Psychoanalytic perspectives on learning and the subject called the learner

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Introduction

In this chapter I explore the contribution that psychoanalytic perspectives, mainly object relations theory, can make to a richer understanding of learning, in all its dimensions, as well as to theorising the subject that we call the learner. I draw on in-depth auto/biographical research used to illuminate micro-level processes in learning and teaching, including in informal settings. The research is to be understood by reference to a continuing neglect of the visceral, embodied aspects of learning and the marginality of psychoanalytic perspectives in thinking about learning and educational processes more widely (Hunt and West, 2006, 2009). However, the neglect does not go unchallenged: Tara Fenwick, for example, in applying complexity science to experiential learning, notes the potentially important contribution of psychoanalytic learning theories, in that analysis of learning ‘should focus less on reported meanings and motivations’ and more on what is happening ‘under the surface of human encounters’, including ‘the desire for and resistance to different objects and relationships’ (Fenwick, 2003: 131).

The resistance to psychoanalytic ideas in relation, for instance, to adult learning – or indeed learning across the lifespan – may partly stem from the continuing influence of cognitivist approaches. The same could be said for theorising learning and subjectivity, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, primarily in terms of cognition and cognitively driven, information-processing subjects (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Of the three domains of learning – the cognitive, the social and the psycho-emotional – the latter remains most often neglected, including in learning psychology (Illeris, 2002). However, as the Enlightenment project wanes, a stronger challenge has emerged to a disembodied Cartesian cognition and mind/body dualities. More holistic, post-structuralist, feminist but also psychoanalytically informed sensitivities are emerging (Hunt and West, 2009). Psychoanalytic ideas, it is suggested, offer new insights into what may be happening ‘under the surface of human encounters’ and in diverse contexts, when people learn.

Resistance

The contribution of psychoanalytic perspectives to illuminating learning is recognised, to an extent, in certain literatures, for example, adult education, including the insights of founding fathers such as Freud, Erickson or Jung (Clarke and Dirkx, 2000; Tennant, 1997). Using Freud, Tennant, for instance, has written of how anxieties experienced by adults in learning can be rooted in childhood as teachers become,
unconsciously, objects of infantile hopes and desires: they ought, for example, to be able, magically, to expel frustration and helplessness in learning. Teachers, in turn, may be narcissistically seduced into omnipotence or omniscience: unconsciously, teachers (like doctors) may be driven by a pervasive sense that they should always know or be able to cope in relation to their students (West, 2001, 2009a). They can become entangled in such infantile reactions and become overly apologetic or that they should always know or be able to cope in relation to their students (West, 2001, 2009a). They

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Among some educators there is concern that psychoanalysis, of whatever school, is socially conservative in its implications: preoccupied, in effect, with getting people to adjust to a status quo, rather than challenge it (Tennant, 1997). Psychoanalysis is seen to pathologise people in highly individualistic ways, as well as to hold overly essentialist views of the human subject (Tennant, 1997). Tennant cites Erik Erikson, for example, as suggesting that mental health emanates from successful adjustment to the demands of society, without reference to the fact that some forms of social organisation may be unhealthy and alienating (p. 34). Tennant concedes that some recent psychotherapeutic theorising, influenced by feminism, for instance, has a potentially more radical, questioning, socio-cultural edge: when, for instance, challenging the gendered construction of important parts of human experience, as for instance in the sometimes literal and often emotional absence of the father in processes of family life (see Sayers, 1995: for example). But he largely neglects the contribution of, for instance, object relations theorists who suggest that various forms of social organisation are alienating and emotionally unhealthy, while others can be more liberating. The socio-cultural order matters, in other words, for psychological health (Frosh, 1991), while learning in therapeutic contexts is partly about recognising oppressive social norms, around gender, race or class, for example, and how these can be played out in individual lives.

