Teaching Applied Psychoanalytic Concepts with Online Assisted Technologies: An Australian Case Example

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The present report is a review of an Australian case example of teaching psychoanalytic concepts with online assisted technologies. It is a first attempt to address a hiatus in the extant literature. A descriptive account of the hybrid teaching methodology that was employed is offered through a consideration of: students' online responses, the teacher-developer's reflections on his teaching experience, as well as formal and informal student feedback. Despite the anecdotal nature of the study, findings lend credence to the suggestion that the online medium has an enormous potential for teaching applied psychoanalysis. Specifically the cyber-classroom contributes to interactivity, situated learning, reflexivity and learning at different levels.

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Introduction

The present report is a review of an Australian case example of teaching psychoanalytic concepts with online assisted technologies. It is a first attempt to address a hiatus in the extant literature. A descriptive account of the hybrid teaching methodology that was employed is offered through a consideration of: students' online responses, the teacher-developer's reflections on his teaching experience, as well as formal and informal student feedback. Despite the anecdotal nature of the study, findings lend credence to the suggestion that the online medium has an enormous potential for teaching applied psychoanalysis. Specifically the cyber-classroom contributes to interactivity, situated learning, reflexivity and learning at different levels.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that a fair amount of psychoanalytic teaching and learning occurs in an online medium. An examination of all the relevant databases did not yield a single scholarly article reflecting on this practice, to date. Compared to other disciplines, Psychoanalysis has been a late-starter to the internet (Laszig 2000). Institutional psychoanalysis' first response to the online revolution is probably best described as measured. There are exceptions: Lacanian psychoanalysts (e.g. Fink 1999) have been willing to embrace electronic treatment through the telephone, real-time webcam or email. Nonetheless, compared to disciplines like medicine or nursing, Psychoanalysis' position on these matters is antediluvian. There are good reasons for psychoanalysis' hesitancy. Certainly the richness and complexity of what happens in the psychoanalytic consulting room is not readily amenable to the circumscription that e-media requires. The proliferation of cybertherapies conducted by practitioners who have neither the credentials, nor the necessary scruples (regarding security and confidentiality) does not inspire confidence (Layne & Hoehenshil, 2005). Similarly, psychoanalysis, cannot readily emulate manualised treatment approaches eager to reap the rewards of this new market. Despite these objections, there is

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every suggestion that e-technology has an enormously important role to play in psychoanalytic education; be it of the lay public or in formal training institutions.

It is probably within the university setting that online assisted technologies are most frequently employed to teach psychoanalytic ideas. Psychoanalytic e-learning has followed the trend of general psychology and counselling curriculum delivery. These sibling disciplines continue to make increased strides in the area, including: computer based supervision by master therapists, online streaming video demonstrations or web based digital portfolios as an assessment tools, Psychoanalysis should be heartened (cf new online Journal of Technology in Counselling (http://jtc.colstate.edu). There certainly is enormous scope for training in the tools of the psychoanalytic trade be it diagnosis, case formulation, treatment planning and treatment itself.

There are probably a number of reasons why university academics who teach psychoanalysis using online resources have not written about their experiences. The obvious first reason is the relative novelty of the e-learning in general. As with the rest of education, technological advancement in area has far outpaced teaching and learning scholarship. Also noteworthy: it is common cause that the demands of preparing online are particularly onerous on academics. The rule of thumb statistic is - 18 hours are required for every online teaching hour (Nelson et al 1999). What we might be left to conclude is that academics are so overwhelmed with their teaching duties that they have neither the time nor the inclination for writing and research on their teaching practices. There are other demands faced by the psychoanalytic academic. What psychological therapies are taught at university level is highly contested space. In Australia, perhaps more than in the US and certainly more than in Europe the imperatives of economic rationalism on the wider socio-political sphere has seen increasing hegemony of cognitive behavioural treatment approaches. Institutional psychoanalysis has done little for this cause - continuing to debate the merits of teaching clinical psychoanalysis outside the preserve of psychoanalytic institutes; this, even in spite of the fact, that psychoanalysis has been taught at universities since Freud's first discoveries.

