

Anxiety and Fragile Learning

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L'apprendimento nell'istruzione superiore è un fragile sistema di transazioni cosce e inconscie che serve a indebolire un processo che è già precario. Questo articolo sostiene che l'apprendimento è fragile per natura e facilmente infranto. Usando una vasta gamma di esempi, il Fragile Learner è descritto come qualcuno che è vicino a concedere la sconfitta alle circostanze che minacciano la sua educazione. Ai fini di questa sottomissione, il Fragile Learner potrebbe essere uno stuolo di un istituto di istruzione superiore, ma potrebbe anche essere un educatore nominato - un docente o tutor personale. I discenti fragili potrebbero sperimentare ansie che sono interne e complesse - un atteggiamento condiviso di auto-sconfitta volontaria, insieme a un arrangiamento di pregiudizi già pronti - che possono sembrare attacchi da altre persone. Ad esempio, l'ansia crea una minaccia interna che si presenta come una minaccia dall'esterno. In alternativa, l'apprendimento fragile potrebbe essere una conseguenza degli studenti che hanno sofferto di malattia o indisposizione. Accanto a nozioni di ostacoli all'apprendimento e alla resilienza, questo documento esplora i ruoli e le identità e le tensioni che inevitabilmente si verificano. Sebbene alcune delle idee che compongono la mia immagine di Fragile Learning siano state studiate da altri contributori (notaio Meyer and Land, 2006, Britzman, 2009; Hoult, 2012 e 2013), questo documento considera le complessità attraverso insiemi differenti di lenti psicoanalitiche. Questo documento è specifico per gli studenti adulti (18+) e i riferimenti a studenti delle scuole o agli studenti di istituti di istruzione superiore sono al di fuori della sua portata.

Parole chiave: istruzione superiore, ansia, apprendimento fragile, terzo, intersoggettività

Abstract

Learning in Higher Education is a fragile system of conscious and unconscious transactions that serve to weaken a process that is already precarious. This paper argues that learning is brittle by nature, and easily broken. Using a wide range of examples, the Fragile Learner is described as someone who is close to conceding defeat to circumstances that threaten his or her education. For the purposes of this submission, the Fragile Learner might be a student of a Higher Education Institution, but also might be an appointed educator – a lecturer or personal tutor. Fragile Learners might experience anxieties that are internal and complex – a shared attitude of wilful self-defeat, coupled with an arrangement of ready-made prejudices – which can appear to be attacks from other people. For example, anxiety creates an internal threat which presents itself as a threat from the outside. Alternatively, Fragile Learning might be a consequence of learners having suffered illness or indisposition. Alongside notions of barriers to learning and resilience, this paper explores roles and identities and the tensions that inevitably occur. Although some of the ideas that make up my picture of Fragile Learning have been researched by other contributors (notably Meyer and Land, 2006; Britzman, 2009; Hoult, 2012 & 2013), this paper views the complexities through different sets of psychoanalytic lenses. This paper is specific to adult learners (18+), and references to school children or students in institutions of Further Education are beyond its reach.

Keywords: higher education, anxiety, fragile learning, third, intersubjectivity

Introduction

In his mid-career paper 'On beginning the treatment' (Freud, 1913c), Sigmund Freud asserts that psychoanalysis is akin to a game of chess. Once a course of psychoanalysis is underway, he submits, there are infinite courses that can be taken; these manoeuvres are de-

pendent on the associative material that develops and is pursued in the session. By contrast, however, there is a finite number of *opening* moves: not much intellectual or angst-fuelled variety is available.

Here and elsewhere, I would like to plead the case for a further comparison. It is my contention that psychoanalysis and education share

traits that go well beyond an interesting perusal of the opening moves and developmental strategies possible in a game of chess. Let us start, perhaps, with the obvious: with the fact that both education and psychoanalysis depend on what is referred to as a *meeting of minds*. Those who teach (in any context) will surely agree that one goal of the profession is to deliver content, task and atmosphere – and to elicit a response – that leads to the learner’s realisation and understanding. A ‘meeting of minds’ has an interpretation far removed from that of (for example) *calm intellectual agreement or compromise*. While Susan Carey (1986) elaborates on ‘cognitive conflict’ and the notion that to understand a subject, one must weave it into pre-existing knowledge schemata, Michael Oakeshott’s approach is perhaps more philosophical, though no less based on impact. Oakeshott (1962) describes a ‘conversation’ that was begun in the primeval forests and which has been made more articulate over the course of centuries. Because we are civilized human beings, we have inherited this conversation; as such, we have been bequeathed the responsibility of working in partnership with one another in every area our intermingled lives, including in education. ‘When two personalities meet,’ writes Wilfred Bion,

