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HOW CAN PSYCHOANALYSIS AND SYSTEMS THEORY CONTRIBUTE TO THE LEADERSHIP OF THINKING IN THE FURTHER EDUCATION AND SKILLS SECTOR?

ABOUT FETL

The Further Education Trust for Leadership's vision is of a further education sector that is valued and respected for:

- Innovating constantly to meet the needs of learners, communities and employers;
- Preparing for the long term as well as delivering in the short term; and
- Sharing fresh ideas generously and informing practice with knowledge.

WORKING WELL

Working Well is a specialist consultancy company, developing leaders, teams and organisations.

We use our expertise in applying thinking from psychoanalysis and systems theory, alongside a practical focus on business needs to support the people side of organisations. Clients find our approach helps them to work well and create a reflective, humane, environment in which staff can thrive and performance improves.



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INTRODUCTION

Dame Ruth Silver – President

Further Education Trust for Leadership

Perceptions of leaders and their leadership can be harsh and unforgiving. Their role is frequently a lonely one, beset by false conceptions, projections and grand delusions. This is true particularly at the very top of an organisation, where budgetary, curricular and accountability pressures are most acute and leaders frequently bear the brunt of the resentment of their staff and partners.

This is sometimes fair and well-founded. Often, though, it is not that simple. There can be a tendency within organisations and systems to personalise analysis, reducing it to the level of individual fault-finding, and to overlook the systemic factors which drive behaviour and shape ways of working. Equally, there can be a tendency among leaders to neglect their own internal drivers and how their role within an organisation or broader system can mobilise them. We forget too that leaders, when all is said and done, are just people, subject to the same desires, drives, hopes, habits and emotional glitches as the rest of us. The premise of this publication is that healthy organisations need healthy leaders, mindful of their role and relationships within a changing and highly complex system and capable of attending to and carefully cultivating their own inner worlds, while remembering those of others.

When FETL first received the application for this work, it was obvious not only that the project was a perfect fit with our aim of promoting leadership of thinking in FE and skills but also that it promised to be among our most exciting and meaningful pieces of work to date. So it has turned out. The authors, Gabriella Braun, Project Director and Director of Working Well, and David Armstrong, Project Consultant and Associate of Working Well, have drawn together a set of vibrant and very useful think pieces, inspired by themed seminars with sector leaders, delivered by Gabriella, which serve

as provocations to encounter concepts from other disciplines, stimulants to thinking about leadership and, crucially, portals to further learning. As Gabriella and David say in the first of their think pieces, leading thinking in FE and skills means:

encouraging all members in the system (staff, learners, stakeholders, policymakers) to actively engage in education – not just in relation to the specific areas of the curriculum, but to the curriculum as a whole and the organisation as a learning community. It means encouraging them to reflect, debate and extend thinking, and creating a culture in which the imagination has a valued place in all elements of the operation.

There can be no doubt that the leaders who participated in the nine strategic seminars were taken to new worlds, gaining new perspectives on themselves and their roles. For many, it was a highly personal, often quite challenging, journey. Most emerged with a strong sense that their own thinking had changed and with an enhanced sensitivity to, and curiosity about, the relationship between their own internal lives, their organisation, and wider systems. Evidently, it spoke differently to different people, and this was expressed in the different insights they shared. That, for me as steward to the project, was the joy of it. Some of the feedback from participants is included in the participants' reflections at the end of this publication. It captures brilliantly the vibrancy and excitement of this project; much better than I can here. I strongly urge you to read these comments alongside the think pieces to get a full sense of the power and value of the learning that took place.

Two things particularly excited me about this project. First, it gave leaders in FE and skills a place to go to reflect as a group together, something that existed through organisations such as the Learning and Skills Improvement Service and the Centre for Excellence in Leadership but which has now, regrettably, been largely lost. Leaders must not only find time in which to think, they must find time in which to think about their feelings. To my mind, that loss of time to think about what you are feeling, why you are feeling it, where it comes from and what it tells you about the organisation, has been particularly damaging, as much as the loss of time to think about the changing world of budgets and curriculum. Second, as well as giving leaders an opportunity to talk about their preoccupations and feelings, it

also enabled them to underpin those feelings with actual theory, drawing on psychoanalytic insight and systems thinking to better understand the internal drivers which are activated in us as we carry out our roles. My own thinking owes much to systems theory and psychoanalysis, a legacy of my early training at the Tavistock Clinic, which works across different disciplines to apply psychoanalytic and systems thinking to group and organisational life.

Starting with systems thinking is important because it offers an understanding of a system in its entirety and of the interrelatedness of its parts. A system is no more than the sum of activities and relationships within a boundary. A college or independent learning provider is both a system in its own right and part of a wider system. These systems are shaped both by those who work within them and their interactions, and by external forces. Often, it is only when a leader is working in a role within a system that their internal drivers are mobilised, become available, and can begin to be understood. This is where psychoanalysis comes in. Leaders must be sensitive not only to this but also to the external drivers of change. The world outside is increasingly unfamiliar and changing fast. Changes such as curriculum reform pass through the porous boundaries of the organisation and change the nature of the interactions within it. As the world changes, so the institution and the relationships it comprises change. Part of a leader's role is to tend to, to care for, all those relationships, especially the difficult ones, not least among them the difficult relationship with oneself. It is those sorts of issues that psychoanalysis and systems theory brings to the fore, supporting leaders to think smartly about organisational mission, purpose, task, role and authority, and to build better, more empathetic relationships with staff, seeing themselves in others and others in themselves.

This publication offers a very welcome contribution to the creation of a literacy of leadership of thinking that is not just about the technical, operational dimension of leading in FE and skills. It is also an invitation to learn: about the self, in role, in the system and in society, and what impact these can have on the internal world of leaders. Each one of these think pieces has a library of theoretical frameworks and training behind it and

my hope is that those who read them will be encouraged to dip into the reading that underpins them. They represent, in a way, a provocation to insight; insight about the self and the journey it undertakes to the self in role and the self in a role of authority and responsibility.

FETL's hope is that these think pieces stimulate an appetite among leaders to think more and learn more and differently about their selfhoods, the things that make them good and effective leaders, and the things that hold them and their organisations back. Above all, the project was, for me, about breeding other wisdoms, along with kindness and understanding of the power of the roles we take up – the roles we live, work with and work under – and the risks and richness they can carry, helping develop those capacities across the sector. Leaders, after all, as I noted at the start, are just people, with inner worlds the same as everybody else. Understanding that, either in leading or in being led, is one way to a more humane, hopefully healthier, more moral organisation.

Note: The topics, concepts and ideas about psychoanalysis and leadership are from Gabriella Braun's forthcoming book: *Leadership: What's Love Got To Do With It?*

THINK PIECE

LEADERSHIP OF THINKING: USING SYSTEMS THEORY IN LEADERSHIP

How can psychoanalysis and systems theory contribute to the leadership of thinking in the FE and skills sector?

1. Introduction

This project was part of FETL's 2015 programme of grants designed to further the leadership of thinking for the FE and skills sector. This think piece is the first of nine, published monthly on the FETL website between October 2015 and June 2016. The ideas for the think pieces were developed through one-day strategic seminars with a range of leaders in the sector. The views expressed, however, are the responsibility of Working Well.

The think pieces address the themes of the strategic seminars:

- Using systems theory in leadership
- Leadership of thinking: What's love got to do with it?
- Leadership of thinking: What's attachment got to do with it?
- Leadership of thinking: What's presence got to do with it?
- Leadership of thinking: What's compulsion got to do with it?

- Leadership of thinking: What's persecution got to do with it?
- Leadership of thinking: What's loss got to do with it?
- Leadership of thinking: What's aggression got to do with it?
- Leadership of thinking: What's Oedipus got to do with it?

Project outcomes

Through the strategic seminars and think pieces, the project aimed to generate:

- New thinking about the leadership of thinking in FE and skills.
- Knowledge and understanding of key psychoanalytic concepts and systemic thinking, and evidence of their application to the leadership of thinking now and for the future.
- Increased capacity in the sector to:
 - have confidence to take its place authoritatively in the UK education system;
 - work at the level of the whole system;
 - work with person, role and system;
 - think and remain thoughtful;
 - integrate intellect and emotion;
 - value and use curiosity and imagination in all aspects of its work;
 - identify and address blocks to development (in the self, the organisation, the system);
 - connect psychoanalytic and systemic concepts to pedagogy for the benefit of progressive, future facing vocational education and training.
- A group of informed participants (the strategic seminar attendees) who can use their knowledge and increased capacity to influence the leadership of thinking and the development of the sector.

Strategic seminar participants

Fifteen leaders from across different types of provision and regions in colleges, skills providers and policy in England, Scotland and Wales took part.

The leadership of thinking

Before we discuss the themes that emerged from the seminar, a word about why we are focusing on the leadership of 'thinking' as opposed to the leadership of 'doing'. This is FETL's focus and it is also the backbone of what we do at Working Well. While leading 'doing' is of course important, it inevitably means acting within existing paradigms rather than questioning, reshaping or creating new ones. We believe the leadership of 'doing' is therefore insufficient on its own in today's constantly changing and unstable environment. And leading 'doing' cannot ever be sufficient for leadership of organisations whose task is to further education and training, i.e. organisations in which thinking is key to mission and purpose.

Leading thinking focuses on developing and sustaining the capacity for thoughtfulness and reflective practice. This involves valuing and supporting the ongoing endeavour to make sense and meaning: of organisational purpose in changing social times and how it translates into organisational design, structures, practice and ways of working within a complex, emergent and changing system; of the whole system; of competing interests and demands (within the system and acting upon it); of issues of authority, role, task and boundaries (including informal and emotional as well as formal, and how these aspects of an organisation are managed and transacted).

We think that leading thinking in FE and skills means encouraging all members in the system (staff, learners, stakeholders, policymakers) to actively engage in education – not just in relation to the specific areas of the curriculum, but to the curriculum as a whole and the organisation as a learning community. It means encouraging them to reflect, debate and extend thinking, and creating a culture in which the imagination has a valued place in all elements of the operation. That includes learners, staff and stakeholders being encouraged to think about and imagine the

organisation as an entity – how it is, how it could be, their part in it and how that connects with the community and the wider world. It means engaging in discussions about diversity and difference (in the system and beyond it); staff being enriched through discussions on pedagogy and purpose; learners being enriched through discussions about their part in the organisation's development, their agency in their own development and in imagining different futures for themselves. And it means connecting learning and education to personal development and group processes.

This is not easy to achieve. We hope that the think pieces from this project will contribute to the debate.

2. Systems theory

Systems theory has an important place in the leadership of thinking as it provides an understanding of the whole system and the interrelatedness of its parts. Taking a view, for instance, of a college, workplace or community learning provider as both part of a wider system (education and training, social, economic), and as a system in its own right, strengthens the analysis and understanding of a multiplicity of data and situations. With this, leaders can be adept at identifying leverage points, and shape their interventions to maximise effectiveness.

Systems theory also brings into focus the core issues of organisational design, structures, purpose, authority, roles, tasks and boundaries. This includes the formal and informal, known and unconscious aspects of all these elements. Such dialogue is critical to flexible, changing organisations, and to ensuring staff continue to feel connected, understand their place in the whole, and have a deep sense of, and commitment to, their roles.

3. Emerging themes

3.1 To be or not to be?

This question was posed in the seminar in relation to leadership of the sector now. We think it can apply to a raft of issues facing the sector, beginning with the question of whether to be or not to be a sector?

