

Dread and Hope in Analytic Training

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I

We often define psychoanalytic training by the type of training model used, the specific program requirements, or the particular content of the curriculum. Yet attention needs to be directed also to the values implicitly communicated in psychoanalytic training institutes through their structure, culture, and educational philosophies. The medium of the institute is its own powerful message. Even those training programs that strive to be egalitarian and to value diverse perspectives can be at risk of becoming authoritarian as a means of resolving the tensions of differing perspectives. Authoritarian solutions inhibit exploration and foreclose the potential space that is so necessary for creativity and growth among candidates and faculty. Despite advances in our training communities, there are still many cautionary tales to be told that hold crucial insights for the future of psychoanalytic education. My own perspective on training has been informed by such an experience.

I began my psychoanalytic training in 2003 at a relatively new institute located in an area where there are few psychoanalysts. It was the only analytic training program within two hundred miles. In the application materials, the institute's training was described as a Freudian program committed to discussing and exploring divergent points of view. But the openness that was promised never materialized. Class discussions were monotonous. There was no real dialogue. Faculty lectured and dutiful candidates listened. As time went on, I began to feel the pressure to conform. Naturally curious and enthusiastic, I gradually became silent and compliant.

The same hierarchical pattern with its numbing effect dominated the organizational structure itself. The power struggles within the small local analytic community continued within the institute. Over time and following a history of exclusions, authority at the institute became centralized. Major decisions, including faculty selection, curriculum, and progression, were primarily made by two people while the remainder of the small faculty were only permitted to be marginally involved. It began to seem to me that the process of learning about psychoanalysis was secondary to the conflicts and politics of the organization. One of our seminar meetings was interrupted in order to inform us of the details of a dispute between the leadership and the training analyst of a candidate present in the room at the time. Following this unexpected news, the candidate was told by the leadership that it might be beneficial for them to switch to an analyst that offered better support to the institute and the training process. Although upset and very confused, the candidate did not decide to change their analyst. Shortly thereafter, this candidate was informed that approval to begin the first training case had been revoked and any work in progress would need to be postponed. The overall atmosphere of the training program was fraught with tension, and the absence or unavailability of printed educational policies and active committee structures within the organization contributed to the fearfulness and vigilance.

Just as I had become compliant, institute faculty also fell in line. Teaching was restrained, reading lists were curtailed, and I observed a reticence on the part of faculty to respond to questions that could be thought to deviate from mainstream views. Many seminar discussions were videotaped and reviewed by the institute leadership. At times, faculty and candidates would receive explicit “re-direction” from the leadership regarding questions or topics from classes that had been taped. In one seminar, I questioned the classical understanding of femininity. The following week, I received a note in my mailbox indicating that the institute leadership had perceived my questions as a challenge

to their expertise. All candidates in the course subsequently received a packet of materials documenting the credentials of the institute's leaders along with a list of approved reading on gender development from a classical Freudian perspective.

I felt confused and then ashamed as if something were terribly wrong with me, because ideas and questions I had raised in class had been so misperceived. From that point on whenever the seminar material would stimulate questions in me, I would feel anxiety building up in anticipation of disapproval. A new internal voice began to insist that it was much safer to accept things at face value than to be curious, question, or explore. I became quieter and quieter.

While I would occasionally get glimpses of a broader analytic world than the one my training institute offered, the one that my candidate class had access to seemed to grow smaller and smaller. On one occasion when I asked about some supplemental reading suggestions, I was told that there had been little of merit published since 1969. My class came to accept the necessity of certain traditions and explanations without question along with the survival value of silence. This was not what I had expected to be learning as an analytic candidate. The dissonance felt intolerable.

In the spring of 2005 during the third year of my training, a group of faculty and three candidates left my analytic institute to form an alternative one. We wanted to develop an egalitarian organization in which divergent perspectives could be openly discussed. During our early planning meetings, we discussed contemporary literature on psychoanalytic education and openly debated the range of options for educational standards. Many progressive steps were taken. Our Board of Directors included candidate representation; we eliminated training-analyst status and allowed for supervision outside of the local area; and we decided to include a range of theoretical perspectives within our curriculum. Most of all, we hoped to remove the ambiguity from the organizational structure with the development of clearly written policies and evaluations *while restoring the*

tolerance for ambiguity around psychoanalytic ideas. We felt excited about distancing ourselves from the past and making a new beginning.

When we began classes in the fall of 2005, our seminars were vibrant. The contrast between my early and latter years of training was striking. I now looked forward to lively seminars in which enthusiastic faculty openly discussed their individual views and divergent views were welcomed. Consequently, the three candidates each began to show signs of developing their own unique professional voices.

But gradually the old organizational conflicts and power struggles re-emerged with the same pressure for conformity and consensus seeping back into the boardroom and the seminar rooms. Past injuries and old wounds surfaced with startling intensity. New perspectives were once again viewed as threatening. Some members began to assert that we should return to the familiarity of a predominantly single-theory curriculum in order to promote consensus.