an emotional storm is created. If they make sufficient contact to be aware of each other, or even sufficient to be *unaware* of each other, an emotional state is produced by the conjunction of these two individuals, and the resulting disturbance is hardly likely to be regarded as necessarily an improvement on the state of affairs had they never met at all. (Bion, 1994, p. 321)

Bion is describing the psychoanalytic encounter, but can we not transfer these words to an imagined interaction in the classroom or the lecture theatre – or even on the online discussion boards. Another interpretation of a ‘meeting of minds’ states that we – the educators – have something that we want the student to learn, and we will use any tools at our disposal—even if they happen to be outdated tools, rusty with overuse after years of executing the same task in the same style—and we

will judge our efficacy as educators via the application of what some might suggest are similarly old-fashioned diagnostic tools that (often) take the form of the essay and the National Student Survey. We will fill you with what we have and what you do not yet have: a case of pedagogic penetration. And yet is it not perplexing that the ‘filling up’ metaphor even survives? As long ago as the Middle Platonist period of Ancient Greece, the historian, biographer and essayist Plutarch had tried to influence our thinking on the matter (Waterfield, 1992). Plutarch explained that:

the correct analogy for the mind is not a vessel that needs filling, but wood that needs igniting — no more — and then it motivates one towards originality and instills the desire for truth. Suppose someone were to go and ask his neighbours for fire and find a substantial blaze there, and just stay there continually warming himself: that is no different from someone who goes to someone else to get some of his rationality, and fails to realize that he ought to ignite his innate flame, his own intellect... (Waterfield, 1992, p. 50)

In *The Very Thought of Education*, Deborah P. Britzman (2009) builds on Sigmund Freud’s famous declaration about the impossibility of certain occupations. Freud had written: ‘there are three impossible professions — educating, healing, governing’ (Freud, 1925b/1961, p. 273); and via the use of fascinating comparisons, Britzman is assiduous both in proving Freud right and in making the reader think. For example, one of her comparisons is between psychoanalysis and dream work. She writes: ‘the psychoanalyst, along with the analysand, would be caught between not knowing and the desire to know, and by creating a transfer of love into knowledge this conflict begins their strange education. The nature of this education, however, is not easy to convey because it exists and does not exist at the same time’ (Britzman, 2009, p. viii). She also compares education with the dream; she writes:

like the dream, education requires association, interpretation, and a narrative capable of bringing to awareness, for further construction, things that are farther from the

mind. And whatever education is dedicated to, all education suffers a radical fate of indeterminacy. The approach that can best turn education inside out, in order to understand something of its emotional situation and its inhibitions, symptoms, and anxieties, is psychoanalysis. (Britzman, 2009, p. viii)

By drawing attention to the similarities between education and dreaming, Britzman invites the reader to consider the roles and responsibilities of both the student *and* the educator. ‘In any learning one feels pressure,’ she advises the reader (Britzman, 2009, p. ix), ‘without knowing from where it comes, to make knowledge certain and so to stabilize the object lest it escape ones efforts.’ She continues:

This fight with knowledge meets its limits in anguish over the loss of certainty, a loss needed in order to symbolize what is new. In the dream work of education, we act without knowing in advance what becomes of our efforts and meet again ignorance and hubris, but also our passion and desire. We hope that education can help us out of this mess and worry that education is this mess. We can, with confidence, admit that because learning is always an emotional situation, the very thought of education animates our phantasies of knowledge, authority, and love. (Britzman, 2009, p. ix)

There are several interesting tensions between my notion of the central fragility of learning and Britzman’s ideas about what education happens to be. ‘Education itself will be interminable,’ she writes, ‘because it is always incomplete and because it animates our own incompleteness’ (Britzman, 2009, p. 3). While I fully agree with the premise that one never finishes learning, my area of interest is the adults who do not feel that the effort associated with such endurance or tenacity is even worthwhile. *These* are my Fragile Learners, and they might easily be terrified by the proposal that their education has no finishing point. The absence of an ending would be (perhaps paradoxically) every bit as solid a barrier to learning as an *actual* barrier to learning would be. Or to put it another way, the absence would assume the status of something physical and unmoveable.