The Cyberclassroom Experience in Practice

The present case study is a first attempt to redress the hiatus in scholarship on teaching psychoanalytic psychotherapies online. It comprises an examination of the instructor's and the students' cyberclassroom experiences of the course - Psychodynamic Models of Counselling, one of a suite of new psychoanalytically informed course offerings at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Perth. The observations that follow amount to 'taking stock' of the hybrid teaching methodology that was employed. To note, students were not formally approached for comment about their learning experiences aside from their being administered the university's standardised Unit and Teaching Evaluation Instrument (UTEI) (ECU, 2008). The data for consideration comprised: an examination of student online responses, the teacher-developer's reflections on his teaching and learning experience, informal student feedback received either by mouth (e.g. comments, telephonic feedback etc.) or electronically (by email or through Blackboard's Blogging tool) as well as UTEI results. By its nature, then, the present study is anecdotal and descriptive.

Students

One of the first complications was that students comprised a mixed cohort: 58 in face-to-face and 21 in external (online) mode. Students in face-to-face mode had access to both

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classroom and Web-based experiences. Further confounding matters – the course was double coded for postgraduate and undergraduate learners, obviously necessitating different levels of teaching. As might be expected, the student body comprised a wide range of different skills, interests and experiences. A good number of the students had come straight from school; others comprised mature aged students. External students were scattered all over Australia.

Which psychoanalysis was taught?

Psychoanalysis is not all of a piece but rather a very broad body of scholarship, addressing itself to a multitude of aspects of human psychological functioning. The definition of psychoanalysis chosen embraced three key facets:
1. It is a theory of mental functioning and human nature
2. It is a theory of mental disorder
3. It is a method of treatment. (Westen, Novotny & Thompson, 2006).

It was recognised that for many students studying this course, this was a first socialisation into a professional helping field. Accordingly, their apprenticeship in psychoanalytic ideas needed to be able to promote future personal and career development. Importance was placed on students developing currency with the concepts that make up the psychoanalytic argot. For the present purposes, the psychoanalysis that was taught would be rooted in the consulting room. The hope was that, by the end of the course, students would be able to make first psychoanalytically informed conceptualisations about themselves, people and the world around them.

Learning principles informing our new online psychoanalytic offering

Simply placing psychoanalytic material online does not equate with online psychoanalytic learning. If we are to engage a discipline as complex and controversial as psychoanalysis, course content cannot be the only concern. The assumption that the present author begins with is - effective psychoanalytic e-learning would need to occur in an open, facilitative learning environment; one that encouraged self-directed learning, reflection, exploration, critical thinking and involvement with content directly related to real issues. Specifically the course took as teaching and learning objectives:

Interactivity

Psychoanalysis stands and falls with human relationships. Its defining project is reflection on the sequelae of our manifold interpersonal interactions. Such foundations are consonant with the online teaching and learning principle of interactivity. It is common cause among online educators that interactivity is one of the biggest advantages of e-learning. Teaching and learning environments designed with greater learner participation enhance motivation, with more sustained engagement with the learning material and deeper learning (Mancuso-Murphy, 2006; Upton & Cooper 2006). Interactivity and dialogue, in these terms, must be operationalised into a key learning resource.

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Situated Learning/Engagement

Psychoanalysis has no shortage of appeal for professionals and laypeople alike. The big questions (God, love and death, amongst others) and the salacious ones (sexuality) are grist for the psychoanalytic mill. Psychoanalysis' intrinsic interest is a positive rebuttal to the undergrad's charge that Psychology is a discipline concerned only with "rats and stats".