Once more I was disappointed and confused as I struggled to understand how we could have come so *far* only to find ourselves once again in the midst of the *same* issues we tried so hard to leave behind. Was change really not possible? Was it worth even trying anymore? Again I found myself in a situation in which thinking critically or expressing my own views felt very risky. Conflicts in our group escalated. Dialogue became limited. Syllabi were censored; two faculty members were asked not to teach because their syllabus included several papers by Relational analysts. Once again, the organizational structure shifted in order to control and contain the underlying conflict. Authority for faculty assignment, course development, and curriculum was once again centralized to program leaders because it was suggested that a more egalitarian process had become too cumbersome or was perhaps simply a wishful product of individual problems with acceptance of authority. Dissenting board members were marginalized. Alternative ideas were

publicly labeled rebellious, expressed concerns were called paranoid, and a “new” word was developed as those who questioned the changes were told they were lacking in “good *followship*.”

The maintenance of the status quo was concretized by a regular and almost mantra-like response to proposals -- “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” *But who defines “broke?”* I struggled to reconcile these messages with the analytic values I was supposed to be learning. Once again the dissonance was intolerable. Only this time, there was no alternative; no second chance.

II

Without realizing it at the time, I found myself coping with the dissonance by becoming less involved with my training, less interested in the field, and less invested in my clinical practice. I went from being an avid reader who couldn’t wait to tear open the plastic wrapper when the new editions of my journal subscriptions arrived to someone who could no longer sustain enough interest to finish an article. When I did, I would find myself forgetting what I had just read or losing track of basic concepts that I had learned long ago. I was training in a field that was supposed to be about facing uncomfortable issues and conflict, examining oneself, tolerating uncertainty, and opening up to new ideas, but what I was actually learning to do was just the opposite.

What does it say if we can't tolerate the same qualities in our classrooms and our institutions that we value in the analytic process? While psychoanalytic ideals may never be perfectly realized in actual life, they need to inform the values underlying our educational programs. **Too great a disparity between our ideals and the values informing our training can be deadening—if not “*crazy making*.”**

Through my work with clinical supervisors I sought from outside my local area, I became aware of the ways in which my experiences in the institute had entered into my own consulting room

and altered the way I characteristically practiced. I had begun to avoid taking up sensitive issues with my patients and was failing to address conflict. Unreasonably, I feared that if I did so, my patients would be narcissistically wounded and fire me. Instead of grappling with uncertainty during the hour, I felt an internal pressure to be the authority. While intellectually I held different formulations of these clinical cases in my mind, in the clinical moment I had been responding *as if in thrall of all the institute's values that were so repugnant to me*. In the very process of training to become an analyst, I had discovered I had lost myself.

As I dared to consider the idea of writing this paper, I struggled with the issue of speaking my mind. What would happen to me if I broke my silence? Could I find the words I needed, some confidence, and my own voice? Would doing so entail risking my status as a candidate in training? Would I be excluded from contributing any further to my institute community or from participating in committees? Painfully, I began to realize that the first changes I needed to make were within my self.

If I choose to stay silent, to seek safety by avoiding conflict, and to avoid the risk of adverse outcomes, *then I would be enacting the same values that I opposed in my training*. So with fear and uncertainty --- and a lot of trepidation, I began to face the conflict and write.

My thinking grew in unexpected ways during the process of working on this paper with a writing mentor. With each exchange of ideas, I discovered more. Similar to my experiences with my clinical supervisors and with certain creative faculty, I experienced how it felt to go beyond what I thought I knew in the intersubjective dialogues that we created. I began to understand “in my bones” (as Winnicott would say) one of the meanings of the verb “to educate,” which is to bring out or lead forth. It was what I had hoped training would be—a lively, intersubjective process that would help to draw out my own potential. When an experience can be trusted to facilitate one’s ability to be open

and fully engaged, vulnerable, uncertain, and willing to risk, then it becomes possible to walk along the growing edge and go beyond what one has known.

III

None of us—whether individually or in small groups—may have all the answers to the question of what makes for the best analytic training in the 21st century and for the best structure for our training institutes. **However, I would like to suggest, there is a pressing need for analytic educators to directly link the ways we “live into the questions” (Rilke) of organizational life to the ways candidates are taught to embrace the questions of analytic life.**

It is no surprise that the values most conducive to the analytic process may also be the ones most conducive to the health and vitality of our training institutions. For example, what if the *implicit* message our analytic organizations conveyed included an appreciation for self-exploration, open dialogue, acceptance of difference and conflict, and a willingness to grapple with uncertainty?

Perhaps, it will be the institute without a need for certainty and closure that will come closest to representing these values in its actions and ultimately in preparing candidates for the practice and *living* of psychoanalysis in an evolving postmodern world. *Perhaps.*

