

TAKING A POSITION: THERAPIST TRAINING AND THE POLITICS OF MEANING

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When the *Journal of Systemic Therapies* put out a call for papers devoted to the issue of teaching and learning postmodern therapies, guest editors Margarita Tarra-gona and myself were gratified to receive a wide range of excellent submissions—more than enough, in fact, to fit a single issue. We decided at that time to parcel the submissions out by dividing them between a special issue that came out toward the end of last year (*Journal of Systemic Therapies, Vol. 25, No. 4*) and this special section. For the authors included here, it has meant extra time for me to dialogue with them about the pieces and to further enrich them. It has also meant a considerable time span between initial draft and final product. I am grateful to the authors for their patience, and delighted with the thickening of their accounts afforded by the additional time. I think you will be, too.

Teaching practitioners and engaging in therapeutic conversations share much in common. Both processes strive for movement toward some degree of expanded experience, knowledge, and action. In each instance, the contours of this movement can take many forms. In stylized visual terms there are various ways one could depict the shared endeavour: one person pushing or being pulled by another; a figure standing above and speaking down to another; two persons standing side by side and facing an adversary, or perhaps looking toward an indistinct and preferred future; two figures dancing, or fighting, or in a mutual game of hide and seek.

The list goes on, of course, and what is interesting is that many of these images, tableaux as it were, are equally suggestive of different forms of pedagogy and therapy. Some images resonate with forms of interaction critiqued in recent years within both educational and therapeutic contexts, while others portray attempts at defining alternatives. Drawing on the metaphor of the recognizability of a person's face, Wittgenstein (1953, xi. 252) spoke of the "physiognomy" of a word, a certain constancy of meaning providing identification amid the myriad aspects the word presents in different contexts. And so for the "shape" of the relationship between teachers and students, therapist and the persons who consult them—we recognize in some a shape that features the active participation of both

figures: if not a symmetry, an orientation that captures the striving for a mutuality honouring the contributions of both partners. This is the “family resemblance,” another of Wittgenstein’s notions, shared by the four articles in this special section.

Two phrases in the title of this introduction attempt to capture that family resemblance. The first, “taking a position” evokes the picture of a teacher quite deliberately choosing a physical orientation in relation to the student, intent on establishing a particular shape to the relationship. Whether or not they draw specifically on Davies and Harré’s (1990) “positioning theory” per se (as do Crocket, Kotzé, and Flintoff), all of the contributors to this section give as much or more attention to the shape of their interactions with students as they do to the “pedagogical content” itself. The word “content” suggests a quantity of “materials” (Shard, 1998, p. 5) delivered to another while these authors are more inclined to depict teaching as a mutual engagement, the “materials” of which may vary, but the *process* of which is collaborative and co-invented.

This attention to how they are positioned as teachers of therapists has a pragmatic rationale, for sure; the authors speak from years of experience training practitioners, and have evolved approaches that are useful in helping students expand their therapeutic repertoires. But the striving for a particular form of relating is more than merely practical. It is ethical, too—hence another aspect of the term “taking a position.” The authors pay a great deal of attention to the effects of their practices on their students. They see themselves as engaged in something much bigger than “offering instruction”; the way they conduct themselves in their teaching mirrors the way they prefer to orient to therapeutic work, indeed to relationships in general, and is infused with, as Crocket et al. put it, an “ethic of care.”

The second phrase in the title to this special section that attempts to capture an aspect of the family resemblance shared by the contributors is “the politics of meaning.” The pieces draw on a social constructionist epistemology that leads to a view of teaching as knowledge-making, a social practice *both* informed by *and* producing of discourse (cf. Foucault, 1972). Foucault’s seminal work reminds us that we do not step out of discourse in teaching *about* discourse (a topic included within the syllabi of each of these contributors); and so a reflexivity of practice is critical to ensuring that as instructor I do not, as Bob Dylan (1964) once famously warned, “become my enemy in the instant that I preach.” In other words, even in teaching about the potential perils of “colonizing” (Todd & Wade, 1994) users of therapeutic services with our meanings, it is possible to do roughly the same thing to students if we shut down space for diversity and dialogue. Katya Joraniak, who was born in the Soviet Union and lived there through the fall of the Berlin Wall and *Perestroika*, has a particular sensitivity to the politics of meaning. Her article about teaching narrative therapy is replete with ideas about making space for multiple viewpoints while introducing students to one particular approach. This, then, is the second family resemblance between the pieces assembled here: they are sensitive to the mutual elbowing for dominance that is a feature of the cultural marketplace of discourse (Winslade & Monk, in press). The result is a teaching practice infused

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with a collaborative spirit (Paré & Tarragona, 2006) that encourages multiplicity of meaning and a reciprocity between teachers and students.

Diane Gehart's article, "Process-as-Content: Teaching Postmodern Therapy in a University Setting," depicts a radical departure from transmission models of pedagogy. Her focus is on creating a relational space where knowledge is discovered and co-constructed. The article is striking for its relative dearth of reference to therapeutic "method" per se, given that she is engaged in preparing students for professional practice. Here, shared inquiry constitutes the method and parallels the tentative and curious orientation to practice that she embodies.

In their piece "Reflections on Shaping the Ethics of our Teaching Practices," Crocket, Kotzé, and Flintoff demonstrate an exquisite attention to care-filled pedagogy, to the mutual moral obligation (Shotter, 1995) that arises as we engage with and construct meanings with each other. The authors give credence to the notion that "words are deeds" (Sampson, 1993, p. 1222), and *ethical* deeds at that.

New Zealanders Lewis and Cheshire draw on a Maori word to capture the unity of teaching and learning in a manner that English fails to do. Their piece "Te Whakaakona; Teaching and Learning as One," resonates strongly with Bruner's (1996) ideas about "building . . . cultures that operate as mutual communities of learners, involved jointly in solving problems with all contributing to the process of educating one another" (p. 81). The article considers the evaluation of students in terms of accountability to future clients of therapeutic services, and offers ideas about diminishing the anxiety about assessment that curtails creativity and expression in learning contexts.

Writing from Moscow, Katya Joraniak takes readers on a fascinating tour of Russia under decades of totalitarianism as the backdrop to her account of introducing therapists to poststructural ideas and narrative practices. Her article "Teaching Narrative Therapy in Russia," for which I acted as second author to prepare the piece for publication, portrays some intriguing paradoxes. She depicts Russian citizens as having an almost intuitive grasp of challenging postmodern practices such as externalizing conversations and deconstruction, *because of*, rather than *despite* being surrounded by modernist institutions intent on delimiting public debate. Joraniak's article provides a number of useful ideas for avoiding totalitarian teaching, as it were, while providing roadmaps for several ingenious teaching exercises.

These are the compelling offerings that await you in this special section on the politics of meaning in teaching family therapy. I hope you enjoy them.

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