Literature on online teaching and learning is replete with observations (e.g. Walton-Moore et al, 2006) about the importance of designing tasks in ways that encourage meaningful interaction. The imperative was to learning opportunities that learners themselves would deem relevant. Psychoanalysis would need to demonstrate its applicability to the 21st century, more specifically to the city of Perth, Australia in 2008.

Reflexivity

Some would say that psychoanalysis is foundational to western notions of reflexivity. This is the importance of self analysis to Freud's undertaking. It is the careful scrutiny of matters of countertransference. The critical edge of psychoanalysis is its willingness to put everything under the microscope, including the practitioner's own life and emotions.

Learning at Different Levels

The cyberclassroom is ideally suited for students learning in different ways and at different rates. Because the individual learner has multiple resources at h/her disposal, s/he is readily able to take charge of h/her own learning The prevailing wisdom is that to be able to be successful in the online environment, students must be able to identify their own learning needs, make plans to achieve learning objectives and be knowledgeable about online course expectations (O'Neal, Fisher and Newbold, 2004).

Operationalising the Learning Objectives

The Blackboard^{TM} virtual learning environment was the platform used in the present instance. The hybrid online teaching model employed comprised different learning opportunities. Specifically, different tools/strategies were utilised to facilitate the different learning objectives.

Interactivity

Interactivity was operationalised at a curriculum content, a collegial (interpersonal) and at an intrapersonal level.

A varied arsenal was employed to encourage students to engage course content. Inter alia, students were also introduced to the multiple controversies surrounding psychoanalysis. Asynchronous discussion boards - the resource that enables individuals to post messages, read and reply to colleagues - is an ideal medium for interactivity. In order to kick start student engagement, participation in three (of many available) online activities was made compulsory. To avoid too large, unwieldy groups, students were allocated into groups of 10 to 12 members. The online activity was not facilitated, although it was monitored.

Wikis - Learners were required to contribute to the development of a critical glossary of key concepts introduced in the course. The task was modelled on Wikipedia

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(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia) the collaborative online 'encyclopaedia' that permits multiple users to contribute towards the communal development of knowledge. Specifically each student was require to write up the definition of two key concepts in their own words and more formally, as well as offering critique or commentary on two of their colleagues' offerings.

In order to promote collegial contact students were offered a Public Blog. This forum was provided to permit informal conversation and social activity.

Students were also provided with a Personal Blog, a private, reflective site, expressly defined as only available to themselves and the instructor. In the sanctum of this space they could deliberate on course content, the vicissitudes of their learning experience or anything of personal interest.

Situated Learning/Engagement

One of the most remarkable features of the World Wide Web is the immediacy of opportunity for student engagement. For the online student there is seamless continuity between the wider world and the university. Creating meaningful learning material involved taking advantage of the plethora of online psychoanalytic resources; providing multiple links and web-based exercises including: professional psychoanalytic websites, online psychoanalytically informed psychometric assessment tools; video clips of the doyens of psychoanalysis available through YouTube (www.youtube.com), podcasts of psychoanalytically germane issues, clinical case histories available in the public domain etc.

Learning psychoanalysis was situated in the immediacy of students' own world and context. We examined clinical cases that had a similarity (or intrinsic interest) to the demographic of our students. Psychoanalytic thought was employed in service of understanding the issues of the day, be it sports personalities' excesses, the vagaries of local politicians, the abuses at Guantanamo Bay. Beresford (see Beresford 2006) offered his insightful application of psychoanalytic ideas to understanding the tragic life of local Aboriginal leader - Rob Riley. Assignments, too, were developed with relevance in mind. Students were introduced to psychodynamic formulation through a series of case examples including Freud's (1910) *Leonardo da Vinci*. As their major project, students were required to do a 'wild analysis' (psychoanalytically informed psychobiography) of a hero/heroine.

Reflexivity

The multiple electronic activities (e.g. clinical judgement exercises, quizzes etc.) were offered students were aimed at fostering curiosity. Students were invited in multiple ways to reflect on themselves, their learning experiences with peers and their learning experience in general

Learning at different levels

Directly, learning questions and examples were offered respectively at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The online medium itself permitted students is such that it permits studying at level of preferred depth.

