

Data of the Heart

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Why use the term *therapeutic* in connection with learning?

Taken from the course *Understanding Therapeutic Learning*

What is it that creates a therapeutic atmosphere?

If I think of a therapeutic experience, it is one where no threats or anxieties are present. I feel calm and safe. Or perhaps I feel energised. There is something warming about the experience and I feel I have been 'added to'. If other people are part of this experience, they want me to be comfortable. They will not be judging me in any way, or have expectations of me that I cannot fulfil as yet. My presence seems valued. This experience might make a personal problem feel a little less weighty for the time being. I feel there is some meaning in this experience.

Hopefully, we all have some moments like this, whether it is because we are alone in a place we love, or with people we trust to be caring and who want to contribute positively to our experience.

What kinds of circumstances can have the opposite effect?

We know that all kinds of situations have the potential to be therapeutic, but equally, they can become the opposite. I'm thinking about someone going for the first time to a sporting event, concert, faith or social gathering, workshop, or even for a massage. Their enjoyment of any one of these experiences could be reduced or completely disappear if they are made to feel uncomfortable because they are not responding in ways that are considered the norm, or made to feel that they do not fit in because they are failing to understand what is happening. They will almost certainly feel embarrassed, anxious and inadequate. Even if we know that we are perfectly adequate, these situations can still leave us feeling wounded. So we can imagine how difficult it is for children and young people who are trying to feel worthy and confident in an educational environment that is required to pressure them in numerous ways.

Unfortunately, even with the best intentions, the institutional nature of school life and the challenging social structures that accompany it, can be laden with negative rather than fulfilling experiences. Many of these negative experiences can arise

during lessons, when young people fail to grasp what is being presented but feel too embarrassed to express their confusion.

It is my belief that every learning experience can and should be at the very least an affirmation of those who are taking part. This does not mean giving constant and artificial praise. A child or young person, and many adult learners may not be able to articulate their needs in the ways that I am expressing them, but every human being, even a very young child, will have an awareness of the elements that I named earlier -

- No threats to my feelings of self-worth are present.
- I feel calm and safe.
- Perhaps I feel energised.
- People in this environment want me to be comfortable.
- These people won't be judging me in any way, or have expectations of me that I can't fulfil as yet.
- My presence seems valued.
- The personal problem that's worrying me feels a bit further away at the moment.
- There is something warming about this experience. I feel I've been 'added to'.
- This thing that I'm learning about is beginning to have some meaning for me.

It may be useful to describe this list as 'the elements that allow engagement'. Perhaps you can add to these elements, based on your own experiences of feeling at ease and confident in learning situations. Alternatively, you could make a list about situations that felt intimidating or uncomfortable.

Literacy in real life; enabling nervous learners to speak and write

You may be wondering what a therapeutic experience of education can possibly have to do with literacy.

Almost everything that a young person takes part in at school, or in further education, involves the need to speak and write. Speaking and writing can be extremely difficult for young people who lack the confidence to express themselves clearly. They may understand a topic better than we realise, but feel unable to articulate their knowledge either verbally or in writing. In some instances a young person may be a confident speaker, but afraid to put pen to paper because of

untidy handwriting, inaccurate spelling, or a lack of skill in transferring their thoughts to the page. They may feel that what is seen on the paper represents them as a person, that it says something about their overall ability and character. This is hardly surprising when we stop and consider the importance that is attached to neat handwriting and correct spelling and the praise that accompanies these. Of course, legible handwriting and accurate spelling makes it far easier to understand and appreciate someone's written work. However, when we prioritise these aspects over a young person's efforts to express their understanding of a topic or to share an idea, we invariably reduce real engagement.

Above all, literacy in any form is a means to communicate ideas, information and feelings. Therefore, it is important from the outset that we make it clear to young people that the use of language belongs as much to them as anyone else - *no matter how they are using it*. Corrections to grammar or spelling and encouragement to make writing more legible can all happen later. In fact, when young people see that their current use of language is treated with respect, making corrections and improvements becomes desirable to them. This is understandable, because having our input appreciated is almost always a motivation to enhance it.

In addition to this, we need to acknowledge that at school or elsewhere, the use of language by both adults and young people can cause distress as well as pleasure. It can enliven us - or lower our mood. Language is so commonplace that it is easy to disregard its impact. We are able to please or offend someone with the words we choose, encourage or discourage, show concern or indifference, spark or crush ideas, open or close minds.

Knowing that language is for everyone

We might still ask, "What's therapeutic about bearing these things in mind when dealing with the simple acts of reading, writing and speaking?" The answer is that language is at all times connected with our experience of the wider world and other people, and of course, that's how language came about. When we embark on helping young people to develop their literacy skills, it is very useful to begin with a conversation about language itself; what we use it *for* and *how* we use it. This way, we are enabling young people to experience the acts of speaking and writing as valuable extensions of themselves, where imagination, mistakes, creativity, untidy writing and unconventional grammar are all embraced because the content is what matters the most. We can be sure that what we called 'the elements that allow engagement' are now in place, and in this atmosphere young people's interest in

literacy can begin to flourish. If this kind of experience continues, they will want to share their work in its best light by seeking out the correct way to spell their words, and they will gladly accept suggestions for adjusting grammar.

Many young people have great fears about literacy tasks. (As well as reading, which we will look at later on.) They are anxious about 'making a fool' of themselves and deeply afraid about producing work that is likely to be deemed inferior, which will be seen by peers as well as teaching or support staff. When this fear is removed - either in the moment or over time - these young people can, quite literally, find a voice, and transfer that voice to paper in an expressive and moving way.

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The origins and some definitions of the term 'therapeutic':

Online Etymology Dictionary - <http://www.etymonline.com/index>

therapeutic (adj.) pertaining to the healing of disease, 1640s, from Modern Latin therapeuticus "curing, healing," from Greek therapeutikos, from therapeutein "to cure, treat medically," primarily "do service, take care of, provide for," of unknown origin, related to therapon "attendant." Therapeutic was used from 1540s as a noun meaning "the branch of medicine concerned with treatment of disease." Related: Therapeutical (c.1600).

Oxford Dictionaries - <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>

therapeutic- *Having a good effect on the body or mind; contributing to a sense of well-being*

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