section of the MHA). None of which tells you much about the Timothy I came to know, but all of which says a lot about labels, diagnoses, the swift decisions to allocate scarce resources to some and not others, and how discourse constrains the possibility of thought (Foucault).

Such diagnoses also hint at the degree of fragmentation of ego, of self. Fragmentation, the

feeling and experience of being constituted of many parts, pieces of shattered self, is one aspect of mental illness that I maintain both therapy (traditional talking cures, music or art therapy) and learning address. To be effective, both therapy and learning require integration and both can trigger, support and develop a process that leads toward integration. One way of doing this is through constructing narratives. Much of my work is built on the simple premise that a person needs, above all, to be heard—everyone has a story to tell, and not being heard and not telling one's story inhibits both learning and therapeutic intervention.

## How can I tell what I think till I see what I say? E.M. Forster

Timothy was not referred to me for literacy sessions. When he surprised everybody by *self-referring*, making unusually loud and emphatic requests ("I just want to write a letter to my mum...") to be put on the waiting list, I had to make a strong case to back my support of his request. To the credit of a supportive and open-minded clinical director, I was given the time to add to my already overwhelming caseload. I was to see Timothy once a week for thirty to sixty minutes. Depending on what was happening in his life in any given week—for example, a suicide attempt, a change in medication, a distressing appeal procedure—Timothy was, like other learner-patients, more or less able to attend, stay focused and recall who I was and what we were supposed to be doing. Every session needed to be as compact a corrective emotional experience as possible (one way to think of this would be in terms of core conditions as outlined by Roger: empathy; unconditional positive regard; congruence) be it for ten minutes or one hour. There was no room for mentioning in a punitive way that nothing of the previous week had been retained; no space for disappointment that a step forward was in its three-step backward phase. There was just what was brought that day, to that session, and that was always good enough.

What is needed first and foremost in such work is the gradual, sometimes painstaking build up of a relationship. This is much the same emphasis as in therapeutic work, and the analogies are many. With this relationship comes, in optimal circumstances, the build up of a containing experience. This can put immense strain on the teacher. Here is an apt

<sup>1</sup>Taped consent for me to write about Timothy's learning sessions was obtained for the original research and subsequent publications.

description of psychic processes that can occur in a forensic setting:

...at times the patient's tendency to make sadistic attacks on his own capacity for thought and reflection is projected and directed against the therapist's capacity to think and reflect. (Welldon)

The teacher needs to be ready and aware of such processes if she is to look after herself and thus be able to look after the learning process and the learner. The idea of containment was to be of great importance in my making sense of my work with Timothy, and has been of ongoing value in other work with vulnerable learners. As described by Bion, it represents the infant's need to evacuate fear and anxiety, along with other intolerable parts of the self, onto the carer, and to have these pieces detoxified. This transaction occurs naturally when the carer is both able and healthy enough to engage in this often-unconscious exchange. Trouble can set in, however, when a carer, for whatever reason, is unable to provide this containment. The result is that the infant then receives back these fears, anxieties and other terrors as "nameless dread" (Bion). This search for containment is not confined to infancy, especially if our first attempts at this search were thwarted. Our search for containing organizations, friends, relationships, governments and experiences has been documented (Obholzer and Roberts) and described by Esther Bick thus:

The need for a containing object would seem, in the infantile unintegrated state, to produce a frantic search for an object—a light, a voice, a smell, or other sensual object—which can hold the attention and thereby be experienced, momentarily at least, as holding parts of the personality together.

My work with Timothy made small but significant headway because, I believe, it provided a containing experience at several levels and also provided a chaotic, fragmented and richly confused psyche with *holding* (Winnicott). This was done at the level of relationship, session and word. Importantly from an educational standpoint, I argue that the constraints that could have been applied to my work (formalized diagnostic tools, prescribed curriculum, measuring of achievement) would have acted negatively on my work with Timothy, with perhaps any learner in a forensic setting, and is questionable practice with vulnerable learners in general. Timothy's needs were for a particular kind of intervention specifically

designed for a fragility that is not a concern of designers of formal tools for the teaching of literacy. I further maintain that a particular type of teacher training, one that addresses questions about the boundaries of teaching and counselling, the influence of the teacher's mental state on the learning process and so on, would be useful for the growing numbers of teachers teaching literacy in the environments of psychiatric hospitals, rehabilitation centers, prisons and hospitals and that to fail to provide this training is both negligent and wasteful.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, in the present government's (United Kingdom) drive to widen participation and meet targets, as well as the health service's largely well-intentioned drive towards community care and active participation, teachers are often allocated teaching jobs with vulnerable learners without the support, training and information they need to do their job best.