How it worked in practice

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After the initial shock and adjustment to the online environment, most students gracefully accepted the challenge facing them. Some needed to be coached more than others. Students used the site in multiple ways. By way of presenting "study results" - students' use of different online tools will be considered in turn, before describing the general student response and the instructor's experience.

Discussion Boards

Asynchronous discussion boards permitted students to participate in the debates that naturally ensued from the material. On average each student contributed to each discussion board topic 3-4 times. Reading the students' conversations was most encouraging. The quality of contributions, notwithstanding, was quite varied. Some learners stepped into discussion in a superficial way. More often, though, debate occurred at a deep and informed level, revealing extensive reading well beyond the recommended list. Paulus &Roberts' (2006) note that too much agreement between participants prevents discussion from moving to a deeper level. This was borne out in our sample. In most groups, heated debate among participants was evident. Learners demonstrated critical thinking about psychoanalysis, other models of practice and about their own assumptions. Inspection of the discussions revealed that there were different types of contributions. This is in line with Booth and Hulten's (2003) research on types of contributions to online discussions. Factual contributions (those that refer to the problem being discussed), Reflective contributions (those that consider the problem from a new angle) and Learning contributions (a culmination of two or more threads of parallel or conflictual argument) were in the vast majority of communications. Only a handful of students seemed inclined to what Booth and Hulten (2003) connote "Participatory" communications" (those that acknowledge the presence of others).

Wikis

The Wiki was a distinct success. By the end of the course the students had developed communal psychoanalytic knowledge base, a useful learning resource. Students reported this was an invaluable resource, one they would return to in their reading and preparing for assignments.

Personal Blog

The self reflective space was not well used. Those that did so used it for a wide variety of purposes, be it thinking about the course or for a more individual purpose. Some of the Blogs were startlingly personal in spite of the fact that students were informed that this site would be viewed by instructor.

Public Blog

The Public Blog seemed to have distinct functional value becoming a general troubleshooting arena. It permitted students to ask one another both scholarly and instrumental questions. It was a forum where course-related concerns and anxieties were ameliorated by learners themselves. Inter alia, it fulfilled a networking purpose e.g. students in another state were able to constitute their own study group through this means.

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Student responses

The students' response to the course as a whole was overwhelmingly positive. UTEI results corroborate this and challenge the suggestion of selection effects. Students' response to the medium and eagerness to learn about psychoanalysis was very encouraging. There was no manifest difference between students receiving teaching exclusively in an online medium and those receiving both an online and face-to-face instruction. A couple of external students, though, expressed the view that they believed their face-to-face colleagues were at a significant advantage over themselves. For most students the feedback was that the electronically delivered material was interesting, vital and relevant. Psychoanalysis' whole person focus was deemed very appealing; much more akin to their first expectations of psychology and counselling. A good number of the postgraduate cohort averred that their preconceptions about psychoanalysis had changed. Many declared that psychoanalytic ideas were something they would aim to pursue in future studies. Following completion of the course, four students specifically made application to the Postgraduate Counselling Programme. Three students reported that since doing this course they found themselves challenging the pejorative presentation of psychoanalysis by other psychology academics. It is common cause that people entering the helping professions often do so to understand their own difficulties or difficulties of family members. A handful of students approached the instructor enquiring specifically where they might receive psychoanalytically informed treatment.

The instructor's experience

Overall the instructor's found teaching psychoanalytic ideas online very gratifying. Lots of planning and forethought were required in getting the learning environment up and running. Being explicit about expectations and clarifying student roles and obligations was imperative. Technical support and suggestions by experts in the Blackboard platform were invaluable. It soon became apparent that problems needed to be forestalled to obviate the proliferation of queries. The task overall was a very demanding and time consuming one. Emails proliferated at certain points; particularly in periods preceding an assignment or online task. Given that online activity is 24-7, students had very high expectations of the availability of the instructor. Blackboard's The Public Blog and Announcements tools were very helpful in pre-emptively addressing matters of student concern.