The lack of coherence and fragmentation are clear. Is it perhaps, as one participant suggested, a system with a common primary task and many different parts in it, rather than a sector? Or is it an umbrella term for different linked bodies? The analogy to a family was made: you put up with family members you dislike, or don't agree with, or don't have anything in common with simply because they're family. Is that the FE and skills sector? For some participants what is important is being part of the wider education sector. But does that, as one participant thought, weaken FE and skills in terms of its power and position? Would it always be relegated to the under-class part of the education sector? Or can it gain strength by being part of the wider sector? Questions of class, privilege and parity run throughout the whole education sector. HE is at the top of the tree. Within FE and skills, FE colleges have traditionally been at the top and skills providers seen as lower class. It is perhaps still perceived in this way, although the skills part of the sector is now favoured by government, so different hierarchies and identities may be emerging.

In terms of process and content the name 'FE and skills' is artificial: the skills part of the sector involves further education and further education involves skills. We wonder whether the name implies the deeply held split in the UK between skills and education. A split that is to do with class. A split that narrows the meaning of both terms.

So the question, to be or not to be a sector, seems to us to be both about complex questions of identity and also about political power and position within the overall UK education sector.

The difficulty of conceptualising the sector as it changes may link to what one participant described as a state of 'organisational dysmorphia', i.e. 'a deformity or abnormality in the shape and size of a specific part of

the body, which is associated with high levels of anxiety.' This links to the notion of 'primary risk':

The primary risk is the felt risk of choosing the wrong primary task, that is, a task that ultimately cannot be managed. ...the risk is an emergent property of the enterprise's existing relationships to its environment.

L. Hirschhorn, 1997.

Identifying primary risks but still being able to choose and determine primary tasks (the key task[s] an organisation has to perform in order to survive) without becoming paralysed, is key in an uncertain, precarious, environment. As one participant put it: 'What if we're all in our little tents and a juggernaut's coming down the highway?'

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Perhaps the issue is less about answering the questions about what the sector is, or if it is a sector, and more about posing them as a starting point for exploration of the meaning of the FE and skills sector as it evolves. And recognising in the exploration that the meaning or meanings may need to be made as much as found. Such meanings will help to give shape to generativity in the sector. We wonder, however, if the sector is still wedded to an identity as the underdog, and, if so, whether this will constrain attempts to reconceive it differently.

3.2 Anxiety

High levels of anxiety, stress and strain in the sector were present from the outset. Two participants couldn't attend at the last minute due to urgent external demands, including an area review meeting. Leaders in the sector have to manage their own anxiety as well as contain anxiety from those around them. It seems that some of the current communication within

the FE part of the sector is in fact swelling anxiety between leaders. This presumably arises from leaders feeling very uncontained, but paradoxically increases the anxiety and lack of containment. That, of course, makes it much harder for leaders to contain their staff. As one participant said: 'If you feel that anxious yourself you'll just transfer it down.' The tents with the juggernaut referred to above depicts the thin line between anxiety and terror. Participants questioned the possibility of coping with this new world (and its injustice). The stress on interpersonal relations was acknowledged. One participant asked: 'how do people interact with each other, or with the work, and does this link in turn to how students interact with each other?'

Implications for the leadership of thinking

One of the first things to go in the face of high anxiety is the capacity for thinking. So the leadership of thinking is dependent on the ability to contain anxiety on one's own and others' behalf, to recognise and address the impact of anxiety and to try to keep thinking. It demands that leaders hold onto to a certain state of mind – one that tolerates not knowing, uncertainty and the vulnerability of this.

Binary or integrated thinking

The duality of FE and skills, the inherent problems with the meaning and purpose of the sector as a whole, as well as its place in the wider education sector, seem to us to run throughout the sector in many ways and at many levels. Striking images emerged in the seminar, such as a tsunami in which there was also fertility and hope. In this case anxiety and extreme turbulence and destruction are combined with the hope of a fruitful survival. In other ways though thinking appears to be binary, and a coming together or integration experienced as impossible. We wonder if this is linked to the anxiety involved in hope in the sector now. The difficulty in integration is illustrated by the contrasts that emerged in the seminar of, for instance, optimism or catastrophe; cognitive or emotional; order or chaos; a sector that is future looking or a sector rooted in the past.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The duality at all levels in the sector produces an inbuilt tendency towards binary thinking. If this is recognised, it can be used to understand the emotional as well as structural divides in the sector. That then allows the possibility of integrating thinking so that leadership now is realistic and effective, and, at the same time, finds a place for imagining a different future.

Gabriella Braun, Project Director, and David Armstrong, Project Consultant, Working Well, September 2015.

THINK PIECE

LEADERSHIP OF THINKING: WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

How can psychoanalysis and systems theory contribute to the leadership of thinking in the FE and skills sector?

1. Introduction

This was the second strategic seminar in the Working Well project. The conceptual thinking and themes about love and leadership are from Gabriella Braun's forthcoming book.

She suggests that there is an essential link between love and leadership:

- Loving people requires the same qualities as leading people.
- Love is part of our constructive side as people and helps us to keep our destructiveness at bay.
- Resisting destructiveness is a vital part of leadership.

Love supports our human instinct for life, rather than our opposing anti-life, destructive instinct. Loving people in a healthy way – without trying to control, possess or live vicariously through them – and leading people both require:

- Caring deeply for someone else;
- Being committed to them;
- Respect and appreciation;
- Enjoying doing things together;
- Generosity;
- Self esteem – love for self;
- The capacity to struggle with difficulties and disagreements and use 'tough love' (as, for example, parents saying no to children and leaders holding staff to account).

Love in relation to leadership doesn't mean literally loving your staff. It's normal of course to dislike some of them. But it means having feelings towards staff that come from the capacity for love – care, compassion, concern, gratitude and appreciation. Love and leadership refers to the relational aspect of leadership, as well as the crucial aspects of loving your work and your organisation.

2. Emerging themes

Many of the examples from our work with organisations, used to illustrate psychoanalytic theory, resonated with the participants; with their work as a leader, their childhood, experiences from school and the family they grew up in, as well as their families now. It was noticeable how readily people offered personal reflections and connections. Discussion around these themes seemed to release a different quality of conversation.

It was more possible to recognise and work with differences between us. There was far more challenge between participants, including from

different constituent parts within FE and skills. Participants were able to be more differentiated from one another and open to alternative perspectives.

In part this could be explained by the fact that this was the second seminar so the group knew each other better, and we did some activities that encouraged lively debate. But we wondered whether the seminar topic itself made a difference; that by creating a reflective space that links to the constructiveness of love and the process of individual development, it was more possible to acknowledge how things can get split, seen in a rather black-and-white way and played out across the different components within the sector and/or its various stakeholders. And in acknowledging this and one's own complicity in it, it was then possible to work with the multi-dimensional complexity of reality in a more creative way.

2.1 The drive for life

This term comes from Freud who thought that we all have both a constructive side, which is on the side of life, and a destructive side, which is anti-life. Love is part of the former, and hate – its partner – is part of our destructiveness. Hate takes us away from generativity and the drive to enrich and develop life. It takes us away from liveliness. Just as individuals inevitably get pulled at times towards destructiveness, so do workplaces. In our view, a key part of leadership in FE and skills is to keep the drive for life going.

In this sector, life and death in the form of organisational survival are always on the horizon. Mergers and acquisitions are a constant. What does the drive for life mean in relation to how that is responded to and led? Participants pointed to examples of leaders who took great care in helping staff to join a newly merged organisation, and other leaders who were bullish and uncaring about it. Either way, a considerable number of staff from the closed organisation left. So does being caring make any difference?

The focus, however, on how staff from the closing organisation are taken in and integrated into the remaining, merged organisation may miss something that might make a difference. That is allowing the closing organisation a good enough ending: one that acknowledges the collective

pain and reality of its death, while helping staff to separate individually so that they can move on in a lively way and flourish afterwards. That involves mourning.

The approach to merger also impacts on the culture of the new organisation. It signals the leadership's intention for the organisation to be caring and on the side of life and liveliness, or uncaring and ruthless in its attitude to its staff – and by default – to its learners.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The drive for life can inform and focus the primary purpose of the sector and of individual organisations. It can also be used to think about mergers and acquisitions; whether they should take place and how they are handled. Keeping the drive for life in mind means paying attention to the death of a closing organisation and allowing appropriate mourning so that individuals leaving it can move on. And so that the new organisation can continue and develop in a lively, life-enhancing way.

2.2 Resistance to change

Participants questioned whether the sector is too opposed to mergers; a resistance that drives 'predatory behaviour' and is to do with 'loving our institutions too much and so resisting change.' They suggested that the drive for life could help organisations be more open to change and genuine collaboration. That would include acknowledging and responding to what the community needs, how you therefore position your organisation (e.g. as part of the education system rather than the FE and skills sector), the skills others have and that you don't.

Resistance to change increases, rather than decreases, threat in the sector, particularly for colleges. Rather than being proactive they often wait for destruction at the hands of government. As a participant from the skills

part of the sector said: 'I'm struck by the fear you feel in your part of the system. If you're so fearful you'll be paralysed and won't be able to build a more cohesive structure across the sector.'

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The current understandable preoccupation with survival in the sector increases resistance to change, which in turn is likely to increase the chance of individual organisations being closed. Leading the sector and its organisations from and towards the constructiveness of love and its drive for life, might be a way of reconceiving aspects of change and the way it's led.

2.3 Gratitude and appreciation

Psychoanalysis links gratitude and love – they importantly build and reinforce one another. We wonder if both of these are difficult in FE and skills. Participants commented on the conversations between leaders in the sector that commonly include disparaging, rather than appreciating, their staff. There seems to be little energy for thinking about how to get the best from people. Instead there is a preoccupation with grievances. Participants commented on the links between employee wellbeing and customer service that are insufficiently recognised in the sector. As one participant asked: 'Are we mean spirited? Could goodwill be a new narrative for the sector?'

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The current narrative in the sector seems plagued by deprivation and despair about the negative images it repeatedly attracts, its place in the education sector and the constant interference by governments. Does the necessary focus on survival reduce leadership to a defensive battleground? A place that reinforces deprivation and despair because it's so hard to find much liveliness there? If so, there's a major leadership task to stop the vicious circle of psychological deprivation and enable a shift towards life, to a new narrative, a new place from which to be inspired, to inspire and lead. To do that the capacity for gratitude and appreciation has to be developed throughout the sector. Otherwise, the destructive pull, rather than the pull towards life, will inevitably dominate.

2.4 Self-esteem

In our first think piece we asked whether the sector is wedded to an identity as the underdog. The issue of self-esteem seems key to us. This may link to the disparaging comments leaders make about their staff: perhaps the low self-esteem and negative images about the sector are unconsciously projected from leaders to their staff. So, unconsciously, staff become imbued by their leaders (and perhaps in their own minds) with much of the negativity.

One aspect of the discussion about self-esteem highlighted what we interpreted as a worry about the narcissism of fakery. An anxiety that self-esteem might lead to arrogance, or means believing you're good at everything, rather than having a realistic sense of your capabilities and worth. The worry might be an expression of a fragile and often low self-esteem in the sector – perhaps from learners (for whom developing self-esteem must be a vital part of their FE and skills experience) as well as staff and leaders.

The lack of self-esteem suggests that the negative images about the sector, its place in the education, social and economic class system, and its treatment at the hands of governments, have been internalised. Psychologically, this is a normal process, but it's very damaging. We suspect it contributes to the passivity in the sector that participants talked about. In a lively and enlivening discussion about the future, one participant asked: 'Why aren't we taking control back from the 'grandees'? Why do I do nothing though I've many ideas to contribute?'

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The internalised identity within the sector which seems to believe itself – whether consciously or unconsciously – to be second class and perhaps second rate, will stall healthy development. A key and urgent task for the leadership of thinking is therefore to explore identity and self-esteem issues both systemically and psychoanalytically so that the sector can be released from the imprisoned and imprisoning place it occupies.

Systemically, this means understanding what the sector's place represents, why it's so powerful in the UK education system and how that relates to social cohesion, class, identity, economics and politics. Psychoanalytically, it involves exploring the unconscious as well as conscious impact of identity and the way it's keeping things stuck.