## The process

Reading and writing, like love, like grieving, involve a quantum leap of faith. You have to have some fundamental trust in the process to allow yourself to go with it; you also have to have some basic belief in the product, in order to allow yourself to strive for it (Bettleheim and Zelan). Timothy displayed a wide discrepancy between his ability to read and his ability to write. His reading level was around Entry Three by the National Standards (England) but his writing was at the level of a five-year-old's, with great, clumsy letters varying in size and thickness of line (some of which was due to medication), mixed upper and lower case and none but the most rudimentary phonic awareness. This discrepancy may be linked to Timothy's trust in *taking in* (echoed in his bulimia, his voracious, indiscriminate television watching, his obsessive mother-love, his *adhesive* closeness to me (Meltzer) as opposed to his *giving out*, as in writing, wherein we engage in an active production of something from the *within* to the *outside* of ourselves. Timothy interacted rarely on the ward, said little and engaged in no occupational therapy activities, though interestingly he did engage in music therapy. He appeared to have an unexpected trust when something came from the outside in—reading a written word, being shown things such as letters in sand, clay or the screen of a small monitor—but the other side of the transaction was thwarted because Timothy could not give of

<sup>1</sup>For further exploration of the challenges involved for teachers entering non-traditional environments with potentially vulnerable learners see Hudson, C. 2003



himself, could not, for the longest time write, form letters, build words and sentences. Often, in his frustration, he would mumble, "Can't I just tell you what to write to my mum...you do it?" At which point, rather than deny the pain and frustration being stirred up by a painful learning process, we opened up space in the session for us to talk about what was going on. (For more on the denial of pain in the learning process see Britzman). In this space, Timothy was to tell his story, gradually, slowly, but with painfully increasing willingness, ability and fluency. This process as used with children was discussed in a useful 1983 publication, *The Emotional Experience of Learning and Teaching*:

The pupil's ideas and thoughts are aided by a teacher who assists him in ordering them, particularly at such times as when the learner becomes overwhelmed by too much undigested knowledge. The teacher's capacity to be reflective and thoughtful about data rather than producing ready answers enables the learner to internalize a thinking person.

(Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., p. 60)

An ongoing question for me in the world of adult literacy, particularly with vulnerable learners is, in the face of government policy that generates strictures and an overburdening of the teacher with the paraphernalia of a centralized system of bureaucracy and control, *what does it take within that to be or become a reflective, thinking practitioner?*

As Timothy and I took the time to reflect and both a physical and mental space for thought slowly and gently opened up, I wondered often and sadly how much badness Timothy imagined himself to contain that he could not envisage anything good coming out



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of him. He was quick to denigrate his efforts, fast to demolish his work and expert at rubbishing everything he achieved while heaping idealized praise on the sessions and me. Melanie Klein and others have richly theorized that this "splitting" of good and bad is characteristic of the unintegrated mental state. Without entering into the theory here, it is useful to point out how this rather common tendency for splitting can often injure educational progress. Learners with damaged self-esteem can oscillate wildly between idealization—of the teacher, of learning, of the self-as-learner, of lessons and of literacy—and denigration of these. A leap of faith is needed in order to recognize that the self is not all bad and not

all good. Klein and post-Kleinian analysts have also theorized that tolerance of ambivalence is indicative of a move towards integration and will be followed by an urge to engage in *reparation*. It is during this phase that the learning process often appears to take flight, with leaps and bounds possible. While this sudden progress is usually attributed to other factors in the learning process, it is useful to avoid underestimating shifts in unconscious mental activity, and what factors in the learning process itself may have contributed to these.

It became clear quite early on that progress in writing was to be excruciatingly slow, the mere physical act of which seemed to put Timothy under enormous strain. I knew I would lose him if I persisted in standard writing practice, which he clearly found perplexing and from which he closed off, resorting to defensive mechanisms such as becoming sleepy, distracted or using long-winded verbal digressions. I began to concentrate instead on reading as a way in, believing that at least an increased comfort with the already written word might help, in the words of one of his security

guards, "Get him away from that bloody telly."

Timothy enjoyed word games based on reading. My use of a wide variety of games in our sessions formed a backdrop for the development of an atmosphere that was perceived as neither academic, ("I hated school...hated teachers...I was bullied and they all said I was thick...") nor threatening, nor in any way replicating either schooling or assessment procedures and tests for diagnosis. We worked together, developing an arena of play and co-operation in which *errors* could be freely made without them being perceived as mistakes. Psychoanalytically, errors also offer rich data for exploring inner worlds. (Freud famously documented this in his 1901 work, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, in which he examined the way the unconscious slips through our guard into our normal, everyday behaviours.) It was during this period of our work (when it could be said we were *doing* very little!) that Timothy also let me into an area of intense interest for him. Establishing a learner's interest is a known methodological tactic, but with many very disadvantaged, vulnerable and closed off learners I have worked with, Timothy included, there appears to be none or one is fabricated in order to please the teacher or subvert the process. When Timothy finally allowed me in on his fervent interest in space and science fiction, we were instantly given a strong footing and a place to start some more demanding but also more potentially threatening work. Timothy's numerous misreadings—star for start, moon for more, fly for flat to quote a few of many—suggested something going on for Timothy while we were reading something apparently unrelated to the subject of space. Psychoanalytically, space and travel into stratospheres and black holes can be interpreted as a reflection of the inner world, the inner landscape. Timothy's inner landscape was exciting, but terrifying too. He was not going to travel there alone. On an educational level, I was reminded of Gardner's statement that

