

Bringing Teaching to Life: An Educational Workshop with Deborah Cabaniss

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On November 8 and 9, 2013, the Seattle Psychoanalytic Society and Institute and the Northwestern Psychoanalytic Society and Institute co-sponsored a workshop with Deborah Cabaniss, MD FIPA titled "Bringing Teaching to Life: An Education Retreat." Cabaniss is a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons and the Director of Psychotherapy Training in the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia where she teaches psychodynamic psychotherapy to residents and coordinates the teaching and supervising of all psychotherapy in the residency program. Former NPSI site visitors, Ted Jacobs, MD FIPA and Brian Robertson, MD FIPA, had recommended bringing her to Seattle after NPSI expressed a desire to improve its teaching methods at the Institute.

Following is our summary of the workshop with key events and learning activities temporarily arranged. We wrote the summary with three objectives in mind: 1) to remember and consolidate what we learned in the workshop; 2) to share information with others from NPSI and SPSI who were unable to attend the workshop; and 3) to provide current and future SPSI and NPSI instructors with a reference for making psychoanalytic teaching practices a more active and alive process.

Friday Evening, November 8, 2013

Deborah Cabaniss requested that the education leaders from both NPSI and SPSI get together on Friday night prior to the Saturday workshop to discuss the teaching practices at their institutes and share any concerns they might have about training candidates. Sitting down to a delicious potluck dinner at the NPSI office, Cabaniss insisted that we call her by first name, Deborah, and so the rest of this report will be consistent with that request. Deborah asked us some general questions and after some discussion remarked that our comments and concerns were consistent with what she'd heard from other training institutes where she'd taught similar workshops. She noted that analysts are not taught teaching theory and that their teaching techniques in the classroom typically mirror how they were themselves taught. It is very common for the analytic stance to be carried over into the classroom setting; and although this is sometimes effective because analysts tend to be intuitive, having some learning theory to guide their teaching practices can help analysts be more effective as instructors.

Saturday Morning, November 9, 2013

Deborah arrived early and helped set up for the workshop. She stressed the importance of the instructor organizing the room to create an environment they feel comfortable teaching in and that feels conducive to learning. The meeting was well attended with 15 participants from SPSI and 16 from NPSI.

The Setting

As people arrived and signed in, Deborah approached each attendee as they entered the room, introduced herself and exchanged a few words with them. Although the room seemed rather large and impersonal, her personal approach and immediate accessibility served as an antidote. The chairs were arranged in a large circle with a white board at the front. Each chair had a small

yellow notepad on it and Deborah brought extra pens in case anyone had forgotten to bring one. She stood the entire time she was teaching except for when she pulled a chair up to some of our smaller groups. There were plenty of refreshments at the back of the room.

Esti Karson (NPSI) formally introduced Deborah Cabaniss, who in turn invited us to go around the room and introduce ourselves by name and institute. When we were finished, she then went around the room and in quick succession, identified all 31 of us by name. In this way, Deborah set the tone for the rest of the workshop, making the point of how important it is to connect with those you teach.

Learning Activity #1

Deborah asked each of us to think of an example from our analytic training when we experienced learning something very important and then to write this example down on our notepads. Next she asked us to share that experience with the person sitting next to us (a technique she later called “pair sharing”). She then asked each of us to share with the larger group something that our partner had told us. While we spoke, she wrote on the white board the key words and phrases we shared that characterized our important learning experiences, such as: *personal, emotionally resonant, helpful, informative, moving, interactive, sense of safety, mentorship, common sense, use of simple and human terms, structure, connectedness and applicability*. Once again Deborah set the tone for the workshop, establishing a connection with and between group members and promising a day filled with active and engaging learning processes.

Learning Activity #2

Deborah asked us to count off from 1 to 6, creating 6 small groups who gathered themselves together in different parts of the room. She let us know that we were free to move to any other group at any time if there was an analytic conflict or if we felt uncomfortable in any way. She then handed each small group a laminated page on which one of the following had been printed: a yin-yang symbol, a peace sign, the Nike swoosh, a US flag, the Space Needle, and McDonald’s golden arches. She asked each of us to write down on our notepads three associations we had to our symbol, after which we shared them with the other members of our group. As we did this, Deborah circled the room, checking in with each small group, asking us to choose a group recorder. With the few minutes remaining, she requested that we discuss the question: “What makes a symbol a symbol?” We then reconvened as a large group and the recorders reported out highlights from their small group discussions. Following are some of the comments reported:

Individual associations tended initially to be more on the surface, especially with well-known symbols. One group described their very recognizable symbol with its culturally inferred meaning as “saturated.” Another group thought that symbols were endlessly packed with meaning. There was the thought that a symbol is something that shapes experience or that evokes an emotional response. Deborah queried us further. Would our associations to a symbol be experienced differently if we heard it described to us rather than if we saw it ourselves? Did the discussion of our associations lead to any change in the way an individual or the group as a whole experienced the symbol? In response to the latter question, most answered “yes”—the discussions had led to some sort of personal or group change.