It is interesting that the reservations of adult educators like Mark Tennant resonate with very recent critiques of what is termed ‘therapy culture’, to which psychoanalysis is seen to have made a fundamental contribution. Educators and education have, in these terms, according to a number of writers, lost their way in a messy swamp of ‘therapeutic education’, while an older idea of disciplined intellectual immersion in a subject, fuelled by commitment to reason, science and progress is now submerged in a tsunami of emotionalism. Rational humanism and education, grounded in a critical yet dispassionate engagement with knowledge has, in other words, been substituted by a pernicious subjectivism. Kathryn Eccleston and Dennis Hayes (2009) argue that therapeutic education, under the influence of, among other things, psychoanalysis, is far from progressive or benign and derives from a diminished and fragile view of the human subject who is in need of therapy from cradle to the grave. Therapeutic education, so the argument proceeds, abandons the liberating project of education altogether. A curriculum of the self – supported by an army of peer mentors, life coaches, counsellors, psychologists and therapists – has replaced a curriculum derived from a canon of rigorous knowledge and sustained engagement with it, led by subject specialists confident in their discipline. Therapeutic education brings an agenda of social engineering or control of citizens, who are to be coached to feel better about themselves as well as to prepare for the labour market, rather than encouraged to think critically and rigorously about the social order. This argument appeals to certain educators precisely because of its anti-therapeutic, anti-psychologising stance.

A number of educators, under the influence of post-structuralism, also continue to argue that the preoccupation with subjectivity and emotionality – pre-eminently the territory of psychoanalysis – can serve, via diverse ‘educational’ practices, to discipline the subject to behave in socially acquiescent ways (Usher and Edwards, 1994). There is in fact, in some of the European, including British, literature resistance to psychologising the human subject at all, on whatever terms, partly as a reaction to the strong, sometimes dominant, psycholgistic, individualistic and ahistorical tendency in North American research and writing on learning (West, 1996). Of course, such critique and concern are open to many counter arguments, not least a tendency to elide everything, from psychoanalysis to notions of emotional literacy, under the same
therapeutic education banner. There is danger of relegating the internal world, and psychological processes more widely, including learning, to a simple epiphenomenal status in which we passively internalise social scripts, most famously in the idea of shifts from false to critical consciousness. To repeat, object relations theory barely gets a mention in much of the literature. This matters, because in its emphasis on intersubjective processes, object relations makes it more possible to integrate, in a bipolar and dynamic way, the social-cultural with the psychological in thinking about learning and change processes (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Merrill and West, 2009).

Object relations

It should be noted that object relations theory, like psychoanalysis more widely, perceives the emotions and relationships to be the prime driving force for learning, in earliest and subsequent experience: ‘it is not in fact the capacity for logical and rational thought that provides the basis for language acquisition. Rather it is emotional interpersonal understanding that provides the basis for meaning and is the precursor of language’ (Diamond and Marrone, 2003: 6). The interpersonal lies at the heart of object relations theories – of Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott and Wilfred Bion, for instance – as against the more classical drive theories of Freudian psychology. The latter were more focused on intrapsychic processes, dominated by conflicts between various drives like Eros, the libidinal drive for stimulation and satisfaction, and Thanatos, with its potential to annihilate it. Object relations theorists, such as Klein and Winnicott, emphasised more of the intersubjective world and how we may internalise ‘objects’ – most famously the breast – as good or bad, a source of nourishment or its converse. Melanie Klein argued, derived from clinical observation, that selves are forged out of the way we internalise objects – whole people or parts – and absorb these as sets of fantasised internal relationships that become the building blocks of personality (Klein, 1998; Frosh, 1991). The emphasis on the interplay of inner and outer objects in the development of personality and self turned psychoanalysis, in Janet Sayers’s words, ‘inside out’ (Sayers, 2000). The self and subjectivity in this object relations perspective are conceived as dynamic, never complete products of our relationship, with actual people and diverse objects, including the symbolic.

The self, in earliest experience, is absolutely dependent on others, and their responses are crucial to healthy self-development, including cultivating the appetite for learning in the sense of openness to experience. But anxiety can constrain this, generated via the individual’s vulnerability and absolute reliance on the other; but also by the capacity for destructive, hateful and envious feelings in relationships. Such feelings are forged, in some versions, in the baby’s interaction with the prime caregiver, including when hungry (the baby has no concept of time) or otherwise in need. In good enough relationships, the other’s response becomes critical in processing feelings: s/he can work to contain and feed back hateful and destructive emotions – to be thought-full, in loving ways – in what amounts to a kind of transformational interaction. Talk, making sounds and rhythmic movement combine to provide reassurance, but also the sense that things are fundamentally well. This amounts, in effect, to a prototypical conversation about the potential goodness of experience. The baby, in turn, can internalise the good object parent, creating a sense of well-being in the world, but also of thoughtfulness and desire to engage. Moreover, the baby begins to learn the power and play of language and can also experience agency through the responses of the other. We may come to realise, in the process, that the arousal of needs can be pleasurable rather than to be dreaded, offering a basic building block for relatively open forms of engagement. Yet, none of these intersubjective processes is perfect and anxiety is always present just beneath the surface of things. Klein developed the idea of splitting as defence against such anxiety: at being dependent and needy, for instance, we may split off ‘bad’ and needy parts of ourselves (when hungry for instance) from the good (when fed), for fear that the other might not be available (Klein, 1998; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Frosh, 1991). Such processes of psychological splitting can apply in adult life: whenever we feel vulnerable, dependent or inadequate. We may split off and project onto others or whole groups ‘bad’ or ‘good’ aspects of ourselves.
We may construct an idealised image of self as one who can cope, escaping, perhaps, into omniscience and omnipotence: the very antithesis of learning (West, 2001).