Britzman goes on to describe ‘education as experience, as pedagogy, as affect, as uneven development, as intersubjectivity, and as the basis of the transference and the countertransference’ (Britzman, 2009, p. 3). From the point of view of the Fragile Learner, the description of ‘uneven development’ is both apt and pleasing; and although this submission does not dwell on the transference and the countertransference – unconscious systems of projecting images of (for example) our parents onto our educator – there is much in the relationship between student and educator that exists at a primal level, unreflected-to and unconscious, which is often ignored by our conscious thought processes. Indeed, Freud himself has much to say on the challenges that lie ahead, for both parties in this most cerebral of transactions. ‘Education,’ he tells us (Freud, 1911, p. 224), ‘can be described without more ado as an incitement to the conquest of the pleasure principle, and to its replacement by the reality principle; it seeks, that is, to lend its help to the developmental process which affects the ego. To this end it makes use of an offer of love as a reward from the educators; and it therefore fails if a spoiled child thinks that it possesses that love in any case and cannot lose it whatever happens.’ Although one could argue that Freud’s definition is very much ‘of its time’, there is something about the intertwined notions of pleasure-seeking and pleasure-giving that both endures and stands as a common factor between adult and child learners. If we are sincere in our ambition to be *good* learners, we will want to elicit the goodwill of our educators (in one way or another: by earning a good grade; by making our educator pleased with one of our responses). So, if Freud’s statement has something more of an ‘inspirational’ than a ‘scientific’ quality about it these days, it nevertheless remains relevant to adult learners in Higher Education – as indeed it does to children.

When Britzman asks ‘Is there something about being educated, about undergoing education, that incurs our regression to infantile dependency and invites defences against helplessness?’ (Britzman, 2009, p. 5), she speaks

of the very model of the Fragile Learner. And as a last word on Freud's comparison with chess, with which I began this Introduction, it is probably worth mentioning that a game of chess – the gladiatorial bout itself – will usually conclude with one of two conceivable endings. Either someone will win (and therefore someone will lose); or there will come a point at which no further moves are conceivable – and a stalemate is in evidence. But perhaps the key metaphor here is one of resignation: many games of chess will involve someone *resigning*. Either defeated and despondent, or secretly buoyed-up and relieved by the fact that he or she can blame someone else for being 'better' at the game, the learner recognises that there is no possibility of an alternative outcome and that it is a matter of time before the end arrives. Giving up is both painful and a pleasure.

Learning and Fragile Learning

Before delving into considerations of what comprises Fragile Learning, perhaps we should try to be clear on what learning means, without the fragile adjunct. The fact that scores of generations have attempted to do so, that many journal papers and book chapters have been written on the subject, and that a 'universally accepted definition of learning does not exist' (Domjan, 1998, p. 13), should not deter us from this endeavour.

Where David Kolb (1984, p. 38) declares that 'Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience', Gert J.J. Biesta (2014) argues that learning itself is only one of seven key concepts – the remaining six being creativity, communication, virtuosity, teaching, emancipation and democracy – that are bound together by the importance of taking risks... Arguably, it is what Deborah Britzman calls the 'very thought of education' – its slippery quality, its elastic boundaries – that makes the challenge of imposing guidelines all the more intoxicating and ineffable. Any strict definition must therefore be almost arbitrary; but given that we must start somewhere and that Domjan has been mentioned in this paragraph,

let us compromise on learning being 'an enduring change in the mechanisms of behaviour involving specific stimuli and/or responses that results from prior experience with similar stimuli and responses' (Domjan, 1998, p. 13). Furthermore, in the same author's formulation: 'Whenever we see evidence of learning, we see the emergence of a change in behaviour – the performance of a new response or the suppression of a response that occurred previously' (Domjan, 1998, p. 13).