2.5 Moving forward

Participants were clear that now is the time for creating the future and that a new type of leadership is needed. Complaining about government is insufficient and inadequate.

So what about love? As one participant asked: 'Does love matter?' 'You can have a cohesive organisation without much love, so what difference does love make?'

Our answer is that love does matter. A lot. But we would say that wouldn't we! Bringing the capacities of love to the leadership of thinking can support creative, enlivened development. That has to include lively, robust debate – as exemplified by the different type of conversation in the seminar. The question of whether or not love matters, whether you can achieve cohesion without love – in some shape or form – and the implications for a new type of leadership, is an important part of the dialogue that needs to take place.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Leading the sector forward in the context of the current environment requires the robustness of love which is at the heart of our constructiveness and drive for life. Not a superficial or narcissistic love, but real and mature love that acknowledges faults, weaknesses, hatred, destructiveness; that has sufficient self-esteem and can invest energy in supporting people to be at their best. Bringing the qualities of love to the leadership of thinking can open up agency, different conversations and the possibility of imagining different futures for the sector. The capacity it involves would in itself begin to transform the sector and its leaders so that they can move it forward differently.

Gabriella Braun, Project Director, and David Armstrong, Project Consultant, Working Well, November 2015.

THINK PIECE

LEADERSHIP OF THINKING: WHAT'S ATTACHMENT GOT TO DO WITH IT?

How can psychoanalysis and systems theory contribute to the leadership of thinking in the FE and skills sector?

1. Introduction

The third strategic seminar in the Working Well project was about attachment, i.e. the deep psychological bond that connects us to other people. The conceptual thinking and themes are from Gabriella Braun's forthcoming book.

She links attachment theory to employee engagement: research shows that engagement has a marked impact on morale, productivity, retention, absenteeism, etc. The evidence shows that, unfortunately, we're not good at this in the UK.

Gabriella's proposition is that:

- Enabling and supporting engagement is a key leadership task.
- Attachment theory is the psychology behind employee engagement.
- Understanding attachment theory helps leaders create an environment

that supports engagement and development where individuals, teams and the whole workplace can flourish.

- Specifically, if leaders work in ways that are known to encourage 'secure attachment' they can optimise that environment and promote in-depth, meaningful and sustainable engagement.

The psychoanalyst John Bowlby's work on attachment theory in the 1950s and '60s showed how crucial it is for us as human beings to be psychologically attached to another person. It's a biological and evolutionary process: the deep bond between the baby and their primary caregivers – usually their parents – is vital for the baby's survival and development. A baby's behaviour – crying, smiling, cooing – is biologically designed to encourage their caregiver to stay close to them and so protect them from danger. Our need for attachment doesn't end, however, once we're able to look after ourselves; it's a lifelong human requirement.

Building on Bowlby's work, Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues defined three attachment patterns. We develop our pattern of attachment as a result of our parenting and environment. It has a profound affect on our personality and response to others and the world. Each pattern has its own behaviours (see below). These are particularly prevalent at times of separation, loss, increased anxiety and vulnerability, such as when we're ill. As adults our attachment behaviours may not be obvious for much of the time, but are likely to come to the fore at these key times.

The attachment patterns are:

- *'Secure*, in which the active involvement of the parent and their sensitivity, responsiveness, predictability and consistency gives the child a "secure base" (Ainsworth, 1982), from which they can take the risks necessary for exploration and play.
- *Insecure avoidant*, where the child has been turned away or rejected when they looked for care from their attachment figure, so has learnt that it is better not to attach to anyone. They minimise their attachment needs and keep to themselves.
- *Insecure ambivalent*, when parents or caregivers have been unreliable – sometimes available and responsive, and sometimes not. There will often have been separations and the use of threats of abandonment

to control the child. Insecurely ambivalent children are always anxious about separation and, in contrast to insecure avoidant children, tend to cling to their attachment figure.'

A fourth attachment pattern was subsequently identified by Mary Main and her colleagues:

- *'Insecure disorganised*. This contrasts with both of the other two insecure patterns, which are organised and based on interaction – however defensive it may be. In disorganised attachment there is no clear pattern or organisation of parent/child interaction.' (Braun, G., 2011). This attachment pattern can cause serious mental health problems later in life.

2. Emerging themes

The seminar generated lively discussion and resonated in many different ways with participants. Questions were posed about whether it's possible to have a 'home based' attachment pattern that is different from our 'work based' one. Is the pattern irreversible? Can we have more than one? This suggests that the idea of being stuck with an insecure pattern – as a great many of us are – is uncomfortable. In fact, while life is generally easier for those of us with a secure attachment pattern, those of us with one of the first two insecure patterns can learn to adapt and manage the drawbacks perfectly well. What is probably different between home and work is that we are often more secure at home than we are at work. And it's the insecurity that can trigger our attachment behaviours.

2.1 Attachment to the workplace

Participants talked about the unhelpful and 'shocking' way in which FE can see leadership as vested in a single person and how 'presidential' principals can be. Since the head of a FE college or workplace provider will not be able to meet the attachment needs of all the staff singlehandedly, we wonder if this leadership style actually fosters insecure attachment and unhealthy dependency.

So what would encouraging a secure attachment to the workplace mean

in the sector? One thing is to have strong leadership throughout the organisation, rather than a single figurehead. The seminar participants highlighted the importance of:

- clarity about primary task, mission, strategy and expectations;
- clarity about accountabilities – within the organisation, rather than just from external bodies such as OFSTED, which often serves to increase insecurity;
- actively integrating new staff;
- supporting staff in their development and competence;
- creating an atmosphere in which robust and difficult conversations can take place so that holding people to account is possible and relationships are deepened.

It wasn't easy as a whole group to discuss participants' specific attachment patterns and the link to their leadership style. Or to discuss their emotional availability as an attachment figure and the impact both of these had on attachment and engagement in their organisations. It's a tough thing to do; not only does it require time to reflect and draw on and increase one's self-awareness, but it also touches the deeply personal within the professional role.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Our attachment pattern stems from our early experiences as children. It's personal and private. Leaders themselves need support and a safe space to reflect on their pattern and consider the implications for their own leadership, including ways of mitigating the possible negative impact.

Attachment theory shows us the importance of fairness, consistency and reliability in fostering a 'secure base'. Participants talked about the complexity of being fair as leaders; in particular when fairness is seen as the same as equality. This is always a hot topic in the workplace. Fairness

assists security and engagement but can be misused if, for instance, it becomes a blanket of sameness, avoids differentiation and turns professional judgement into simplistic, mechanistic responses. That has nothing to do with equality and indeed harnesses inequality. Fairness can also be subjective and, so, open to perception. Our attachment pattern may be one of the factors influencing this. Participants discussed how important it is, and how difficult at times, to withstand the fury from staff who incorrectly perceive themselves as being treated unfairly.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Leaders can use the knowledge from attachment theory to build as secure a base as possible for staff. That involves careful judgement and thought. It doesn't, for example, mean turning the notion of fairness into a politically correct but meaningless sameness. And, while it's unethical for leaders to analyse staff's attachment patterns (and they're unlikely to have the competence for this), understanding that people have different attachment patterns, which affect ways of working and responses to stress, can be helpfully built into leadership.

Insecurity may well have been bred into the whole sector since, as one participant said: 'FE didn't have a secure birth.' The implicit hierarchy – whether in the mind and/or in reality – and divisions within the constituent parts of the sector furthers the struggle for security. To quote a participant again: 'When skills joined the sector there was an attitude of "Oh, now there's someone else to blame".'

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The feeling that FE and skills (in England) had an insecure birth is likely to have contributed to ongoing insecurity in the sector. The leadership of thinking needs to consider the ways that insecure attachment has been brought into the sector and continues to be perpetuated. It also needs to explore the features in the sector (e.g. presidential style leadership; short contracts, etc.), that may trigger feelings and behaviour associated with an insecure pattern of attachment. If leaders don't help the sector to recover from a sense of insecure start in life, FE and skills will remain hindered in its capacity to innovate and move forward creatively and with authority.

2.2 Attachment in teams

Teams play a large part across the sector. They are key to helping staff gain a sense of identity, belonging and attachment to the workplace. Being part of a team can be great, but it can also be hideous. When we struggle in our teams they can't provide us with a means of attachment, and indeed may drive us to feeling isolated and to detach.

The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion's theory of groups identified that without knowing it, groups and teams are in two states of mind. One of these is a 'work mode', when they are on task and productive. In this state of mind teams can be innovative, fun, rewarding, able to deal with change and with reasonable amounts of stress. The other state of mind Bion described is what he termed a 'basic assumption' state of mind. This is frequently triggered by stress that the team can't cope with. Instead of focusing on the work task, teams in this state operate unconsciously as if the basic assumption is that they're either there to depend on a leader, or to fight or flee from an enemy or form a pair that will rescue them. We think that promoting secure attachment in teams is likely to encourage and sustain the work mode.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Supporting attachment in teams is a key way of developing engagement in the workplace. Identifying the role teams play in relation to attachment, staff's experience of teams and the impact of change and re-structuring provides important data in engagement. It can also inform decisions about re-structuring and ways of supporting change processes.

2.3 Attachment, separation and loss

Our attachment pattern affects our reactions to separation and loss. And separation and loss are always part of change. The level and constancy of change in the sector means this is an ongoing issue. One difficulty for leaders is, as participants said, the strength of attachment in the sector to 'what we used to do'.

Attachment, separation and loss also apply to learning: learning something new can involve a loss of pride in not being able to do it already. It also means separating from our pre-conceived ideas in order to take new ones in. We learn best when we have a secure enough base from which to take the necessary risks for exploration. So, attachment, separation and loss are at the heart of the core business of FE and skills. They are key to staff, their teaching/training style and how they relate to students/trainees.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Leadership of change in the sector is paramount. It has to include a combination and iteration of educated, emotionally intelligent thinking, and action. The thinking needs to include the impact of attachment, separation and loss, and finding ways of helping staff to separate from the past and deal with the consequent loss involved.

Similarly, attachment, separation and loss are core to the business of learning. This has important implications for the pedagogical thinking in the sector as well as for staff training and development.

2.4 Moving forward

A lack of engagement with, and attachment to, the primary task and purpose of FE and skills within the UK education and training system fuels the sector's continuing insecurity. This perpetuation of insecurity impacts on its ability to fulfil its potential – educational, social and economic. Participants pointed to 'UK low productivity, the mismatch of supply and demand skills, lack of employability skills and poor employer engagement in developing skills.' The focus, they thought, should be on 'UK plc, productivity and becoming a world leader in skills.' This requires a secure FE and skills system; understanding attachment theory can help to create that.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Attachment and engagement have implications at all levels in the sector and in its wider environment. This includes the need for security and the negative impact of insecurity. While the issues remain unrecognised and under-conceptualised, little can be achieved. But if the issues were seen as core to the FE and skills agenda, attachment theory could help to create a strengthened sector, respond to external pressures, shape its future and find solutions to challenges that are likely to be more robust, fit for purpose, imaginative, creative and developmental for all concerned – including students and trainees.

Gabriella Braun, Project Director, and David Armstrong, Project Consultant, Working Well, December 2015.

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THINK PIECE

LEADERSHIP OF THINKING: WHAT'S PRESENCE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

How can psychoanalysis and systems theory contribute to the leadership of thinking in the FE and skills sector?

1. Introduction

The focus of this seminar was psychological presence. That is, being connected emotionally to yourself and others. Key to this is being what the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott called your 'true self'. When we are our true self we're aware of and tolerate the destructive as well as the constructive parts of our personality. Presence allows us to be emotionally intelligent, authentic leaders.