If, in earliest experience, anxiety is considered fundamental in learning – emanating from states of absolute dependence on the other – it is being suggested that it is there too in later life, especially in periods of transition and stress. People can feel unable to cope with new ideas or change processes; past, in such situations, may elide with present, present with past, in what Melanie Klein termed ‘memory in feeling’: a deeply embodied and largely unconscious process (Klein, 1998). This can be especially pervasive for those who experienced difficult transitional processes in earlier life, in separation from prime caregivers or in going to school, for instance. Isca Salzberger-Wittenberg et al. (1999) have observed that, however mature or capable we may be, there can be continuing dread of helplessness, of feeling lost, of being overcome and found wanting in contexts requiring new learning. Salzberger-Wittenberg, in an introductory chapter, describes meeting groups of experienced educators beginning programmes at the Tavistock Clinic in London and of becoming aware of tensions in the room, during a first session. She encouraged everyone to comment on their feelings in that moment, and people talked of insecurity, anxiety and of the fear of being found wanting. The trouble, she concludes, is that we often pay mere lip service to such feelings and ride roughshod over them in educational settings. This, despite the fact that, the more unfamiliar and unstructured the situation, or the more threatening it might be to our status as knowledgeable adults – who are supposed to know and to cope – the more disorientated and terrified we can feel (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 1999: 4–5; West, 2009b). Anxiety can also find expression in the face of a new idea, or different way of knowing, bringing fundamental challenges to our existing assumptions and sense of self, as among women learners in encounters, for instance, with feminism (West, 1996).

**Connecting the social and psychological**

There is among many auto/biographical researchers an increased straddling of the socio-cultural and psychological in theorising, for instance, learning and meaning making, as well as the stories people tell about such processes. This reaches back to the inter-disciplinary psychosocial traditions of the Chicago School of Sociology and social psychology that got lost as sociology, becoming more positivistic and statistical, while psychology became more essentialist and scientistic (Wright Mills, 1959; Chamberlayne et al., 2004; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Hunt and West, 2009; Merrill and West, 2009). Feminist psychoanalysis has made an important contribution to these interdisciplinary aspirations although feminists, as Jane Flax (1990) observed, were, like many adult educators, initially antagonistic towards considering women’s oppression in psychological terms at all. Freudian psychoanalysis compounded the difficulty by placing penis envy – the idea of women desiring to be more like men and feeling inferior because they were not – at the heart of theories of loss and unconscious desire (Sayers, 1995). But writers such as Janet Sayers (1995) have shifted the attention to the importance of wider cultural imperatives in intersubjective life. Many feminists have been drawn to object relations theories precisely because of their compatibility with a constructivist model of human development and identity formation in which culture penetrates to the core of the most intimate of processes.

Stephen Frosh and colleagues (Frosh et al., 2005), using biographical narrative research and drawing on object relations, have noted a greater socio-cultural awareness in psychoanalytic theorising, alongside social psychology’s willingness to engage with ‘meaning’. They explore, drawing in part on post-structuralist insights, how subjects may be positioned by powerful cultural and interpretative repertoires. Yet, they suggest, this is insufficient to explain how people may also position themselves: drawing on the work of Melanie Klein (1998): they make use of object relations, including notions of splitting and idealisation. In a study of 11–14-year-old boys, they interrogate homophobia and experiences of masculinity and interpret these in psychosocial ways. Some boys can question their positioning, and begin to reflexively learn about it, while others do not. Using biographical interviews of ‘a clinical style’ – encouraging exploration of
openness, contradiction and emotionally marked material – they interrogate the processes involved in boys succumbing to or resisting and questioning homophobia. Resistance and learning, they note, can be forged through identification with significant others. In one young man’s narrative, there is strong identification with a mother, in the context of a violent father. In the interview itself – conducted by a man – a process of identification and splitting was discerned in which the ‘bad’ actual father is contrasted with the ‘good’ interviewer. The researchers conclude that social discourses around being gay and of what constitutes a good father – and learning about these – are not simply templates to be passively drawn on. Rather, dynamic intersubjective forces – such as splitting and idealisation – are in play, ‘constructing and policing certain modes of masculinity and inhibiting others’, including the capacity to think about what might be happening (Frosh et al., 2005: 53).