Discussion

Our teaching psychoanalytic ideas online permitted different opportunities from the traditional classroom teaching. Findings from the present use of this medium would suggest there are distinct gains for learners of basic psychoanalysis. There are the usual ones concerning outcomes: students having greater access; convenience (productive use of time), developing proficiency with technology use in addition to learning the discipline. There were other advantages:

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Interactivity

The electronic medium is consonant with psychoanalysis' discursive-hermeneutic notions of knowledge. The present teaching example demonstrated how in a matter of 14 weeks, virtual strangers became a coherent, interactive learning community. The online medium was certainly facilitative of communication. Our experience concurred with Levin, He and Robbins' (2006) observations that the online medium engenders more learner participation than the traditional classroom setting. In the virtual classroom, the usual social impediments tend to be removed. Not being able to see their colleagues students were more gender-blind, race-blind and physical stature blind than they otherwise might have been. Students, likewise, tended to be less anxious about being perceived as silly or stupid for asking questions or venturing a point of view in this virtual setting. The online medium seemed to promote a more permissive culture inviting different experiences and other points of view. The flipside of this is the psychoanalytic insight that online relationships tend to have an "as if" quality (see e.g. Davidson, 1998), one more prone to imposture. The nature of online relationships and its consequences on learning is worthy of further investigation.

Also noteworthy – the virtual classroom seemed to allow different sorts of student relationships to developed. The most distinctive were instrumental knowledge driven, personal and collaborative learning relationship. The collaborative learning relationships is worthy of further comment. It seems that students were motivated by being able to see the labours of their peers. With individual contributions manifest they appeared to feel accountable for contributing to their knowledge community.

Situated Learning/Engagement

Psychoanalytic knowledge acquired in the present online classroom was dynamic, vibrant and locally and historically situated. The total nature of the learning environment meant that the distinction between students learning about psychoanalysis and practitioners engaged in the work of psychoanalysis was a mouse click away. It was amazing for students in 2008 to see video clips of an aging Sigmund Freud, describing in a heavy German accent, some of his insights. Alternatively there was John Bowlby musing on attachment. Besides the now commonplace ability to access libraries and journals from their desktop, the present student body had ready at hand access to the hallways of the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA), Australian Psychoanalytic Society (APAS), the Psychotherapy, and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) or the local professional site of the Psychotherapists and Counselling Association of Western Australia (PACAWA). Moreover, insofar as some sites have their own discussion boards, students could rub shoulders with the giants in the discipline or directly communicate with professionals in the field.

Reflection

The e-environment has the capacity to foster a context for reflective practice: it makes multiple types of relationships possible and is able to provide both private and public spaces. Our students they were able to apply the reflexive wisdom of psychoanalysis to deepen an understanding of themselves, their multiple online relationships and their learning experiences.

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Learning at Different Levels

The present study made it clear that the notion of a universal, tech savvy, Generation Y student is a misnomer. Our e-classroom was conducive to diversity in learning. It was capable of supporting both undergraduate and postgraduate students in the same learning environment, as well a variety of student needs, skill levels, abilities, computer knowledge and backgrounds.

Conclusion

The shortcomings of the present study are patent. Its impressionistic foundations and lack of rigor meant that conclusions were, at best, tentative, worthy of further formal investigation. The present Australian application does, however, suggest that electronic medium affords multiple opportunities to enrich teaching applied psychoanalytic ideas. Theories that support e-teaching and learning developed in conjunction with the e-learning in higher education are conspicuous in their absence. The challenge before us is how best to create learning enhancing online environments tailored to specific disciplines. As students and academics become more conversant with new technology good, discipline specific, e-learning environs becomes their expectation.

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