2. Emerging themes

The key emerging themes were:

- Being present to yourself
- Encouraging presence in the organisational culture

2.1 Being present to yourself

Psychological presence starts as a baby; it's developed through us being allowed and encouraged to let our 'true self' emerge and develop. If, for whatever reason, this isn't possible, we may instead develop what Winnicott called a 'false self'. This self tries to comply with expectations and demands from parents, and/or social and cultural pressures. Winnicott thought that in some ways we all have to display a false self – society depends on this – but it's problematic if it overshadows our true self to the point of us not knowing what that is.

Parents who are able to encourage their children to develop their true self, gradually teach them to manage it, for instance by keeping aspects of it to themselves as appropriate to the setting. So we learn that there are some things that are okay at home, but may not be with friends or at school. This is part of socialisation. In other words, the way we display our true self is connected to role and the context or system we're in.

Participants linked their presence as a leader to the organisation's purpose and primary task: in the same way as in the family or with friends, presence is linked to role and context. In the workplace these links – role, context and system – are paramount. In his discussions with colleagues and trainees, the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion distinguished between 'being a doctor (or a psychoanalyst)' and 'being like a doctor (or psychoanalyst)', i.e. the difference between a good imitation, following all the rules and models, as opposed to internalising the role within oneself.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

In an organisational setting, being our true self and psychologically present is essentially linked to being present to the organisation – its purpose, primary task, development and values. So presence in leadership is about person, role and system. It requires leaders to internalise and live the role rather than mimicking what they think it should be about. Leaders are then able to be themselves, be on task, in the service of the organisation and have the necessary potential freedom and spontaneity for innovation and development.

An important aspect of being our true self and present to ourselves is the ability, as Winnicott saw it, to be alone. This starts as a baby when we learn to be alone in the presence of someone. In that state we can be ourselves with our own thoughts and experiences. Eventually, we learn (hopefully) to be literally alone without the need to be on the run from ourselves. This is because we're not avoiding difficult and destructive aspects of ourselves and are connected to our internal world, which provides us with figures who accompany us in our minds. The inevitable degree of aloneness in leadership can feel very lonely. Participants talked about the weight of having ultimate responsibility. As one participant said: 'The loneliness of leadership never leaves you.' The capacity to be alone is therefore fundamental to leadership as it protects us from loneliness. Importantly though, loneliness is in part a state of mind, whereas some aloneness in leadership to hold the ultimate responsibility, is a requirement.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Leadership is so often felt to be lonely; we don't distinguish between loneliness and aloneness in leadership. The ability to be alone is a requirement of the leadership of thinking. Without it we can't retain our own thinking and identity, or hold ultimate responsibility. Being our true self and emotionally present allows us to be alone, rather than lonely.

Participants talked about the connection between physical and psychological presence. An interesting comment was made: 'If I'm completely engaged I have to be physically resilient. If I'm disengaged I have to be mentally resilient.'

Presence isn't a one-off achievement: we can gain it, lose it and, with hard psychological work, regain it. There are indeed times when presence is pretty impossible. As one participant said: 'I can feel less present during a crisis as compared to getting back in the groove afterwards.' Another commented: 'Sometimes in order to survive you have to not feel anything.'

2.2 Encouraging presence in the organisational culture

A culture that encourages presence is one that allows people to be who they are and supports awareness and reflexivity individually, in teams and across the organisation. The starting place for this is being present to others. And that means being connected to ourselves and, as a leader, enabling others to connect to us emotionally.

Encouraging presence in the culture requires having some understanding of psychological processes and defences; we need defences to live but if we're too defended psychologically we can't be present to ourselves. If we're overly anxious our defences are likely to become stronger and can be rigid. So to encourage presence in others and in the organisational culture, leaders need to 'contain' staff. They are then more likely to be emotionally safe enough to be psychologically present. Presence therefore links to attachment theory and the need for leaders to provide a secure enough environment for both staff and learners.

Participants suggested that presence in the organisation is also dependent on clarity – about primary task, expectations, standards. From that clarity it's also important to legitimise different points of view. The idea of compliance was discussed; what seems to be key is to move staff from compliance to something beyond it. That includes, for example, having our own ideas and rationale for what we do, not just blindly complying with demands from external bodies (government, Ofsted, funding bodies, local authorities, etc.).

Implications for the leadership of thinking

An emotionally present organisational culture will necessarily go beyond compliance, since compliance alone is akin to the false self. The leadership of thinking at organisational and sector level needs to support and encourage staff to move beyond compliance through engagement and commitment to task and purpose. To move, in other words, to something akin to the true self.

2.3 Moving forward

The 'leader as translator' was referred to at the previous seminar; the communication of external policy proposals and decisions, bridging what can come across as the gap between external and internal conceptions or points of view. Another aspect of the leader as translator is the important component of the leader 'making present' the organisation and sector to others as part of co-creating ideas.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

In order to support innovation and development in and of the sector, the leadership of thinking has to both connect emotions with intellect and share and co-create ideas. These require presence so that ideas can be built collaboratively rather than competed with or submitted to. Thinking and actions can then be creative, fertile, allow experimentation, include spontaneity, being adventurous, 'going off piste.' This is part of the intuitive side of leadership. It links to the healthy capacity for (informed) risk taking. It seems to us to be both an important indicator of emotional presence and at a premium in the current context of FE and skills.

FE and skills can get caught in political expediency and ideology. To move forward effectively and imaginatively, the sector has to assert its authority so that it respects both the reality of external factors and what might be called the core of FE and skills and its thread of meaning over time. A combination of task, values and culture that in some way represents, as it were, its true self.

David Armstrong has written about this suggesting that '...part of the function of leadership under conditions of radical uncertainty, contextual and structural, is to make present, through interaction with others, an idea of and a feel for the "enterprise" – or "practice" – of the organization which can ground and recover the exchange and enactment of thought' (Armstrong, 2005). It's a different, but closely connected idea of presence.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Part of making present is making meaning; meaning that is coherent and true to purpose, values and continuity (as well as discontinuity) of time. Meaning and identity without emotional presence are sterile and subject to the whim of others. If the sector is to be protected and developed, robust and fit for the challenges it faces now and in the future, making meaning emotionally present is a critical task of leadership.

Gabriella Braun, Project Director, and David Armstrong, Project Consultant, Working Well, January 2016.

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THINK PIECE

LEADERSHIP OF THINKING: WHAT'S COMPULSION GOT TO DO WITH IT?

How can psychoanalysis and systems theory contribute to the leadership of thinking in the FE and skills sector?

1. Introduction

The main theoretical concept behind this seminar is Freud's notion of 'repetition compulsion'. Freud thought that we repress those things we can't think about because they cause us too much anxiety and difficulty. But, Freud said, what's repressed returns unconsciously through a pattern of compulsively repeating what was pushed out of consciousness. It was this destructive pattern that led Freud to the idea of the destructive/death instinct that co-exists in us along with the life instinct.

2. Emerging themes

The key themes from the seminar were:

- Overworking and wellbeing
- FE and skills and the impossible task
- Repeating patterns and history

2.1 Overworking and wellbeing

Being a leader in FE and skills means constant stress: having to keep multiple agendas in view, deal with reduced budgets, do more for less, change, adapt, create new markets, respond to new directions, etc. Overworking is commonplace; indeed it's hard to stop working. Yet, as across so many sectors now, the wellbeing agenda is espoused. It seems that the inherent contradiction in increasing pressure and stress, while espousing wellbeing, is ignored. We suggest that the contradiction is supported by an unconscious compulsive repetition of actions and attitudes that heighten stress, negate wellbeing and diminish the capacity for thinking. Until this is understood and addressed the wellbeing agenda will remain rhetorical.

Participants discussed the lack of a boundary now between work and personal life. 'I never switch off from work,' one of them said. On the other hand, flexible working can mean it's hard to tell what's helpful and healthy and what's overworking and a lack of work/life balance. Sending emails late in the evening, for example, is often assumed to be the latter. But, participants pointed out, if someone chooses to take a few hours out, for instance, to be with their children, and then work later in the evening, it may actually be supporting their work/life balance. One participant suggested that for many roles now – leadership included – the idea of working 9–5 is no longer relevant or appropriate. It's a new paradigm.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The wellbeing agenda is trying to address the significant cost of workplace stress through absenteeism and mental health issues. To take this seriously and encourage meaningful change in the sector, leaders need to understand the deep-seated compulsion to repeat actions and attitudes that perpetuate stress in the sector – a destructive, unthinking repetition. This understanding needs to take account of, and inform, the complex reality of flexible working and how it can encourage wellbeing.

Stress is a much bandied-about word. To get underneath the drive to repetition compulsion there needs to be a distinction between the stress intrinsic **to** leadership (in particular in relation to responsibility and accountability), and the stress that's self-generated **by** leadership (for example, using the reality of leadership to mask an individual need to compulsively overwork). It's important, therefore, to consider the degree to which stress is self-created as a psychological defence. This defence could, for instance, be against the uncertainties surrounding leadership: what to promote, challenge, present, set forth; what is possible, imaginable, etc. So the preoccupation with stress may itself be compulsive and overworking may be self-imposed as well as driven by external pressures. Take, for example, the therapist who works harder and harder complaining all the while about overworking, but unconsciously, in part at least, self-imposing this overwork. The self-imposition may be an unconscious attempt to assuage their (unconscious) guilt about the limits of their capacity to make enough difference to people through their work. Could an equivalent apply to the leader in FE and skills? Do the additional agendas imposed on the sector, such as the Prevent agenda, amplify this?

2.2 FE and skills and the impossible task

Does the FE and skills sector repeatedly agree to impossible tasks? For instance, agreeing to get learners through GCSE English and maths, with reduced resources, in considerably less time than schools have and despite the previous failure of schools. Participants commented that no other part of the education sector would have agreed to this so why did they? Presumably there is a question of who makes the demand. Where impossible tasks are demanded by government is there a difficulty with the nature of choice and the tension between serving government as a public sector organisation and having autonomy as a leader? Perhaps the issue then is about how to exercise appropriate authority and professionalism with regards to how demands/tasks which have to be agreed to are implemented. If there is a compulsive repetition of a somewhat blind compliance without identifying where autonomy and authority are (and are not) possible and appropriate, it must have meaning. We wonder if it's related to the fundamental issue of the sector's own low regard for itself

and the way it has internalised the ascribed identity, esteem and status from politicians and other stakeholders.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The problematic identity, low self-esteem and status of FE and skills seems to result in its repeatedly agreeing to the impossible tasks so often demanded of the sector. These tasks then serve to demonstrate the sector's apparent inability and low status. This in turn pushes the sector to endeavour to 'prove' itself by taking on more impossible tasks. It seems to us that the leadership of thinking needs to halt this vicious circle by encouraging understanding of the destructive pattern and building a different image the sector has of itself and that others have of it.

2.3 Repeating patterns and history

At the macro level of the system, participants discussed the repeated patterns of responses in some countries, e.g. automatically disagreeing with all things English and some districts automatically 'doing everything other than the way the local authority proposed. There is a shift of power in the sector, which at times isn't recognised and at times, participants commented, leads to a "punishment relationship" that is driving leadership.'

The repetitiveness of problems was discussed: 'In our organisations,' some said, 'we're never solving the core challenges. Always the same things are troublesome, as if there's something repetitive taking place, a kind of organisational DNA.' This is reflected, for example, in patterns of staff absences and 'our ways of responding', keeping things safe, acting without thinking or really looking and seeing. We need to '*stick to a vision*', as opposed to '*constantly changing*'.