Note has been made, in similar biographical narrative research on adult learning – using object relations to complement socio-cultural analysis – how individual responses to oppressive situations can vary, even among people from similar backgrounds (West, 1996; Hunt and West, 2006; Merrill and West, 2009). Some people, for example, seem more able to transcend oppression and remain psychologically more open to new experience, despite painful learning biographies. New trans-European research on non-traditional learners in higher education, using biographical narrative methods, is chronicling and theorising such processes (the RANLHE project: www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl). Interdisciplinary conversations are developing, connecting, for example, the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu with psychoanalytic thinkers such as Donald Winnicott. Bourdieu’s insights into habitus and disposition reveal how a learner with limited socio-cultural capital may struggle in a certain habitus, especially the more exclusive ones of some traditional universities and disciplines. Bourdieu’s structuration approach enables us to understand how, for instance, working class adult students may be positioned and constrained by a particular habitus (Bourdieu, 1988). Yet Bourdieu fails, like many sociologists, to explain how and why some students, against the norm, perhaps, find the resources and resilience to survive and even prosper in a particular habitus.

Donald Winnicott’s (1971) ideas are helpful, here, especially his notion of transitional space in relationships between people. He was interested in the infant’s struggle to separate from a prime caregiver and what made this possible, in psychologically healthy ways. He was to apply the notion to processes of separation and self-negotiation in adult life too: what enabled people to move from dependency and defensiveness towards greater openness to experience and creative forms of endeavour (Winnicott, 1971). Spaces might take many and varied forms, such as being at university or in therapy. Significant others, and their responses, were seen to be important in re-evaluating self and possibility and in overcoming anxieties about whether a space might be for them. A person might come to think and feel differently towards self, ‘reality’ and future possibilities because of the responses, over time, of significant others (like a teacher or other respected professional). If people feel seen, understood and legitimised in their endeavours – in creating new stories of who they are and might be – a stronger sense of self may find expression. These processes are far from simply cognitive, but fundamentally embodied and emotional: touching the earliest and most primitive aspects of being human.

Auto/biographical research

The basic argument is that object relations can help us to understand more fully the lived experience of learners and learning and in interdisciplinary ways. Object relations theory offers a more nuanced perspective on change and transitional processes; the metaphor of the theatre is useful here: we can conceive of psychological dynamics and the development of self as well as of learning as analogous to the development of a dramatic production. Some characters with whom we interact may be emotionally rigid, and even persecutory and abusive, and we can become rigid and maybe abusers too, including of ourselves. However, casts of characters can change as new people enter the intersubjective stage: people with whom we identify, whom we respect and feel respect us, yet who also challenge, like a tutor in higher education or professionals...
in a family learning project. I want to provide two case studies of this, drawing on auto/biographical research. As suggested, a rich body of psychoanalytically informed biographical research has developed, if on the margins of educational research, over the last two decades, with diverse studies of learning and subjective experience in health care and social work, as well as in educational contexts (Chamberlayne et al., 2004; Froggett, 2002; West, 1996, 2001; Salling Oleson, 2007a, 2007b; Weber, 2007).

These methods encourage story telling – by creating good enough transitional space – allowing learners to engage reflexively, with the researchers, to identify themes in material and to think about them together. The methodology emphasises the importance in research of attentiveness, respectfulness and a need to manage anxiety and to build secure, collaborative space (Merrill and West, 2009). Participants are involved, as stated, in the analysis of their material, via recordings and transcripts and, given the longitudinal design of some studies, this will include what may be difficult to say and or what might be missing from the account (West, 1996, 2001, 2007; Merrill and West, 2009). The methods help illuminate the complex interplay of desire and resistance, self and other, over time, in private and more public space.

