

## The “Full Training Illusion” and The Myth of Functional Equivalence Todd Essig, Ph.D.

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The train has left the station, or least a technologically mediated simulation of a train(ing). According to the web-site of the China America Psychoanalytic Alliance, two APsaA approved institutes are now offering “full, on-line psychoanalytic training beginning September 2015 (classes, supervision and psychoanalysis): the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis and the William Alanson White Institute.” Other APsaA institutes are considering classes by 2016. Presumably, graduates will become eligible for membership in the APsaA and IPA, and should someone join Division 39, perhaps Section 1 as well.

Let me cut to the chase: these institutes that have announced, or are considering, programs to provide “full on-line psychoanalytic training” are risking their reputation, and ours, for misnamed projects of dubious therapeutic and educational (as well as economic) value. They are making what I hope you will agree is a significant mistake, and in the process offering an object lesson in how psychoanalysis should not relate itself to twenty-first-century technoculture.

The three components of full psychoanalytic training vary in the likelihood of successful simulation via technological mediation: classroom instruction, likely; supervision, possible; training analysis, unlikely. And the most important, the hidden fourth, the way the traditional three components organically interact so candidates become psychoanalysts with unique, personally meaningful psychoanalytic identities and sensibilities? Unfortunately that component is mostly ignored as though it did not exist. Overall, the promise of full psychoanalytic training online must be considered an illusion—and an unnecessary one given other options for training candidates in areas without a psychoanalytic presence.

Many psychoanalysts shudder at the thought of technologically mediated treatment and training. They would never base a treatment or a training experience on screen relations alone, other than maybe an occasional

session made necessary by travel or illness. But full training online? No way. Technology is just not their thing. I am definitely not one of them.

Others are enthralled by the experience and possibilities. They enthusiastically train and teach wherever there is interest. Geography no longer bounds professional activity: have Skype, will practice. Because a screen relations based treatment (SRBT) so often feels the same as what takes place when people are bodies together they assume the two contexts function equivalently, or near enough for purposes of treatment or training. There is no reason not to treat almost anyone almost anywhere, other than situations like someone likely to be crisis ridden requiring local intervention. I am also not part of this group.

I belong to a third grouping: those in recovery from being in the second group. We have firsthand experiential and empirical knowledge of the inevitable limitations screen relations put on treatment. We have experienced the losses that accrue trying to get around the losses geography imposes. We often feel betrayed by overinflated promises of techno-utopianism that conflict with our knowledge of significant differences between SRBT and traditional co-present treatment. We can even become embarrassed or frustrated when uncritical displays of what can only be seen as narcissistic countertransference to technologically mediated methods blinds someone to the inevitable losses and limitations of screen relations. While studying the unique aspects of SRBT does not preclude using technological mediation as a better-than-nothing solution to exigent circumstance, when there really is nothing else, it does bust the myth of functional equivalence.

Once that myth is busted there are significant consequences for training because “full on-line psychoanalytic training” is based on that myth. The structure of all these programs assume a functional equivalence between co-present treatment and SRBT for the various purposes served by a training analysis. One can substitute for the other; a SRBT is good enough for training purposes. Furthermore these programs all assume it is good enough without any special training for training analysts about either the losses and limits inherent in technological mediation or in how to minimize technology’s influence, such as by studying Skype as the “uncanny third” (Dettbarn, 2014). Busting the myth has consequences as well for supervision, classroom instruction, and curriculum. Without functional equiva-

lence for training analyses, distance training needs to go back to the drawing board for a top-to-bottom reformulation of all three components: classroom experience, supervised cases, and training analyses, as well as their interaction.

The drawing board, not the marketplace, is where distance training currently belongs. We need to develop options other than those based on the myth of functional equivalence. While some might say current models are “better than nothing” solutions to the problem of teaching psychoanalysis in areas without a psychoanalytic presence, such as China, that is not true. There is not “nothing.” The standard we should use in thinking about these programs is more than simply better than nothing. They need to be better than something else, where that something else is solutions grounded in available knowledge about technological mediation and psychoanalysis.

What is the current state of knowledge? Current knowledge of the differences between the psychological affordances of technologically mediated and physically co-present contexts raises significant doubt about whether a screen relation can adequately prepare someone for when someone actually walks into their consulting room. *Screen Relations: The Limits of Computer-Mediated Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy*, a new book by Gillian Isaacs Russell (2015), documents significant differences across a variety of therapeutic processes such as providing a facilitating, holding environment; adopting a stance of evenly-suspended attention; or developing conditions for shared reverie. A conclusion from this game-changing book is that any analyst who takes seriously the something-more-than-interpretation, who looks to the relational or interpersonal experience co-created in an analysis, who considers implicit relational knowing to be a locus for therapeutic change, or who attends to recent advances in neuroscience and views analysis as talk that changes the brain cannot simply assume the functional equivalence for a training analysis on which “full psychoanalytic training” online is based.