Exploring repetition compulsion in the sector as a whole, some participants came to the notion of a repetitive pattern to do with the feeling of 'being

a bullied victim', associated with disadvantage, being second class in the educational hierarchy, constantly trying to solve problems that can't be solved at our level (e.g. making good the deficits in English and maths) and 'trying to fix it and be all things to all people.' This group of participants noted how their own early life experiences had led them to constantly try to 'fix and rescue.' This is their default position. They thought that the sector attracts people who want to work with the condition of being a bullied victim and held accountable for what others, such as schools, haven't been able to achieve. We suggest that if many staff in the sector have this disposition the pattern will be continually reinforced and become part of what the psychoanalyst Isabel Menzies Lyth called the 'social defence system.' That is, the unconscious way in which staff in an organisation (or sector) unconsciously pool their individual psychological defences and the defences become shared by the group – i.e. they become the social defences of that organisation or sector.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The social defence system of the sector and its implications for leadership need exploring. Are there ways in which this blocks the sector's health and wellbeing? Are leaders pulled towards a repeated fixing, rather than a strategic re-imagining? A key task for the leadership of thinking is to connect unconscious beliefs to conscious behaviours and actions so that the sector can gradually change – and that includes changing aspects of its social defence system.

Interestingly, there was strong disagreement among participants about the notion of the sector as bullied victim and rescuer/fixer. Some participants commented that this didn't represent their experience of the sector. The intensity of the discussion and strength of disagreement may suggest another aspect of a repetition compulsion: that the sector cannot bring together its different and disparate views, parts and experiences and is weakened – including politically – through that.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The sector will continue to be undermined and weakened externally and internally if, on the one hand, leaders cannot bring together views and represent a collective with more authority and status; and, on the other hand, if leaders cannot disconnect the sector from its own internal perceptions of deprivation and victimhood where these have taken hold either consciously or unconsciously and continue to be passed onto staff.

2.4 Moving forward

Compulsiveness reduces thinking. It is, by definition, without thought. Participants were clear about the need to identify and be steady to the concept of 'primary task', which would also provide more clarity about how to respond to external demands.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The leadership of thinking needs to develop the capacity for resistance. Resistance against deviating from primary purpose and task (while remaining adaptive), against attacks on thinking, against the impossible task (or how it's implemented) generated from within and without, and against compulsive behaviours that reduce the possibility of imagining and re-imagining a healthy, not compulsive, way forward and future for the sector.

Gabriella Braun, Project Director, and David Armstrong, Project Consultant, Working Well, February 2016.

THINK PIECE

LEADERSHIP OF THINKING: WHAT'S PERSECUTION GOT TO DO WITH IT?

How can psychoanalysis and systems theory contribute to the leadership of thinking in the FE and skills sector?

1. Introduction

We usually associate persecution with something that happens to minority groups, rather than with leadership. But widespread systematic oppression, bullying at work and a persecuted state of mind all stem from the same psychological phenomenon: our tendency to feel persecuted and to be persecuting. Neurologically, this is part of our hard-wired fear system designed to help us survive. Psychologically, it's part of our conscience, as well as being one of our mechanisms for dealing with overwhelming anxiety. There are two key psychoanalytic theories that explain persecution: Klein's concept of the paranoid-schizoid position and Freud's notion of the superego. We can't do without some persecution in our minds; we'd be too gullible to manage life or leadership. But too much is unhealthy and damaging.

The paranoid-schizoid position has been explored in earlier think pieces but a word about the superego: Freud thought that it includes our conscience and that it is the place of laws, that is psychological laws and prohibitions, e.g. against incest, as well as social laws. We have, as it were, an internal judge that deals with our transgressions. Our superego can be relatively benign or it can be harshly critical of us.

2. Key themes

- Persecution and the leader
- Persecution and staff
- Persecution and the sector

2.1 Persecution and the leader

What makes leaders feel persecuted or become persecutory? The key triggers participants identified were mainly to do with external demands, staff issues and criticism and blame:

- 'It's the things I can't control that hurt me, like funding cuts. I'll kick in a solution but worry to death.'
- Ofsted 'making things up', as well as councils and schools.
- 'The latest huge cut means another restructuring. It's the human cost of that that persecutes me.'
- 'Staff's expectations of me that I'll fix things.'
- 'It's the impossible stuff we're berated for – maths and English – how we get blamed for the skills gap, not employers.'
- 'It's criticism that makes me feel persecuted. It's getting better and easier than it used to be but it's still there. It just goes with the role.'
- 'I feel persecuted when misunderstood, like an underdog and not part of the mainstream.'
- 'When I'm undermined or sniped at.'

There may be gender differences in the way that persecution is experienced. While external factors were important for both men and women in the group, the women also identified internal issues such as feeling criticised, misunderstood or undermined.

Staff performance was identified as the overriding issue that makes participants feel or become persecutory:

- 'When others don't do things right and don't anticipate the consequences.'
- 'People not improving fast enough and taking responsibility for it; resistance to change and complacency.'
- 'I have difficulty holding people to account. I want to take responsibility for everything and get irritated that people don't want to take it. But it's an own goal, coming from my need to control.'
- 'It's about performance management; that people don't realise they're doing badly.'
- 'When people score an own goal, like taking OFSTED to see a bad teacher. Why? It was in their gift to choose, so why did they do that?'

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The far-reaching change and particularly difficult environment that the sector is facing with cuts, mergers and closures, exacerbate persecutory feelings. These hinder and distort thinking, close down development and can be extremely damaging. The leadership of thinking therefore needs to address the root causes of persecutory feelings and look at ways of creating a more benign environment: one in which leaders can manage their own feelings of persecution and reduce the tendency to persecute others.

2.2 Persecution and staff

There is a clear link between feeling persecuted, attachment and containment. When leaders act in ways that arouse insecure attachment (discussed in a previous think piece), staff are more liable to feeling persecuted. Proximity between the leader and staff can help attachment. Conversely, participants commented that staff can feel abandoned if the leader moves their office to another campus or location. With abandonment goes insecurity. Leaders shouldn't necessarily avoid moving, but they need to be mindful of the effect on some staff and put in place additional mechanisms for containment at those moments.

Participants wondered if there is also a link between the interest and attention paid to staff and persecution: is disinterest experienced as a form of persecution? Might leaders unintentionally persecute some staff by a lack of attention and apparent disinterest?

Change increases anxiety and participants thought that the constancy and level of change in the sector has increased persecutory feelings. The frequent failure of change processes also takes its toll. HR, for instance, rather than dealing with opportunity and growth, is constantly dealing with the fall out of this.

The way that leaders communicate to staff is key to increasing or decreasing persecutory feelings. Communication about change and performance that helps staff not to feel misunderstood and unsupported is crucial.

The stress in – and on – the sector is likely to amplify the common tendency in organisations to unconsciously make one function or department the receptacle for negativity. This is not necessarily a bad thing as if one function absorbs the negative feelings – and HR often fulfils this function – others can keep the more positive feelings that enable their work. Feelings of being persecuted or being the persecutor can also move around with different departments/functions holding these at different times. This needs to be recognised and dealt with as a systemic issue.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Leaders need to think about their behaviour and the organisational culture in relation to staff's persecutory feelings. Paying particular attention to ways of promoting security, attachment and containment at times when persecutory feelings will be triggered is very important. This includes ensuring that sufficient attention is paid to all staff, including those on the margins of the organisation.

2.3 Persecution and the sector

Just as different departments or functions can be the persecuted or persecutor in an organisation, so can different parts of the sector. And just as these can change in individual organisations, so they can sector wide. Thus, leaders in the sector need to constantly ask questions about the changing meaning of the map of the sector, and the impact this has on relationships between its parts and on persecutory feelings.

We wonder whether feelings of persecution may also sometimes mask another feeling, which is impotence. The degree to which leaders in the sector have choice and autonomy is a theme that has emerged throughout the seminars. On the one hand, participants talk about the very high level of autonomy and freedom they have as leaders; on the other hand, there is a sense of being constantly at the beck and call of government, dealing with unreasonable or impossible demands that, if they are not met, have punitive consequences. So while there are persecutory elements in the environment, and they evoke feelings of persecution, we wonder whether something else is also at play here: is one aspect of the sense of persecution in the sector a response to, or defence against, feelings of impotence? Might persecutory feelings in fact conceal the sense of impotence and the frustration and perhaps shame that goes with it?

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Leadership in the sector may be hampered by a lack of clarity about the reality and specificity of autonomy and freedom. Exploring whether feelings of impotence get tangled up with, and underlie, some aspects of persecutory feelings and behaviour will help to disentangle this. This needs to include diagnosing if such feelings stem from a lack of autonomy and/or from unresolved wishes and confusion about the precise nature of autonomy leaders in the sector can have.

2.4 Moving forward

The step change required in the sector will be impossible if persecutory feelings with their toxic affects are allowed to flourish. Furthermore, if persecution dominates in the sector, it will have a detrimental effect on learners. Supporting transformative and effective change, mitigating against deprivation and enhancing success for learners, means addressing persecution.

Participants asked whether persecution is a wilful act. We think it undoubtedly sometimes is – wilful and conscious. But it's also frequently unconscious and therefore not wilful. And it's often a mix of wilful and conscious, which is supported and driven by the unconscious. This makes identifying persecutory feelings and issues complex and difficult.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Leaders need to be able to distinguish between feelings of persecution and actually being persecuted. Both are serious, both are real, both need addressing. But the way to address them differs. A key issue for the leadership of thinking is to help leaders work with themselves and with others to monitor the point at which actual persecution, caused by external circumstances and constraints, flips into and feeds persecutory states of mind and to help leaders identify the impact of these states of mind on learning and learners.

Gabriella Braun, Project Director, and David Armstrong, Project Consultant, Working Well, April 2016.

THINK PIECE

LEADERSHIP OF THINKING: WHAT'S LOSS GOT TO DO WITH IT?

How can psychoanalysis and systems theory contribute to the leadership of thinking in the FE and skills sector?

1. Introduction

The rate of change in organisations means that loss is now always part of working life: loss of colleagues (e.g. in restructuring), loss of stability, loss of what went before. To ensure that change is successful, leaders have to manage their own feelings of loss and help staff deal with it; otherwise change is likely to be undermined – sometimes unconsciously – and staff become demoralised and disengaged.

Freud said that a failure to mourn can lead to problems: we lose interest in the world around us, become unproductive, lose our passion and capacity for new relationships.

He discovered that mourning and severe depression share the same characteristics: lack of interest in the world around us; an inability to form new bonds and love; a lethargic loss in activities and productiveness. We emerge from mourning able to move on and regain our liveliness,

productivity and capacity for new relationships. But where we can't mourn, we may instead become seriously depressed. We then can't move on with the loss and are stuck.

Organisational change is obviously not the same as a personal bereavement, but dealing with the loss it involves can still be very difficult. And the effects of not dealing with loss can be as harmful to organisations as they can be to individuals.

2. Key themes

- Experiences of loss in organisations
- Dealing with loss as leaders
- Experiences of loss in the sector

2.1 Experiences of loss in organisations

Participants' comments about their organisations bore witness to the acute loss pervading organisations across the sector. Loss of jobs, values, identity, curriculum and loss of organisations themselves:

- 'There were 120 sixth form colleges, now there are 93 and it's likely to go down to 30. I know and have visited mostly every principal. I've mentored or coached others. Now it feels I'm in the middle of a sector about to implode.'
- 'It's nearly our 25th anniversary and we're throwing a party. But maybe we'll cease to exist; this might be a death.'
- 'The way English and maths have squeezed the curriculum means our freedom has diminished and there's a loss of control as professionals.'
- 'The reduction of autonomy is like the death of people's careers, their sense of identity.'
- 'The loss of control over the curriculum has meant we've changed from a culture based on preparing people for work to a more academic culture.'

'We've lost our founding values and lost understanding of them. It affects behaviour in all sorts of ways.'