The use of the slash in the term, auto/biographical research (Stanley, 1992) emphasises the idea that research itself is a form of relationship and learning in which the self of the researcher will shape the other, and vice-versa. It is, as Roper (2003) notes, not only about generating words to do with experiences elsewhere, but also involves relationship in its own right. Such a relationship can generate, consciously and unconsciously, patterns of response, which aid or hinder understanding. Reflexivity, on the part of the researcher, becomes central to the task, including interrogating what is termed the counter-transference feelings in the researcher; in other words what the other may provoke in us, which can provide insight into the other and her feelings (Merrill and West, 2009). Such research can become a dynamic and dialogical form of learning, with researchers spending many hours with individual learners, across various research cycles. As research evolves, and relationships strengthen, issues are revisited iteratively, generating, testing and retesting hypotheses over time. Participants can become more confident and increasingly curious about their own lives: it is unusual, they might say, for anyone to be interested and to listen, respectfully, to them and their experience.

Two cases in point

‘Brenda’ (all the names are pseudonyms) was a mature woman student who was a participant in a longitudinal study of adult learners in higher education (West, 1996). She was, at the beginning of the research, a nervous, diffident woman of 52 who had underachieved educationally. She was undergoing change and transition in her life and was clinging on to an unhappy marriage. She was emotionally abused as a child and anxious about her capacity to cope and what others might think of her. She told a story, in the early stages of the research (which was to last for four years, over seven research cycles), of participating in learning as a way of making herself more acceptable to her husband and his friends. She was, she said, investing in higher education because she was fearful that her marriage would disintegrate. A process of splitting is evident in her early material, higher education represented more of a threat than an opportunity, full, as it was, of intelligent people, unlike herself, as she would often put it. She defended against thinking of herself as a learner in higher education for fear of being pushed away. She emphasised, instead, the fact of being a mother and wife participating, part-time, at university. Three years later, as she progressed towards a degree, she felt stronger and talked of herself as a student in higher education: she could express feelings and ideas – of diverse kinds – about literature, feminism, higher education and of the ambivalent experience of being a learner.

This change was mainly due, she said, to the influence of significant others, including particular teachers, as well as a daughter who was also a student. She also strongly identified with a number of literary characters: carrying them around in her head, she said, such as a prostitute in a Maupassant novel. She felt like the prostitute, in that she had often felt used and abused by men. Brenda was in counselling at the time and said she felt more
able to engage with thinking about the emotional aspects of her life and learning, including her capacity for self-denigration.

Brenda talked of specific epiphanal moments, in the language of Norman Denzin (1989), at university – turning points – revolving around, for instance, particular lecturers and their responses in seminars. Some, she felt, simply talked past or through her. But she described one tutor who, she said, made her feel understood in her fumbling attempts to contribute to group discussion. She felt seen, in a basic emotional sense, and felt that higher education, at long last, might be for her too. This is the psychosocial territory of object relationships – of anxieties contained and of feeling noticed at a primitive, largely unconscious level – enabling more fulsome engagement and thoughtfulness (including with feminist ideas). A seminar at university might constitute some transitional space, in which significant others, and their responses, enable some gradual renegotiation of self to emerge. A person, like Brenda, came to think and feel differently towards self and the world, as a learner: more a subject in history rather than the object of others’ negative projections.

A second case

‘Margaret’ was a participant in a programme called Sure Start, similar to the American Head Start programme (there are related programmes in Australia too) (West, 2009b). She came to be actively involved in a range of family and learning projects as well as becoming an activist. These programmes are designed to break cycles of disadvantage and exclusion and Sure Start (and associated Children’s Centres) is now established in many areas in England identified as having high levels of deprivation. Sure Start and Children’s Centres vary, but may offer diverse services: child support, crèche, access to specialist services such as speech and language therapy or child and mental health, as well as varied opportunities for informal and non-formal adult and family learning. The programmes can be controversial and have been seen as overly intrusive and/or a way of disciplining morally feckless parents (West, 2009b). But rhetoric can vary, while there are a number of players as well as agendas that can occupy the space represented by the initiative. Some professionals, for example, may exploit government rhetoric – on the need to strengthen community capacity building, or improve service delivery via partnership arrangements, or nourish new forms of sustainable local development – to justify more participatory approaches to project management and community regeneration alongside more diverse and questioning forms of learning (West, 2009b).