To be clear, this is not to say that SRBTs cannot be helpful to some patients in need. They can. Nor is to say that SRBT prevents the appearance of some psychoanalytic processes including unconscious communication, affect attunement and containment, and transference-countertransference dynamics. Our literature is now replete with case histories and first-

person accounts of a psychoanalytically successful SRBT. Enactments can emerge onscreen and then be discussed and resolved pending the next enactment. Minds can meet. Insight can grow. More demonstrations of these facts are not needed. Let us acknowledge that some psychoanalytic care CAN be provided remotely via technologically mediated intimacies. The better-than-nothing really can be exactly that, because we are wired to relate and will always unconsciously bridge the gaps. That debate is over; it will not be recounted here, and it should be retired.

But this does not support the myth of functional equivalence, especially for training analyses. Just because a surgeon can perform an emergency tracheotomy with a Bic pen (research shows the soft feel Jumbo passing muster, Owens, et.al., 2010) does not mean it should be used for routine care and in training programs. “Full on-line psychoanalytic training,” at best, is a Bic pen tracheotomy—and one performed even when other options are available.

If the train(ing) is not pulled back into the station at minimum I would hope we stop saying we are offering “full on-line psychoanalytic training.” What we are really offering is a technologically mediated simulation of psychoanalytic training with significant limitations, like training in a flight simulator, which is not the same kind of full training as is actually flying planes someplace. There are several benefits to acknowledging reality. One benefit is we will not foment unrealistic expectations. Teachers, supervisors, analysts, and candidates will not confuse one context for the other. A second benefit is we will enrich the training experience by supporting curiosity about what the differences are between screen relations and being bodies together, perhaps unleashing a search for creative solutions that will never emerge if problems are denied. Third, we will create conceptual space for a different way forward into twenty-first-century technoculture. Rather than trying to exploit technological-mediation for financial gain, the unique human (psychoanalytic) value of being bodies together can be placed at the forefront of what psychoanalysis offers the wider world. We need to be direct about the limitations of technologically mediated experience so as to celebrate the amazing possibilities present only when people are bodies together (Pinker, 2014).

Finally, in addition to what is too close for comfort to selling “diluted antibiotics” to places where demand is strong, we are once again misread-

ing the cultural moment, just as we did at the start of the digital revolution when we dragged our feet, despite the efforts of some, me included, to accelerate participation in emerging technoculture. The irony is that distance training and treatment options are growing in popularity when experts in computer-mediated communications are becoming increasingly aware of the limits and losses of such screen relations. We ignored technological utopianism when it was shiny and new and full of promise only to flock to it now that it is a tired relic of a future that will not be. Despite the pride of many, online treatment and training is in no way today's cutting edge.

For example, in his new book *The Glass Cage* Nicholas Carr (2014) busts the "substitution myth" by documenting psychological and physical damage when technology is brought in to replace human activity. Sherry Turkle's new work (2015) sets out to "reclaim conversation"—i.e., rescue the complexity of human intimacy from merely being connected by our always-on, always-on-us communications devices. Rather than such screen relations providing a technological solution to loneliness and distance, they degrade our capacity for intimacy, solitude and self-reflection by diminishing the skills we need to be bodies together. In the same vein, and at a much different level of cultural relevance, I've written about how the "Skype therapy illusion" (i.e., how the better than nothing gets turned into routine care) is built on the myth of functional equivalence (2014).

Of course, the future does not give up its secrets easily, and it will always surprise. But, as the saying goes, you pay your money and you take your chances. I just don't want to bet on blurring the differences between being bodies together and sharing thoughts on screen. There are lots of illustrations providing glimpses of what's next to support this view. We just need to pay attention. For example, when I told a thoughtful young journalist, totally a digital native who has grown up onscreen about Skype therapy her response was "really, uhm, yuck." Or consider a spin class teacher at my gym who eschews all the fitness-tracking screens available. Instead he exhorts the class to listen to your body to gauge effort and then be together on the ride to support achievement. The 20-somethings in the class whoop with delight to have screens turned off so they can revel in the resulting experience of being bodies together. Or consider the future as envisioned by the young artists at the New Museum's current triennial. It's been described as a subversive celebration of humanism among post-human digital experience. The cutting edge all these illustrations share embraces of the limits

and losses of digital technologies so as to celebrate the unique human experiences only found by being bodies together. Techno-utopianism is dying. Technological mediation as panacea is, well, so yesterday.

It is not too late to correct our rather embarrassing trend of celebrating the future as it existed in 1996. We do not need to do that to help students and patients in need of our expertise in places where we are not. But the answer is not to ignore the losses and limits inherent in technological mediation. The answer is to make the technological mediation as opaque possible, to study what is possible and what is not, and thereby celebrate what can become the cutting edge for psychoanalysis in the twenty-first century: a radical embrace of the possibilities, benefits and dangers of being bodies together. I believe unless we quickly move beyond today's reliance on the Skype therapy illusion and myth of functional equivalence we will once again prove ourselves worthy of the cultural disregard against which so many of us push.

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