- 'There's been a loss of whole curriculum areas for us. 61% of our qualifications are in English and maths now. This means that the needs and opportunities of qualifications for the local economy are suffering.'
- 'If we can't get people through English and maths we can't offer apprenticeships. It's as if we have to accommodate a new and enforced primary task.'
- 'The effects can last for so long: we merged two sites and people still say it's the worst thing that ever happened even though it happened in 1999!'
- 'Teachers mourn their lost youth.'
- 'The senior team often criticise staff for not liking change. But a lot of people like change. It's not change that's feared but loss or the imposition of someone else's change.'
- 'We're growing and have to scale up what we do. It's my personal business and we've maintained our values. But now we're needing good people and don't have the money, so I'm thinking of giving equity away again.'
- 'For us loss has been positive, i.e. we got rid of the last principal and things have improved so much since. The effect on staff morale has been really positive.'

2.2 Dealing with loss as leaders

Like many of us facing loss in our personal lives, the participants commonly deal with loss in their organisations through attempting to by-pass mourning and get through loss as quickly as possible:

- 'I want to move too quickly. I'm like that in my personal life too; we always need to move on and have a good life.'
- 'I help by not allowing wallowing. But I'm so future focussed I leave no time for mourning.'
- 'I just want to get to the end part [of leaving the organisation] but I know if I do that too quickly I won't allow the facilitating processes of mourning.'

Dealing with loss requires looking back and acknowledging the past without getting stuck in it. Interestingly, founders, original values, succession and previous generations were more in view than in previous seminars: the painful loss of founding values, questioning whether to invite the founder to an anniversary celebration, how to have an effective transition when you step down as the leader.

Looking backwards and forward was also apparent when participants asked whether they're the right people to be leaders in the sector now. Some thought they absolutely are – they've made a paradigm shift from earlier models of leadership in the sector, and are the ones that can now lead the sector forward. Part of the shift in their leadership is the way they are involving staff in decision making and change:

'I've enabled space for people to decide what change is necessary. I tell staff the issues and ask them for solutions. So we've created a constant way of dealing with change. The downside is that we may miss the losses that are taking place.'

'We try to get up joined up solutions to change: we always include the union in our management meetings.'

Other participants were leaving or considering leaving their leadership positions:

- 'We're going to have to re-structure and lose staff again. I can do it but I really don't want to go through that again.'
- 'I need to leave as someone else is needed to take the organisation to a new and very different place. I'm too invested in the founding values to do that successfully.'
- 'Do or don't I want an exit plan? I'd like to come out but am scared.'
- 'I don't like the values of equity capital; it goes against our charity background but we need to be successful.'
- 'This is a challenge for the sector as a whole, i.e. our non-profit making culture at a time when the financial drivers are so much stronger. Are we the right people to drive this?'
- 'If you create profit will you lose what is right?'
- 'The charity has reached a point where we attract a particular sort

of person. Can we continue that way? Are we the right leaders or do we need a different kind of leader? Can I keep on banging the drum for us? Maybe a small charity now needs to become part of something bigger.'

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The far-reaching loss in organisations across the sector is acute and painful. The leadership of thinking needs to acknowledge this and help the sector to mourn so that it can, as Freud said, 'decathect' from the past, adapt to the future and create new life. Mourning involves remembering and recognising what has gone and what is going. When we mourn a person, our internal world and the relationships within it change to accommodate the loss. Our relationship with ourselves also changes in the sense that the lost person now only exists in our internal world. Likewise, if the sector is to accommodate and adjust to loss it has to change its relationship to itself and the different parts within it.

2.3 Experiences of loss in the sector

The sector is used to change and in many ways handles it extremely well. However, the stoical and placid acceptance ignores loss and seems to remove agency, as well as confusing identity, values and primary task. The danger is that these then morph without thought. Moreover, they morph with an undertone of unexpressed, un-dealt with feelings of loss. As one participant said: 'I think we take loss on the chin and it creates an acceptance dynamic that doesn't manage the experience of loss well. As if there's no anger. We really get our pecker up and then go straight into re-organisation. Why don't we do any of the yearning and anger? [Bowlby's second phase of mourning] We're giving the impression to government and others that says: okay, we can get away it.' This acceptance may produce a further toxicity, which is that the lack of fight compounds loss as it feeds into a sense that what is lost may not have been worth fighting for.

In order to cope with the ongoing onslaught of change and the loss it incurs, we think it's likely that the sector has developed an illusion that it's possible to continually change in any number of ways. The illusion seems to us to mask deep-seated disillusion as well as a sense of impotence, which we discussed in the last think piece. The illusion also encourages an inevitably fragile omnipotence and tendency towards mania/a manic response to change. Yearning, searching and anger, disorganisation and disrepair are banned, which severely limits the possibilities of re-organisation. Instead, liveliness will decrease and depression will increase. A depressed organisation or sector is of course ill-equipped to weather the dislocating turmoil FE and skills now faces.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The acceptance of continual change in the sector denies loss. The leadership of thinking needs to explore illusion and disillusion and generate dialogue about loss. It needs to identify processes of change that support healthy mourning. And importantly, government and other stakeholders should be engaged in thinking about the cost of continual change and the importance of allowing a more sustainable process that builds the health and future of the sector.

We asked in the last think piece, on persecution, whether sometimes feelings of persecution in the sector mask feelings of impotence. Similarly, the illusion and 'acceptance dynamic' mask feelings of loss. As well as encouraging depression, this means that loss seeps out in problematic ways. One part of an organisation, or one part of the sector for instance, may then hold the difficult feelings and get stuck and unable to change. We wonder whether it's not just persecution and loss, but if the difficulty in facing and understanding painful feelings generally get masked and entangled.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Unexpressed, unacknowledged and denied emotions seem to commonly get entangled. Anger may avoid loss; loss may underlie and mask a slightly precarious, manic excitement and focus on the future; grievance may mask grief. Disentangling emotions, understanding what's behind them and the link between particular feelings and their expression, is vital to establishing healthier organisations and a more robust, resilient sector with a genuine capacity for change and development.

2.4 Moving forward

The level and depth of change in the sector means continuing and continual loss. While leaders need to be able to look forward and focus positively on the future, if mourning is avoided, depression is likely to get more rooted and harder to shift. We wonder if there is a tendency to take, as it were, anti-depressants which dull the pain (and the mind), but do not go near the causes of depression. This will make change increasingly difficult. Failed change is already commonplace; rather than remedying that, the failure to mourn supports it. Furthermore, when loss isn't addressed, other emotions, such as insecurity and feelings of abandonment, persecution, compulsion and destructive aggression, are activated and have more room to dominate.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Facing loss is enormously difficult and painful, yet it's life enhancing. Without it, depression can turn the sector inwards and against itself. This will radically decrease its vitality and potential. The leadership of thinking needs to keep the drive for life and stave off the destructive drive, which is a failure to mourn supports. Mourning, however, has to be appropriate to what is lost, what is continuing and to primary task: leaders in the sector need support in identifying ways of doing this and acquiring the necessary courage and resilience it involves.

Gabriella Braun, Project Director, and David Armstrong, Project Consultant, Working Well, May 2016.

THINK PIECE

LEADERSHIP OF THINKING: WHAT'S AGGRESSION GOT TO DO WITH IT?

How can psychoanalysis and systems theory contribute to the leadership of thinking in the FE and skills sector?

1. Introduction

We tend to avoid aggression and think it's 'bad', but in fact it's necessary for our survival and our lives, and can be healthy as well as destructive. Psychoanalysis recognises that, for good and bad, aggression is an inescapable part of being human. It's behind each stage of our development: children's mastery of walking and talking; adolescents' ability to separate from and succeed their parents; adults' assertion, determination, ability to manage daily life.

2. Key themes

- Aggression, authority and leadership
- Aggression and compliance
- Aggression to support development

2.1 Aggression, authority and leadership

Thinking about aggression as healthy as well as destructive goes against the grain and was difficult for participants. There were clear links between their experiences of aggression in the families they grew up in, and their ease and use of aggression as an adult and a leader. Nonetheless, for those more comfortable with aggression the idea that it's needed to manage life was new.

Previous personal or organisational experience influenced the use of it now as a leader: 'I wonder whether my concern about repeating the aggressive ways of my predecessor has made me nervous about using my aggression.' Participants talked about difficulties their staff have in using aggression or thinking it may be positive: one of them had talked to their senior team about the topic and they just couldn't see aggression as positive. Others commented that they wished they saw more [healthy] aggression in their organisations.

If, participants asked, the word is so loaded, is it better to go with the norm and use the word 'assertive' instead, or better to talk about aggression and attempt to convince people about its healthy potential? Our view is that if you avoid talking about aggression and its constructive part, you collude with the idea that it's only dangerous and can't help staff think about ways of channelling, rather than avoiding, aggression.

One participant asked: 'Is it so difficult for us to think of aggression as necessary and positive to leadership because we're bedded in our communities or is it about feeling hopeless?' We think that the underlying sense of rage and hopelessness about the way the sector is treated intensifies anxiety about aggression; if it's let in, or, rather, let out of the bag, will destructive aggression take over?

Implications for the leadership of thinking

In order to use aggression constructively leaders need to be able to distinguish between their own constructive and destructive aggression. This vital leadership ability involves allowing yourself to feel aggression, interrogate it to discover its meaning and so ascertain whether it's positive or negative. Then you can identify how to use and manage your aggression in the differing circumstances in which it arises.

Rather than being a constant, it was thought that aggression could be seen as part of the leadership tool kit, necessary for driving the primary task, converting ideas to actions, to stay focused and be proactive rather than just reactive. Healthy aggression also underpins the use of authority in role. And both authority and healthy aggression are vital to managing performance. As one participant commented: 'We need aggression to manage staff performance and staff need aggression to manage student behaviour.' This is an area of difficulty in the sector: 'People pass the buck.' 'We're a softly, softly industry. Our teachers have to confront students but are very poor at confronting other staff. There's a collective need for us to give staff the tools to be aggressive constructively.' One participant suggested there was 'a fear of aggression getting emotional.' There were comments about middle managers failing to hold staff to account, constantly postponing having difficult conversations – which require aggression – and colluding in poor practice. Although on the whole staff find it easier to challenge students than staff, sometimes this is also avoided.

Systems thinking can assist the management of performance since it brings in the perspective of the wider system and the factors influencing collective and individual performance. This is not to evade individual responsibilities but to recognise that performance is not simply personal or individual. One difficulty in the sector is the tendency to set unrealistic targets which means that the system, the organisation and the individual

are all set up to fail. Where impossible targets are set by external agencies the lack of appropriate, professional resistance by the sector may reflect the difficulty in using aggression.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Aggression is essential to managing performance. The prevailing difficulties with this seem to reflect the avoidance of aggression in the sector, difficulty in seeing it as normal and failing to work with constructive aggression on a day-by-day basis.

2.2 Aggression and compliance

We think that the belief that aggression is only destructive supports the process in the sector of projecting it outwards to external agencies (e.g. government, OFSTED). That evokes a somewhat passive-aggressive stance in the sector, which fuels underhand destructive aggression such as staff room gossip and backbiting. It also may cover over compliance. As one participant said: 'we always do what's "right", what's expected of us regardless.' Passive aggression may also cover a sense of hopelessness about being able to make a difference.

Compliance is likely to be compounded by difficulties in the sector's identity, which has been explored in previous think pieces. If the sector is uncertain of itself and has low self-esteem, using aggression constructively is almost impossible. As one participant said: 'Aggression isn't directed to where there can be an impact in our sector. It's turned inwards.' And another commented: 'We experience a lot of aggression towards us (e.g. area reviews – at least when they were first announced), but very little shown by us. We're a culture of being "nice".' The struggle with identity, self-esteem and using aggression contribute to turning inwards where, coupled with loss (and a lack of dealing with this), aggression becomes depression. This can be self-defeating and self-destructive.

What if, participants wondered, they used their aggression constructively as junior doctors have? What if this was done about the English and maths issue? They agreed though that they weren't unified enough to do that but also, teachers are not respected like doctors are, so they wouldn't be listened to. 'We don't clearly articulate and argue our views, and we're not a trusted profession.'