For a moment, let us think of learning as an object – an acquisition metaphor, in Sfard's terms (Sfard, 1998). Many objects can be broken with greater ease than was required to make them. If we think of learning as a very basic object – let us imagine a stick – we can see how it can be broken and how difficult it might be to repair. The act of repairing it requires an additional tool (for example, glue). But is the comparison fair? How did education become a stick? Granted, a stick in a forest is a dead piece of tree (and easy to snap via accidental footfall or with our bare hands); but a stick is also very useful if one has restricted eyesight or mobility problems, in which case it becomes supportive. It would take a good deal of deliberate violent effort to break a walking stick – to break something that is meant to support – but it can be done. However, if the object with which we compare education is more (aptly and realistically) complex – an engine, for example – then we might imagine a *variety* of opportunities for sabotage or damage. Indeed, we might opine that the more complicated and intricately structured the object happens to be, the more chances that exist for something to go wrong. One important difference between a stick and an engine being that it takes an expert – and more than someone with a tube of glue – to fix an engine or to fix broken learning.

Let us return to the interpersonal relational aspects of pedagogic development. And let us consider some examples. Fragile Learning might occur as the result of learners not receiving the respect that their individual societies had convinced them was their due. Or it

might be the result of age discrepancies: such learners might not be anxious because of their age (or not specifically), but advanced years nibble away at the fragile walls of their psychic apparatuses. Fragile Learners might experience anxieties that are internal and complex, which can be used, via the psychoanalytic means of projection, to appear to be attacks from other people. In this example, anxiety creates an internal threat which presents itself as a threat from the outside. Alternatively, Fragile Learning might be a consequence of learners having suffered illness, or having witnessed the after-effects of violence. With many Fragile Learners, it is important that something be blamed for an interruption to learning.

Indirectly, and via the use of alternative terminologies, some of the ideas behind Fragile Learning have been investigated by other writers. When Meyer and Land, for example, submit that ‘teaching is a complex and often challenging process, because learning is a complex and challenging process’ (Meyer & Land, 2006, p. xiv), they are not so much stating the obvious as drawing our attention to a central conundrum. The conundrum involves the unpredictability of the two or more people in the pedagogic transaction. The same authors continue:

When knowledge ceases to be troublesome, when students sail through the years of a degree programme without encountering challenge or experiencing conceptual difficulty, then it is likely that something valuable will have been lost. If knowledge is to have a transformative effect it probably should be troublesome, or at least troubling, but that does not mean it should be stressful or should provoke the kinds of anxiety, self-doubt and frustration that can lead students to give up. (Meyer & Land, 2006, p. xiv)

Personally, I would like to take this further and include the educators who must incorporate and contain both ‘the kinds of anxiety, self-doubt and frustration that can lead students to give up’ and the kinds of anxiety, self-doubt and frustration with which they themselves are faced on a regular basis.

Meyer and Land (2006, pp. xiv-xv) also refer to the fact that students ‘get stuck’ in their

learning – ‘at particular points in the curriculum whilst others grasp concepts with comparative ease’ – and ask what teachers can do ‘in relation to the design and teaching of their courses that might help students overcome such barriers to their learning’. Although *getting stuck* is but one means by which learning might become fragile, it is simple to infer that this is also a predicament that could happen to the educator. *Getting stuck* suggests (at the very least) a commitment to engaging with learning. And it is also a frightening phrase, when we think about it. If I say that it makes me think of sinking in educational quicksand, then I accept that more is said about me (and my projections) than about learning; but surely this is at least half of the point. If I am stuck, I have probably started something; however, I have become mired – and I am broken. The educator might ‘get stuck’ in both the *process* of learning (which in turn might halt professional development and snuff out creativity) and also in the reciprocal give-and-take of the pedagogic dynamic.

‘What makes particular areas of knowledge more troublesome than others,’ Meyer and Land continue (2006, p. xv), ‘and how might we help our students not to avoid the troublesomeness, but to feel more confident in coping with it, resolving it and moving on, with the confidence of expectation that there will be further troublesome episodes of learning along the way?’