Margaret told us a story of being a child always stuck at the back of the class and rarely noticed. She struggled in a difficult, abusive family and was wrestling with an abusive relationship when Sure Start entered the psychosocial space of her life. Going to meetings, on her own, was a major step, she said. She lived in isolation, as she put it, with her young child, but found that ‘everyone was really friendly and made you feel welcome. It was relaxed. All the children were happy. It was just nice. Nice surroundings, nice people.’ She told us how she got to know people at a time when she needed to rebuild her life. She was surprised, she said, to find that ‘you did have an input and I felt involved, so … everyone was just nice and friendly, everyone was the same. They were, they really made you feel welcome. I just felt safe and relaxed.’ The quality of the relationships with senior staff in the project was central to her narrative.

However the project could feel intimidating and forbidding, especially when she was encouraged to play a fuller part in developing the programme and asked to serve on a management board. Margaret did not want to say anything at first, in her encounters with professionals and representatives of diverse agencies. The people from other agencies, the ‘suits’, as she and other parents put it, ‘were there for their own agendas’. But she began to be ‘a bit of a nuisance’, by insisting, when the going got hard, that the parents should be at the heart of the programme. It helped, she said, that the Director and Chair were interested in them and what they had to say, ‘like good parents really’.  

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But the process was far from easy at times, as particular parents felt sidelined in meetings. We, as researchers, fed back some of these responses to the professionals and steps were taken to address process issues in the Management Board. Time was given to role-play and to preparing a case for particular meetings. Margaret described a kind of epiphanal moment, involving a struggle to find voice at a particular meeting where she felt strongly about issues of child protection:

I was very nervous about saying it; I got it out the way and thought it wasn’t too bad … . It was about the child protection, we had the Sitter Service in and we wanted to know what their screening was, that kind of thing. One lot said that it had three stages – you could get police checks. Somebody said it was just one. I turned round and said ‘Can’t we get somebody in to explain it?’ They are going to sort that out I think or find out … I knew I wanted to say it but would it come out properly, and it did so I was happy. It was a big step for me.

(West and Carlson, 2007: 104)

The moment probably went unnoticed by others. For Margaret, in the totality of her life, it constituted a major step. She was a person who had been scared to speak out at school, in her family and in her adult life, in personal and public space. Her parents or others never encouraged her and yet this was changing. She felt able, in the project, to challenge dominant agendas and was no longer, as she put it, ‘simply a mum stuck at home’. When we reflected together on these change processes and at feeling more of a self in relation to others, the role and responses of key professionals came to the fore. She, too, talked of feeling seen and understood; of, in effect, being parented herself in ways that enabled her to manage her anxieties and to engage with experience, however initially inhibiting this had been. Particular professionals were alive in her story, available and respectful, as well as challenging when it most mattered. Both Brenda and Margaret talked of being more fully themselves in those moments.

**A more holistic understanding**

I have suggested that psychoanalytic object relations theories, combined with auto/biographical research, provide rich insights into the ambivalence and relationship at the heart of learning, at least of any significant kind, and of forging a self. There is a body of clinically informed, socially aware, theoretically sophisticated work that can help us to understand how the desire for, but also resistance to, different objects, including the symbolic, find expression, including in the stories we tell (Sclater, 2004). Such perspectives offer insights into the contingent and developmental nature of human subjectivity in which primitive anxieties over the capacity to cope are never far from the surface of even the most polished appearance. Such insights help build more holistic understanding of the centrality of the emotions and bodily experience in learning, and how this might be theorised. We become more attuned to what often lies beneath surface appearances, both in ourselves as well as others, in change and transitional processes.

Research itself, as described in the chapter, may also be conceived as a form of learning: representing a kind of transitional space for renegotiating self with another. Research can offer a relatively secure, playful space in which narrative risks may be taken and interviewees, over time, can come to think more deeply about experiences of learning, of relationship, including awareness of defences against new ways of seeing. Brenda came to realise how she often told stories, and behaved in educational settings to appease and even please powerful men. This included the research: we were able to explore this partly because of the quality of the research relationship and the longitudinal, reflexive nature of the study (West, 1996). Such material, in the process, offers new ways of thinking about learning and what can enhance and inhibit it, but also for conceptualising the whole subject that we call the learner, beyond surface appearance and a disembodied, decontextualised cognition.
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