Deborah explained that she uses this particular learning activity when she teaches a class on dreams. She has found that having students associate to symbols and then discuss their associations with one another helps them to learn about dreams in a way that feels alive and emotionally meaningful. They discover that they already know something of how to work with

symbols and that this can be applied to working with dreams. They learn that describing an affectively laden experience (i.e., seeing a symbol, reporting a dream) is different than being in it. They learn that when they have an association to a symbol and discuss it with another person, their association changes or it gets elaborated—much as it would in the analytic encounter where an analyst and patient analyze a dream together. While reading assignments about dreams and dream interpretation are still important, experiential learning exercises actively illustrate how dreams can be approached and how one might begin to work with them in a clinical setting. Students are able to usefully apply what they learn about symbols and dreams towards understanding the concepts of displacement and condensation.

After a break for coffee and refreshments, Deborah moved on to the topic of learning objectives. She began by reading from the first chapter of Ralph Tyler's book *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*:

"Many educational programs do not have clearly defined purposes. In some cases one may ask a teacher of science, of English, of social studies, or of some other subject what objectives are being aimed at and get no satisfactory reply. The teacher may say in effect that he aims to develop a well-educated person and that he is teaching English or social studies or some other subject because it is essential to a well-rounded education. No doubt some excellent educational work is being done by artistic teachers who do not have clear conceptions of goals but do have an intuitive sense of what is good teaching, what materials are significant, what topics are worth dealing with and how to present material and develop topics effectively with students. Nevertheless, if an educational program is to be planned and if efforts for continued improvement are to be made, it is very necessary to have some conception of the goals that are being aimed at. These educational objectives become the criteria by which materials are selected, content is outlined, instructional procedures are developed, and tests and examinations are prepared. All aspects of the educational program are really means to accomplish educational purposes."

In his book, Tyler develops a rationale for identifying and studying what educational purposes a school seeks to attain and what educational experiences can be provided. It is not a book about psychoanalytic training per se, but can be a helpful resource for evaluating learning objectives and thinking about learning activities that will lead to the desired objectives.

Learning Objectives

Deborah next described the concept of teaching according to a “backwards design.” The first step is to formulate a valid learning objective (LO). The second step is to design an activity or activities to meet that LO. The final step is to come up with a way of assessing or measuring whether a student has met the LO. In summary, the three steps in order are: 1) design LO; 2) design activity; 3) design measurement.

Deborah pointed out that instructors often go the opposite direction: they assign readings for a class and only afterwards think about learning objectives, often without considering how to evaluate their students understanding of the material. Many years ago, she conducted a survey of the clinical associates (candidates) in her institute and discovered that what they worried about most was how they were being evaluated. At best they hoped evaluations would be benign; at worst, there was some paranoia—both positions suggesting that many approached learning as a passive process. Learning objectives were not being carefully thought about and communicated; thus the clinical associates did not know how or on what basis they were being evaluated.

Deborah stressed that “learning activity is not learning passivity.” One could determine to what extent these different positions are found in an institute by having an “exit poller” interview students after each learning activity to determine what they had gotten out of it and whether it matched the learning objective(s) or not.

Types of Learning Objectives

Deborah next described three types of learning objectives, noting that when LOs are create, any one or more of the three types may be chosen. The three types of LOs are:

Knowledge: As the name implies, a knowledge objective focuses on the imparting of knowledge (often in a way that emphasizes theory and creates good theoreticians). Examples are: “The student will demonstrate an understanding of primitive mental states” or “The student will understand negative therapeutic reaction.” Deborah highlighted that “understand” and “understanding” are rather broad and vague terms that are difficult to measure. It would be easier to demonstrate knowledge and more accurate to measure an LO such as: “The student will be able to list characteristics of primitive mental states” or “The student will be able to define negative therapeutic reaction.”