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The lack of constructive aggression in the sector reduces the capacity it has to stand up for itself, be counted, articulate professional views and judgements. Where the sector 'fights' it may not always be clear if it's fighting for or against something. This reduces its effectiveness. If there isn't clarity about what could or should be fought for, the use of constructive aggression will be dissipated. The leadership of thinking should support dialogue to explore what and when the sector should healthily 'fight' in relation to its purpose and primary task, and how to unify to do this.

2.3 Aggression to support development

The primary task and purpose of the sector is about learning and development. This involves healthy aggression: the determination, motivation and capacity to stand out from the crowd and achieve your potential, risking exclusion and envy, depend on it. We suggest that healthy aggression in the service of development is therefore central to all aspects of the sector's work. Aggression is also needed for survival. As participants said, currently a good deal of aggression is going into the transformation of the sector.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The leadership of thinking needs to consider some fundamental issues about the use of aggression in taking the sector forward: is the aggression driving the transformation of the sector being used healthily? Are aggression and thinking working together or does one cancel the other out? When is aggression used in the service of survival and when it is used in the service of development? What does each mean and require of leadership?

2.4 Moving forward

To imagine the sector's future and face the enormity of change required to move towards that in the current environment, will only be possible by harnessing aggression. The question then is how do you enable constructive rather than destructive aggression? How do you shift between them? For us the answer lies in linking aggression to love and attachment which, as discussed in previous think pieces, bring out the positive drive for life.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Linking aggression with love and attachment is an important part of the leadership of thinking across the sector and its organisations. This includes ensuring the primary task is fit for purpose going forward, that primary risk(s) are constantly reviewed and that the developmental use of aggression for life and learning are harnessed and kept in view.

Gabriella Braun, Project Director, and David Armstrong, Project Consultant, Working Well, June 2016.

THINK PIECE

LEADERSHIP OF THINKING: WHAT'S OEDIPUS GOT TO DO WITH IT

How can psychoanalysis and systems theory contribute to the leadership of thinking in the FE and skills sector?

1. Introduction

The Oedipus complex is central to psychoanalysis. Freud named it after *Oedipus Rex* as he thought that Sophocles had captured a universal truth in this play. That truth is not about sleeping with your mother and murdering your father as we commonly think, but the psychological reasons behind these events. At the heart of these is our difficulty with triangular relationships. For most of us our first experience of a triangle is as a child with our parents. It applies equally to single-parent families as the child is still aware that at some point there was a couple that produced them. Although the triangle relates most obviously to the nuclear family, psychoanalytic anthropology has found that the issue is still present in other family structures. From this primary struggle follow issues that we suggest are common in the workplace: the difficulty in holding onto reality at times; exclusion; difference; turning a blind eye; and succession.

These were the areas we covered in the seminar. The participants were surprised at the strong resonance to their personal and professional experiences; they had not expected this to emerge from Oedipus. We were struck by the speed and energy with which they made connections to the themes and picked up Oedipal references in their own life situations. It was harder, however, for participants to relate some of the discussions back to the story of Oedipus itself or to move from the personal to the organisational and systemic.

At the end of the seminar we wondered whether we would be able to write a think piece. Indeed it's proved a challenge since something of the Oedipal dynamic seemed to occur in the seminar. In Oedipus boundaries go horribly wrong: children aren't meant to witness the intimacy of the sexual relationship between their parents, let alone replace one parent and sleep with the other. In the seminar many stories recounted by participants were deeply personal and intimate. In an Oedipal sense, they were stories from the private bedroom of the seminar, not things that should be shared or seen by others.

2. Key themes

- Triangular relationships and exclusion
- Turning a blind eye
- Succession

2.1 Triangular relationships and exclusion

Participants were immediately struck by the idea of triangles being problematic. They commented on how common it is to have a triangular senior leadership team – principal and two vice principals – in colleges and how common it also is for these to be problematic. Three people inevitably means that at times two people will pair; the other one can then easily be excluded or, even when the pair don't intend this, can easily feel excluded. Exclusion is something we all find painful and difficult. When it's from

a threesome it unconsciously triggers our Oedipal issues: as a child the awareness, however unconscious, of being excluded from aspects of our parents' relationship, while at the same time being totally dependent on them for our survival, is extremely difficult.

As well as pain, exclusion can provoke rivalry and envy. We may or may not be conscious of these feelings or the depth of them. When we're unaware and our feelings are uncontained, they can be harmful and poisonous. The participants talked about some painful experiences of exclusion, both in their private and professional lives. One of them, for example, had carefully been excluded from meetings as a new leader. Another had been viciously excluded as a young head of department. The principal worsened the situation by publically holding him up as an example of excellent performance and shaming the older staff. Leaders' actions can significantly help or fuel them the dynamics of exclusion and rivalry.

This exclusion by peers was a powerful instance of sibling rivalry. Getting rid of a rival from a sibling relationship is one aspect of the complications of both Oedipal dynamics and sibling rivalry. Participants gave examples of sibling rivalry in the family and the vengeful measures that had been taken. The link between exclusion and persecution was clear. Although the ordinariness of sibling rivalry is recognised in the family, we don't think about it at work. Yet these dynamics are very common and ordinary in the workplace too.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Feeling excluded at times is ordinary, painful and inevitable. Leaders need to be aware of how this might be affecting interpersonal relationships, team work and organisational dynamics or indeed be a result of them. Leaders also need to take sibling rivalry into account in the way they lead. Ways of reducing and responding to issues of exclusion and sibling rivalry in order to promote workplace wellbeing and success need to be part of the regular concerns of leadership.

Awareness of the problems associated with triangles does not necessarily mean avoiding them. Depending on the circumstances, a triangle can provide a stronger structure than a pair, since a twosome can get entangled and overly close, impeding their ability to see clearly or consider alternative perspectives. But having triangles does mean considering where and how triangles are used, and working hard to counter and contain the problems they are susceptible to. In the seminar we discussed the key triangle in organisations in the sector: students, teachers and leadership/management.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

It would be helpful for the leadership to consider the implications of the triangle of students, teachers and leadership/management: for learning and development, student success, organisational development and wellbeing, and for the development of the sector. What does this mean for supporting constructive development rather than, as in Oedipus's case, halted or perverted development?

Psychoanalysis shows us that in the early triangular situation of parents and child, there are two pairs: the parents as a couple and, initially, the mother and baby. It's complicated and difficult for fathers to find their place in this very early stage of their child's life. They have to manage the exclusion from the mother/baby pair. A very important part of the father's role, is to intercept the pair, thereby helping mother and child to begin the process of separation. Fathers, or the person regardless of gender taking the paternal role, have to judge when to do this; too soon is unhelpful but so is too late as the mother and baby can become too rigidly merged, which hinders the child's development.

Connected to this is the paternal function of holding onto reality. Not just the reality that mother and child, while necessarily starting the child's life in a merged state, cannot stay there, but more broadly, the reality of the external world. We wonder whether governing bodies or trustees perform part of

the paternal function in the sector. That's to say they support the maternal function of nourishing the organisation, while bringing in the outside world, keeping close to, and ensuring that reality is not lost sight of.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The leadership of thinking can strengthen leadership in and of the sector by exploring how the paternal and maternal leadership aspects function and work together. This includes considering the respective roles of governance and senior leadership. It also involves exploring the way paternal and maternal function are both utilised with a role – of leadership, management, teaching, caretaking and so on.

2.2 Turning a blind eye

In Sophocles's play everyone turns a blind eye: there were many clues that Oedipus was the abandoned son of the widowed Queen Jocasta whom he married and had children with. What is avoided and turned about from is truth and reality. Oedipus didn't knowingly murder his father or sleep with his mother but he closed his eyes to the possibility of knowledge. When he opened them the pain was unbearable and he blinded himself. Similarly, when we cannot bear the pain and complexity of Oedipal dynamics we may turn away rather than face them. Not only does that impair our sight, it also impairs our curiosity and capacity to learn.

Participants immediately recognised the dynamic of turning a blind eye and cited times when they or others do this. Sometimes, they thought, it's helpful to turn a blind eye; you need to choose your battles. But this is a conscious turning a blind eye, whereas it's often unconscious as in the play. Participants also commented on the link between turning a blind eye and the wish to avoid conflict and so, for instance, ignoring performance issues (discussed in the think piece on aggression).

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Turning a blind eye consciously is necessary from time to time but when it's a perpetual unconscious state, a turning away from truth and reality and ignoring critical damage, it's dangerous. The leadership of thinking should support leaders in organisations and in leading the sector, to develop self-awareness and ensure they have enough people around them who will not collude when they inevitably close their eyes and cannot or will not see.

2.3 Succession

Succession is a big issue throughout the sector and for many of the participants. Oedipus became king through murder and incest. While these aren't normally literal routes to succession, metaphorically they are not at all unusual. Succession can be gruesome, destructive and damaging. The sector may at times incline towards tribalism and 'incest', which is likely to relate unconsciously to oedipal struggles. These struggles will rear their head at times of succession and mergers.

Participants talked about generational succession in society and in the sector. Succession involves both giving and receiving and how generations can work together to allow this to be healthy.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

How does the leadership of thinking influence and encourage healthy rather than destructive, damaging succession? How can it promote succession that recognises the changing world of the sector and society and the need for integrity and positive identity alongside adaptation; or succession that maintains a focus on learning, development and inclusion?

2.4 Moving forward

In this, the last seminar, participants had hoped for a resolution of the many complicated theories from the seminars and how they applied to their roles and organisations. Oedipal issues too have to be resolved and the way they are has a significant impact on our personalities. But resolution is not the end; these complex issues and undercurrents continue throughout our lives and will come to the fore at particular junctures. We have to continue to try to be alert to them and work with them. The same is true for the seminars; there was no neat way of drawing everything together. Using psychoanalytic and systemic thinking in leadership is a continuous process. It's complex, hard work and tiring. We believe that the gains more than make up for the pain and effort. Oedipus shows us the risk of not being curious or paying attention to the impact our psychic lives can have on our actions.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Like the human psyche, FE and skills has strengths, limits, possibilities and frailties. The leadership of thinking needs to encourage a climate in which curiosity, learning and the struggle involved in development, take precedence over turning a blind eye. One that pays attention to the interplay between the internal and external world of its organisations, its people, its dynamics. This means allowing space for reflection, connecting thinking with feeling, and giving space for creativity and imagination, including the imagination to envisage and lead towards a different, successful future for the sector in a new and evolving reality.

Gabriella Braun, Project Director, and David Armstrong, Project Consultant, Working Well, July 2016.

WORKING WELL: PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

'I've emerged a very different leader'

The 12 leaders from the FE and skills sector who took part in the nine strategic seminars were asked to complete an evaluation questionnaire. The thoughts and comments they shared give an indication of the often-profound personal and professional impact the project had on its participants. There are too many to feature in full but we have selected a number of them, organised under four different headings, to give readers a flavour of the seminars, which, of course, shaped the think pieces included here. The selection focuses on the impact of the project on individuals and their thinking about leadership. Given the personal nature of some of the comments, and to protect the privacy of our participants, we have anonymised all the feedback we received.

How my thinking about leadership has changed

A major theme was what one leader called the 'profound impact on my understanding of myself and the development of this into my leadership thinking and practice'. 'My own thinking has changed,' said one participant. 'Whilst acutely aware of the external influences on the sector I was blissfully unaware of how my own internal drivers and reactions could be impacting on me as a leader.' Another reported 'making changes

where behaviours may be stunting the growth of the organisation'. One participant said that the project had taught them that 'thinking drives good leadership', a theme developed by another who commented that they had become 'much more thoughtful and reflective about how and why leadership is happening in the way it is in my organisation'. There was evidence too of a growing appreciation of the complexity of leadership and the relationships and interactions involved. 'The project has made me think more about leadership and the factors that may be affecting me and those I lead in ways which I hadn't before,' one leader remarked. Another, in a similar vein, wrote:

I have always thought that being clear about your position on things is critical and I do still think this but it really is not enough on its own to ensure positive and sustainable results for your college. Everyone or a critical mass in the organisation needs to be clear about the role and working towards the primary task. A real understanding of how others perceive you and your actions and how you view these is critical and can get in the way of creating and sustaining an organisation that does learn to improve. At this time in the sector's history, reflection not rumination is a key part of leadership.

