



Freud's Allegory of Learning

A small and almost insignificant 21st century reflection on
how the Commission encourages re-thinking education
and how most local and national educational authorities
do not (re)think at all

Whereas the European Commission seems to increasingly encourage us to re-think education and learning, and based on sound and forward-looking learning approaches, many educational and national authorities across Europe are doing the exact opposite: they seem to increasingly regress to traditional, long-time outdated and reactionary “learning” strategies not at all delivering the learning approaches we need in the 21st century.

It seems as the Commission is doing what it can to encourage new thinking and practice in the fields of learning, and it seems that most European are doing their best not to follow the Commission’s recommendations and guidelines.

Sometimes it makes sense to use other knowledge fields and discourses to illustrate what we are trying to explain. Such activity might throw new light on our messages - and on the primitiveness of current local and national educational strategy.

Reading in allegories can be a powerful tool to offer new perspectives and even to foster re-thinking.

Once upon a time a man in the middle of Europe studied mental processes and in particular what it takes to change mental processes.

His reflections, findings and inspiration provide an interesting and underestimated *allegory of learning*, as his discourse shares basic and important principles with the fields of learning, with the enigmatics of learning.

The allegory demonstrates that real learning

- cannot be created through short-cutting
- cannot be enhanced or speeded-up through transmission of content
- cannot be forced through exams and testing
- cannot be reinforced through access to large amounts of knowledge
- cannot be enhanced or speeded up through changing the forms of the knowledge, such as into digital data

Lots of so-called modern learning strategies will find this disappointing or even offending, but we can do very little about it as real learning has its own logic, structures, conditions and dynamics.

Why will Freud’s allegory of learning help us?

Because they offer us another kind of narrative than learning theory and didactics - with other words and expressions and with another kind of toolbox of understanding...

And, because it appears that Freud’s psychoanalysis, in particular his technical writings, are extremely close to what we can call learning theory, perhaps even coinciding or converging.

Why is that?

Because they explain how mental change can happen and new mental structures emerge, which is what learning is all about.

They also reveal with almost unbearable evidence how primitive and almost embarrassing some of the current educational strategies in fact are...
Like we have learned very little along the last many decades, still repeating almost pathologically the same mistakes over and over...

So, what did Freud discover along the days, weeks, months and years behind the coach?

He discovered, sometimes through painful self-criticism, that:

- knowledge transfer does not lead to mental change
- the subject must overcome considerable resistance to create mental change
- the subject will need to go through long and immersive working-through processes to bring about change
- change will not be efficient unless connected to the whole personality
- change is depending on the full subjectivation of the “truth”

He discovered a lot of other things, of course, but these 5 discoveries are the backbone of our small allegory.

And why is that? Why are these 5 discoveries relevant to learning and learning theory at all?

Let's try to explain that.



KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Of course, Freud was working with all sorts of mental problems, neurotic as well as others. So the aim was to bring about a change that freed the patient from those difficulties.

After some time (often many months) behind the coach, listening and commenting, Freud usually discovered what the problem was.

He then transferred this knowledge to the patient, expecting that this would solve the problem.

He was increasingly surprised to see that nothing happened!

No mental change was brought about in the patient.

This caused a severe and deep crisis in Freud's work; but it also opened the door to one of the great insights of our time.

Transfer of knowledge did not have any impact on the patient, on the contrary.

Still today, millions of teachers and psychologists are nevertheless practicing such knowledge transfer.



RESISTANCE

Not only had he discovered that knowledge transfer had no real impact on the patient. He also discovered that the patient did not want to get better. The patient simply resisted any mental progress. The patient was afraid of change, afraid to face the reality and in particular afraid to assume responsibility for his or her feelings and actions.

The patient was “hiding behind the symptoms”, so to speak.

However, Freud slowly recognised that this was a normal thing for most humans: confronted with the need for deep mental change, based on addressing complicated challenges, they stepped back and regressed to what they already knew and were familiar with.

This resistance to change can also be called the principle of inertia.