Skills: This is the “be able to do” learning objective. The question to ask is: “What skill do you want someone to know after a particular class or seminar?” It helps to hone down big ideas about expertise into smaller, more focused skills that a student at their stage of analytic training can be realistically expected to perform. For example, a rather large LO such as “Establish a therapeutic frame” could be pared down to “Be able to talk about the fee.” After deciding on a learning objective, the next question is: “What kind of activity would help develop this skill?” One example could be role-playing. Deborah encouraged us to be creative, to “think outside the box.” However, she also emphasized the importance of thinking clearly about the differences between learning objectives and to word them carefully. The more a learning objective is *operationalized* (i.e., “defining something (a concept, a skill etc.) in such a way that it can be practically measured”), the more likely a student will be able to accomplish it.

Attitude: This objective refers to how we want someone to shift mentally and emotionally following a learning activity, with the focus on process and not on an end goal. For example, “The student will see projective identification as helpful instead of as a problem” can be expected to shift a student’s attitude from fear and condemnation to openness and acceptance. A larger objective in this category concerns the student having an attitude of being interested in learning rather than experiencing learning as a burden or task that one must simply “just get through.”

Deborah again emphasized that every valid and effective learning objective must be measurable. As described previously, a “backwards design” approach assists with this goal of measurability, with teaching activities as the tools necessary to approach and accomplish it.

Teaching and Learning Activities

Deborah described a range of activities, tools and techniques that she incorporates into her teaching practice. Among the simplest examples were role-playing exercises; the occasional short quiz; reports of how in the previous week students used a particular concept (e.g., “Bring in a case example from the week that illustrates projective identification”); and writing exercises, particularly important because writing about something one has heard or read facilitates learning at a deeper level (e.g., “Write down two ways you learned to utilize the concept of projective

identification with a patient” or “Come in next time with a written summary of the group discussion”). She noted that if your means of measuring an LO is the ability to discuss a topic or a concept, then you must come up with an activity where everyone speaks. Broad questions (“What do you think of the article?”) often lead to excessive inhibition. More targeted questions generate a more active discussion. Most candidates, but especially new candidates, will benefit from an introduction to a concept, theory or article that highlights its relevance and salient points before they are able to discuss it.

Articles and papers are typically assigned in analytic training. Deborah believes that it is helpful to know our reasons and objectives for assigning them and to clearly state these to candidates. Examples of knowledge-based LOs for assigning papers might be to familiarize a candidate with specific analytic literature; to read about certain clinical material; to prompt students’ thinking about a topic; to have shared knowledge or develop a core knowledge base (which is very important to be able to discuss analytic concepts). Examples of skills-based LOs for assigning papers could be to be able to construct an interpretation based upon a particular concept or to identify different defense mechanisms in clinical material as presented in a particular paper. When an LO is to increase skills, it can be quite useful to do an activity during the class, followed by a discussion of it.

Other activities, tools and techniques that Deborah uses in her teaching are:

Pair-share: a useful technique that was illustrated above in learning activity #1 where individuals are asked to write down an important memory, to share it with the person next to them, and then to summarize and share what the person said to the group. Deborah asked us what the utility was for sharing what one’s partner said rather than one’s own thoughts. Some responses were that it was easier to talk about someone else; it enhanced the discussion; it honed our listening ear; it helped us to stay on topic. Deborah said that when teaching, we need to always ask ourselves: “Do we want to increase or decrease the anxiety in the room?” There are reasons for doing both. If you want to create a heightened affective experience, you may want to increase anxiety. Less instruction increases anxiety. More instruction decreases anxiety. Certain situations call for decreased anxiety, however, such as the imparting of potentially sensitive material. If you ask students to write about something and orient them from the beginning that you intend to ask them afterwards to share what they have written with another person or the group, you allow them to decide in advance what they are willing to share with others.

Warm-Ups: Deborah emphasized that a good warm-up sets the tone for an entire class or seminar. It establishes a sense of safety, empathy and respect while announcing or illustrating what the class or seminar will be like up ahead. Warm-ups are about making alliances and establishing a frame. A warm-up can be very basic, such as asking students to introduce themselves—something too often forgotten or left out in some psychoanalytic classes. Knowing students’ names is very important. Other examples of warm-ups would be asking students to write down two popular cultural references to psychoanalysis, to write five sentences about dreams, or to talk about what they want to learn from the class/seminar.

Readings: Deborah often uses a poem to get people talking about a topic or to prompt them to talk from a more affective or associative place—“a soil that is easier to grow something in than the soil of competition and anxiety.”