Students and teachers pursue hidden questions that, seen one way, appear academic and, seen another, appear personal.

In no teaching situation do these "hidden questions" make more persistent a demand for space than in the teaching of vulnerable learners with fractured inner worlds. Timothy, the gentle giant who only wanted to write a letter to his mum, had come, in a most roundabout way, to a setting in which he could safely explore a great black hole inside him—a darkness that was fearsome—and the wished for flight-

from-pain-and-badness so concretely symbolized in spaceships and time travel.

Our work from this point on regularly centred on comics and short texts about Timothy's treasured subject. Non-verbal communication was vital for me to observe. Often when his reading faltered as fears grew, I was able to understand this as a point to stop and invite conversation about what was going on for him. Links were consistently made, albeit tentatively, between the text and Timothy. In everyday literacy practice, the learner would be lead from a digression back to the text, but here the digression was the text and the site of the work. Slowly we incorporated writing, again focusing on the words which were either loved or hated, making collages of the words and inventing ways of reproducing them physically other than by just writing. Doodling was encouraged throughout:

Doodling may be a way of holding an unconscious process, and represent an intermediary or transitory area where we experiment with or moderate what we can bear to think about. (Coren)

We also paid sustained attention to misreadings and word substitutions, in which the word was neither signifier nor signified but something other, something possibly dark, persecuting and lodged internally for many years.

Slips of the tongue are the equivalent of misreadings...after the patient has experienced how interesting and revealing such slips are, and how much they help promote understanding of what is going on in his mind they are welcomed as unexpected vistas on important problems. (Bettleheim and Zelan)

Working slowly, reflectively and minutely, we allowed words themselves to act as containers. Alone, Timothy was projecting fears and anxieties into words and the words were spitting them back without detoxifying them. The learning process, within a containing relationship, was allowing him to read, re-read, think about, hold, re-make—sometimes physically, re-write and re-invest in words. They were acting as words should, as reading should, as they do in early life when, in the form of fairy tales, goblins, good and bad witches, they become containers of our fears and anxieties.

As his fear of words decreased, Timothy's reading improved and his willingness to take words out of the sphere of reading and into that of writing increased.

This process was long, made strenuous demands on us both, and was subject to numerous setbacks and glitches too convoluted to discuss here. However, I hope I have given a snapshot of how a psychoanalytic approach to education can afford some understanding and a way of working, particularly where emotional difficulties beleaguer the process, and how intertwined our inner landscape is with, not only our ability to learn, but what we learn and why.

Psychoanalysis, like religion and medicine, turns panic into meaning. It makes fear bearable by making it interesting. And it does this in the most ordinary way; through conversation with another person. (Phillips)

I maintain that teaching also has a role to play in this turning of panic into meaning. One way it does this, implicitly or explicitly, is through allowing narrative. Timothy did, eventually write a letter to his mum, albeit one which would not have scored very highly when measured with formal tools for measuring spelling ability, expression, handwriting and so on. As a measure of the distance Timothy travelled in confronting his inner terrors, in confronting a teaching and learning situation and in overcoming a pathological fear of words and their hidden meanings, I think he scored very highly indeed.

There is the hope that interventions such as the ones described here can derail the process in which "all words make a life sentence" (Sinason). By helping Timothy develop the trust needed to make this quantum leap of faith, he was able to engage less fearfully with reading and writing in particular. His learning of literacy has given him more access to verbal thought and expression, once so severely limited. Timothy's new understanding of literacy and communication can now be employed longer term in therapy and in turn will facilitate greater learning potential. It is a long haul, but a journey which, sensitively set off upon, increases us all. ■

**Olivia Sagan** has worked with learners with multiple disadvantage in many challenging settings in both the UK and abroad, either as a teacher or a counsellor. These experiences triggered and nurtured a long-term interest in both the interface between learning and healing, and the issues of personal history, trauma and social justice. She is currently Development Officer at NRDC (the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy) and is undertaking further research into mentally ill learners, literacy and psychoanalytic approaches to learning and educational organization.

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