Another way of saying this is that change must be linked to a very strong motivation and a very strong need - to overcome resistance and inertia.



WORKING-THROUGH

Thus enlightened by all this bad news, Freud set out to find out what are, then, the conditions for mental change.

What kind of “work” or “processes” is needed to bring about mental change? This challenge followed and even haunted Freud for the rest of his long professional career.

Unlike some other scientists he based his studies on overwhelming amounts of authentic practice, not on simulations or similar.

What he found out was that the patient needed to go through long and complicated processes of *working-through* to bring about any form of change. Working-through the same problems, the same stories, the same feelings, etc. - over and over again and sometimes for many months or several years. However, each working-through was a little different from the previous: each working-through the problems included small steps of change and small steps of subjective truth, so to speak.

So, the working-through was not simply circular, as this would not accomplish any change at all. It was more like an upward going and expanding spiral movement, along the tangents of which the patient revisited the problems over and over again, but each time at a slightly different level.

The dramatic conclusion was that psychoanalytically-driven change needed to happen, not in weeks or a few months, but in years!

This is why we prefer medication to psychoanalysis in our times - we do not have time for such odysseys.

However, the medication does not work for learning.



WHOLE PERSONALITY

Freud also discovered that not only was the patient in need of working-through the mental problems along considerable amounts of time; another condition for mental change was that the patient along this process was able to integrate the whole personality in the process: intellect, theoretical thinking, cognitive structures, feelings and emotions, memories and the languages of the body. In particular it was important that the patient’s intellectual insights were strongly linked to feelings and the feeling of “self”, the patient’s mottled identity.

Mental change must include body and soul.



SUBJECTIVATION

Freud's more philosophical conclusion was that no matter the amount of and the quality of the knowledge transferred to the patient, the patient remained the "object of his or her history".

The working-through process is therefore at the same time a process of *subjectivation*: the patient assumes increasing responsibility for the difficulties, for feelings, actions and for possible changes.

A condition for successful mental change is therefore the stepwise shift from being the object of one's history to becoming the subject of one's future.

"The truth is in the subjectivity", Kierkegaard said.

An identity must be created that can manage good as well as bad, that can manage change and that is able to increasingly experience challenges as opportunities and not as threats.

All this and much more, Freud discovered - in his own discourse and through decades of intensive human interaction.

However, the most important discovery was the failures of knowledge transfer and the need for long-term and immersive working-through.

Truly evident from this allegory, neither exams or tests (or their pseudo-interactive digital versions) nor access to incredible amounts of digital knowledge in itself will create any real mental change - or learning.

Such activity is more likely to mess up or at least cover up the learning process.

The lack of learning can in our times be covered up by amounts of information and resources.

Also evident is that we can use this allegory to point to strong criteria for learning strategies likely to foster real learning, such as learning processes that:

- offer long and creative activities allowing the learners to immerse into authentic missions
- allow the strong integration of theoretical and practical activities
- work cross-disciplinary to allow as many learning approaches as possible
- provide the learners with substantial real-life and real-time engagement and in collaboration with a variety of players
- engage learners in serious and important missions, addressing valuable challenges for the learner as well as for society
- invite learners to co-drive and co-create something new
- encourage learners to take chances and risks to accomplish important tasks
- engage learners in the full circles of projects, missions, research and innovation
- allow the individual learner to identify with the missions and to personally grow from the work processes

Working-through is key and working-through means immersion.

The case of science learning is interesting.

The increasing resistance towards science learning among young people is a well-known fact.

An increasing community of researchers and other clever people states that the problem is not that science is difficult. The problem is that science does not work well with the young people's identities.

So, what is the solution to this problem? More tests and exams?

There is a long tradition behind these insights of our learning allegory: from Platon via Freud and Kierkegaard to Seymour Papert!

Unfortunately, this tradition is not the one on which educational strategies are based in our times, even though powerful players such as the European Commission and increasing communities of researchers encourage such thinking - or re-thinking.

Even such players as the OECD and the World Bank encourages entrepreneurial learning, but still such encouragement does not reach the offices of local and national educational policy.