The impact it has had on the way I work

Participants observed 'huge', 'significant' and 'immediate' impacts on the way they worked. One said they had emerged from the sessions 'a very different leader'. Specific changes included being more 'present', becoming 'a more reflective leader' able to 'reflect on the wider dynamics of a situation', and '[creating] space for my senior team'. Not rushing to judgement – thinking, 'not just doing' – was a consistent theme among participants, as was a willingness to be self-critical. One said that they had been led 'to question my position in relation to the organisation and the sector generally'. A number reported using the topics to underpin development work with their own leadership team, sometimes sharing the think pieces and discussing them with colleagues. In a period of mergers and restructuring, some leaders had been led to think differently about

'organisational loss'; while others emerged from the sessions determined to create the space for the development of 'new ideas and new ways of working'. One participant said: 'It has made me think about the kind of leader I am, the kind of leader I should be and the kind of leader I want to be. It has also led to me undertaking deep thinking about whether my leadership is right for my organisation at this time.'

How my thinking about leadership in the sector has changed

'It's made me realise that the space to think in the sector is rare,' said one participant, who noted also that CPD tended to be about 'skills building' rather than 'people developing'. The need for boldness and self-confidence in sector leadership was also noted, as was the need for 'a strong unified voice'. 'There can be opportunities – even out of situations that appear to shrink opportunities (mergers)', wrote one. '... '[I]t's how we conduct ourselves and [the] clarity and thoughtfulness we give to our actions that can ensure opportunities can be taken.' Another reported feeling more 'part of a sector rather than just our city or institution', noting that they now proactively sought to think about things 'at a sector level' rather than simply from an organisational point of view. One leader highlighted a need for 'a new narrative, a new place from which to be inspired, to inspire and lead', while another emphasised 'clarity of purpose and a culture that's resilient to change', noting too the 'need to increase the capacity to think, reflect and act, rather than falling back into a sense of victimhood'.

How I will take the ideas forward

Participants gave numerous examples of how they were already taking forward the ideas they had encountered in the seminars. A number reported using material from the seminars in the professional development of their senior leadership team. Some also noted that they were actively seeking to provide more space for creative thinking and new ideas. One leader noted 'a significant need to take this approach and learning down

to the engine rooms of colleges, e.g. middle management teams'. Others indicated that they would continue to use the project materials, and in particular the think pieces, to question themselves and their actions, and to shape their thinking and ways of working with others. Sharing what they had learned – both within their organisations and in the sector more widely – was another theme among participants, with one noting: 'We have a knowledge and understanding that others in the sector do not and it would be a great shame if the collective knowledge we have isn't used to greater influence.'

PROJECT REPORT

How can psychoanalysis and systems theory contribute to the leadership of thinking in the FE and skills sector?

SEPTEMBER 2015 – JUNE 2016

Project Director, Gabriella Braun
Project Consultant, David Armstrong

1. Project aim and outputs

The aim of this project was to identify how psychoanalysis and systems theory can contribute to the leadership of thinking. The following is an abridged version of the project report. The full report is available on the FETL website: www.fetl.org.uk. We hoped the project would promote:

- New thinking about the leadership of thinking in FE and skills.
- Knowledge and understanding of key psychoanalytic concepts and systemic thinking, and evidence of their application to the leadership of thinking now and for the future.

- Increased capacity in the sector to:
 - have confidence and self belief, and take its place authoritatively in the UK education system;
 - work at the level of the whole system;
 - work with person, role and system;
 - think and remain thoughtful;
 - integrate intellect and emotion;
 - value and use curiosity and imagination in all aspects of its work;
 - identify and address blocks to development (in the self, the organisation, the system);
 - connect psychoanalytic and systemic concepts to pedagogy for the benefit of progressive, future facing vocational education and training.
- A group of informed participants (the strategic seminar attendees) who can use their knowledge and increased capacity to influence the leadership of thinking and the development of the sector.

The outputs were:

- Nine strategic seminars
- Nine think pieces published on the FETL website

2. Methodology

2.1 Recruitment of participants

In discussion with a project advisory group we produced a guidance note for potential participants and for sector bodies. Sector bodies were invited to recommend participants. FETL trustees also suggested the project to some staff in the sector. Gabriella Braun conducted telephone interviews with all those interested in participating.

Fourteen senior leaders from FE and skills were recruited to the project. One dropped out the evening before the first seminar due to the start of an area review. The Scottish Funding Council was hoping to participate but fast-changing events in Scotland meant this was impossible at this time.

2.2 Strategic seminars

Each one-day seminar included input about psychoanalytic theory and leadership developed previously by Gabriella Braun, as well as group work to apply the ideas to participants' roles and organisations and to the sector as whole. The strategic seminars were:

- Using systems theory in leadership
- Leadership of thinking: What's love got to do with it?
- Leadership of thinking: What's attachment got to do with it?
- Leadership of thinking: What's presence got to do with it?
- Leadership of thinking: What's compulsion got to do with it?
- Leadership of thinking: What's persecution got to do with it?
- Leadership of thinking: What's loss got to do with it?
- Leadership of thinking: What's aggression got to do with it?
- Leadership of thinking: What's Oedipus got to do with it?

2.3 Think pieces

The think pieces were written after each seminar and further developed the ideas. Each think piece focused on the specific application to the sector and included implications for the leadership of thinking.

2.4 Additional elements

At the end of the project we ran a one-day seminar focused on application and evaluation of the project. We also produced a reading list for those interested in developing their thinking further.

3. Evaluation

Participants were asked to complete an evaluation questionnaire. A selection of their comments are below:

3.1 What are the key ways that the project has influenced and developed your thinking about your leadership?

- My own thinking has changed. Whilst acutely aware of the external influences on the sector I was blissfully unaware of how my own internal drivers and reactions could be impacting upon me as a leader.
- In my case the programme has had a profound impact on my understanding of myself and the development of this into my leadership thinking and practice has been significant. I have become much more thoughtful and reflective about how and why leadership is happening in the way it is in my organisation. All of the concepts have been very relevant to leadership in an FE setting.
- The project content has made me think more about leadership and the factors that may be affecting me and those I lead in ways which I hadn't before (for example, the links between attachment and employee engagement). Discussions with other leaders in an honest and non-judgemental way have also been very valuable in a period of particularly high change.

3.2. Has this had an impact on how you work? If so, in what ways?

- It has had impact on how I work. Like others I have used some of the topics to underpin development work I have done with my team. Also, it has made me a more reflective leader. Instead of jumping to conclusions and therefore solutions, I reflect on the wider dynamics of a situation which often provides a greater range of possible responses. I'm calmer too.
- The impact has been significant. It has made me think about what kind of leader I am, the kind of leader I should be and the kind of leader I want to be. It has also led me to undertaking deep thinking about whether my leadership is right for my organisation at this time. This has led me to question my position in relation to the organisation and the sector generally. The programme, and particularly the focus on attachment, love and persecution have been deeply relevant to my personal circumstances and the thinking around change management and transition particularly.

3.3. Has the project influenced on other leaders/ leadership in your organisation? If so, in what ways?

- I have shared the sessions, notes and think pieces with my senior team and we have discussed them at some length. The organisation is going through critical structural changes and dealing with organisational loss is particularly relevant. Some colleagues, as did the group on the project, found some modules more difficult to relate to but I have heard them referred to more latterly in our change programme.
- My senior team are enjoying the space and empowerment to develop new ideas and new ways of working.
- Managers' conversations and actions are more focussed with their staff and that is a direct consequence of the conversations senior managers are having. These have all been about changing behaviours.

3.4. What are the key ways that the project has influenced and developed your thinking about leadership of the sector?

- I have been in the FE sector for almost 20 years and thought I understood it! I feel I have gained a deeper understanding about FE and how the collective thoughts from leaders in the sector are in some ways contributing to holding it back.
- It's made me realise that the space to think in the sector is rare. When we provide CPD we tend towards skills building not people developing. The sector needs thinkers – leaders who are going to think their way to their organisation's development and success.
- It has reminded me to keep thinking about my leadership, the importance of working with others for them to think about their leadership and it has made me think more proactively about the need to sometimes think about things at a sector level, rather than just individual or organisation. It's made me think more about being part of a sector rather than just our city or institution.

3.5. Do you intend to take the ideas forward or build on the project? If so, in what ways?

- I am sharing the think pieces with our senior leadership team first to discuss what we think resonates that allows us to look at what we have done with fresh eyes. I plan that we each look at an area for development that is our responsibility to take forward and use each other to test out how we intend to take it forward. For myself, I hope I can continue to question my own actions – particularly looking outwards on what I can influence as part of the area review and indeed [this side of] London.
- I think there is a significant need to take this approach and learning down to the engine rooms of colleges, e.g. middle management teams and I would like to find a way of doing this.
- I will continue to use the think pieces as input to my thinking and will try and work on how to use this further with my team.

3.6. Any other comments?

- I found being part of the project really stimulating and thought provoking. It made me consider theories and concepts I had no idea were impacting upon the sector or those in it. The group formed a strong bond perhaps without noticing and I hope that as a group it keeps in touch. We have a knowledge and understanding that others in the sector do not and it would be a great shame if the collective knowledge we have isn't used to greater influence.
- This was one of the best professional learning journeys I have embarked upon. I have emerged from it a very different leader.
- I've really enjoyed being part of the project, looking at topics from a different perspective and from theory that I knew nothing about before participating. I think including roles from across the sector was very useful, it's been very good to have training provider perspectives as well as colleges – very grounding.

4. Conclusion

The project had a significant and, in many ways, a profound impact on participants. Some important themes emerged and the ideas provide new thinking in the sector, which is highly relevant to the change and evolution it is now facing. Their comments above show how relevant and stimulating they found it. This is also endorsed by the fact that only one person dropped out and that attendance was high. Their engagement in the seminars and responses to the think pieces testify to the contribution that psychoanalytic and systems thinking can make to leadership of thinking in the sector. More importantly, they are introducing new thinking into their leadership and their organisations. We expect that they will also influence the sector in this regard more broadly where possible.

We do not know how much the think pieces were engaged with beyond the project participants; the feedback and interaction we had hoped for did not materialise.

While the project leads us to unreservedly advocate the use of psychoanalytic and systemic ideas in the leadership of thinking, this needs to be recognised as a continuous process. It's no quick fix; on the contrary, it's complex, hard work and tiring. We believe that the gains more than make up for the pain and effort. And, as we say in the final think piece, the risk of not being curious or paying attention to the impact our psychic lives can have on our actions is great.

5.0 Participants

Matt Atkinson, Principal and Chief Executive, Bath College

Pat Carvalho, Principal and Chief Executive, Harrow College

Nav Chohan, Principal, Shipley College

Denise Brown, Vice-Principal Curriculum and Quality, South Essex College

Charlotte Blant, Founder/CEO, Youthforce

Chris Garcia, Remit (who got a new job and only attended two seminars)

Angela Lloyd, Chair of Governors, Coleg Gwent

Ashley McCaul, CEO, Skills for Growth

Graham Razey, Principal, East Kent College

Karen Sanders, Group Director Human Resources and Organisational Development, Activate Learning

Dame Ruth Silver, President of FETL and FETL steward for the project.

Sarah Stannard, Principal, Southampton College

Paul Wakeling, Principal, Havering Sixth Form College

The full project report, including the comments of all participants, is available on the FETL website: www.fetl.org.uk.



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