Presenting and discussing: Teachers and students have to tolerate classroom competition and anxieties about presenting in front of others. Instructors should think about activities that might help students assuage these difficulties. Breaking up into pairs can help. In larger groups, it can also be helpful to have people switch seats or count off and break into small groups. It is important to specify that people are always free to move to another small group (e.g., if there are clinical conflicts).

Writing: Asking students to write down their thoughts and then to share what they've written helps them to focus their attention and stay on topic. Deborah often gave us this experience in the workshop and it was very effective in bringing the point home.

Supervision: Institutes frequently focus on number of hours spent in supervision because it is easily measurable. Deborah encouraged supervisors to consider learning objectives for specific candidates as well as learning activities and readings. They should ask: "What are the objectives or phases I want the candidate to have met at the end of the first year? The second year? The third year?..."

Saturday Afternoon

Deborah spoke about "vertical learning objectives" for a particular course or seminar and "horizontal learning objectives" for training as a whole.

Learning Activity #3

Deborah had us count off from 1 to 6 to form into smaller groups. Our assignment was to come up with a learning objective, teaching activity, and means of measurement for a first-year analytic training class, with each group provided one of the following topics: free association, transference, counter-transference, resistance, termination or working through. She went around to each group giving helpful suggestions, at times reminding us that the assignment was for first-year (not advanced) students. She encouraged us to "think outside the box" and to imagine that whatever resources we needed or wanted would be available for the purposes of this activity.

After about 30 minutes we re-convened as a large group to discuss our progress and process. The exercise had illustrated how challenging it was to create a thoughtful, creative and measurable learning activity. Many people expressed surprise at how difficult it had been to come up with (and as a group to agree upon) a learning objective. Deborah stated that this is often the case, that creating LOs is generally the hardest part of teaching and takes the most work and time when planning a class, course or seminar. Regarding measurement, Deborah said that how you show/know that the student is learning can help firm up what you want your LOs to be. She then added: "If you don't recall anything else I've taught here today, just think: LESS IS MORE." She said that she reminds herself of this before every seminar: "If the group leaves at the end of the day and remembers nothing more than this one thing, I'll be happy. I really want them to get this."

Operationalizing

Deborah spoke about how as analysts we think candidates ought to be able to learn things we know fairly easily, but as teachers we are not so good at operationalizing ways to impart this knowledge. To illustrate, she said that if you were asked to tell the person next to you how to tie their shoes, you would really have to stop and think carefully about what you would say. It's not easy to do. We need similarly to think carefully about ways to operationalize psychoanalytic concepts that may be second nature to us.

Deborah encouraged us to challenge ourselves to be as specific as we can be about what we want to accomplish when we teach. If it is to “Gain a better understanding,” we need to think about the specific understanding we want a student to gain. For example, the learning objective “Understand negative and positive transference” could be refined as “Able to recognize when you are at peace or when you are at war with your patient.”

When thinking about learning objectives that cover the analytic training of first to fourth or fifth-year clinical associates and candidates, it’s possible to use the same LOs by building in added complexity with each succeeding year. But whatever the year, this style of teaching tends to be very labor intensive. “PREPARATION IS EVERYTHING,” Deborah stressed, which could even mean, for example, coming up with examples of clinical material beforehand to illustrate to candidates what you want them to learn. However, Deborah also encouraged us to take small enough bites that can be chewed and digested. Instead of thinking about changing our teaching practices across the institute all at once, we can consider strategizing how to accomplish this in phases (e.g., beginning with first-year candidates or starting with just one course). Deborah advised us to then talk about how this process went with others—to describe our struggles, what worked, what didn't. She suggested we think in terms of ongoing faculty development, perhaps developing a course on how to disseminate the creation of learning objectives or creating a faculty teaching support group.

Closing

At the end of the day Deborah gave copies of her new book, *Psychodynamic Formulation*, to both NPSI and SPSI. Senior training analysts Maxine Anderson (NPSI) and Cecile Bassen (SPSI) offered some final words and appreciations. As we were finishing, Deborah was asked her thoughts on how she felt the workshop had gone. She responded that she thought we had played well. She observed that the groups had worked together so seamlessly that by the end of the day she wasn't sure who was from which institute. She thought all the participants had been creative and involved, exhibiting respect for one another and expressing similar concerns about how psychoanalysis was taught in their institutes. Her last comment was "I'm hoping this will jump start more discussion and be seen as a beginning and not an ending."

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