Not many educators would dispute the importance of embracing the ‘troublesomeness’ at the heart of education (as opposed to our dwelling in atmospheres of boredom or self-importance). After all, it is at the junctions of beliefs and certainties – the clashes, the conflicts – where much of the good material is forged. As educators, we should *want* our students to embrace troublesomeness, but not only for their own benefit: by asking our students to embrace it, and by taking part in a symbiotic and reciprocal relationship with these students, we are enabled and obliged to embrace it ourselves. Thus, the relationship is enriched and augmented. An ‘emotional

storm' (Bion, 1979, p. 321) is brewed up, during which the educator acts as a lightning rod, silently and unconsciously absorbing the student's unconscious projections, and during which both parties take themselves (and, unconsciously, are taken) to the precarious brink that exists, just before fragility opens up a fissure in front of them.

Katheryn Ecclestone uses the word *fragile* but in a different way and with a different focus from how it is used in my own formulation. Ecclestone's (2008) view and that of Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) is that a 'fragile' learner is one 'at risk' or 'vulnerable': however, she is describing a learner *whose condition of susceptibility has already been discerned or can be viewed as a presentiment*. Ecclestone (2008) complains that

a new language of labelling is appearing throughout the education system from early years to universities. It is becoming commonplace to refer to 'vulnerable learners', 'at risk learners', students with 'fragile identities', 'the disaffected and disengaged', 'the hard to reach', people with 'fractured and fragmented lives', learners with 'complex needs' and 'low self-esteemers'. (Ecclestone, 2008)

In other words, the learner might exhibit traits or characteristics that would make him seem unlikely to be a high achiever... but only if he (and his pre-existing situation) is judged from the standpoint of what we tend to think of as a 'traditional student'. The author continues:

'Low self-esteem' is widely seen as the cause of social and educational difficulties while whole groups such as asylum seekers learning English, the children of asylum seekers, working class boys or 14-year-olds disaffected with school education, are deemed to 'suffer from low self-esteem' or to be 'emotionally fragile'. In a presentation to new staff in a pre-1992 university, the vice-chancellor informed us that 'our widening participation students come with a lot of emotional baggage from their previous educational experiences and this is a challenge to those of us used to traditional students'... The idea that more and more people are emotionally fragile now pervades all areas of life. (Ecclestone, 2008)

Our definitions undoubtedly share certain nuances, but *my* Fragile Learner is an individual

whose shortcomings are not so easy to predict. *My* Fragile Learner is not representative of a 'type' or of a 'group'. Indeed, as I see it, the Fragile Learner might have in-built strategies for self-defeat that are not only invisible or indiscernible to his or her educator or peers, but are also hidden *by and from himself or herself*. If it is true that 'education begins with the anxiety of dependency, helplessness, and fears of separation' (Britzman, 2009, p. 7), then the true wonder might not be that some learners are fragile, but that any learner is anything *but* fragile!

To look at it another way, we might think in terms of negatives and opposites. In *The Parallax View*, Slavoj Žižek refers to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) when he writes:

Kant introduced a key distinction between negative and indefinite judgment: the positive judgment 'the soul is mortal' can be negated in two ways: when a predicate is denied to the subject ('the soul is not mortal'), and when a non-predicate is affirmed ('the soul is non-mortal') – the difference is exactly the same as the one, known to every reader of Stephen King, between 'he is not dead' and 'he is un-dead.' (Žižek, 2006, p. 21)

Any Internet search will swiftly confirm that there are dozens of antonyms for the word *fragile*. One of these is the word *secure*; and by applying the idea behind Žižek's deconstruction (though not strictly), we see that the statement 'learning is fragile' can be synonymised in two different ways by using this antonym. Either 'learning is not secure' or 'learning is *insecure*'. And although these are mere semantic games, it is interesting to note the differences in interpretation. Learning can be structurally unsound; or learning itself might suffer moments of ontological instability, madness and/or anxiety, and the 'nameless dread' (Bion, 1967) that often accompanies the paralysis of indecision.

At the start of this paper I quoted Jacques Lacan in an epigram. 'What is it to teach, when what is to be taught has precisely to be taught not only to one who doesn't know, but to one who *can't* know?' (Lacan, 2014, p. 17). Here we see the concept of pedagogic insecurity at its most depressing and most exciting. Lacan

was a maddening master, and it is fair to say that he practised what he preached: his seminars lasted one year each and he expected his students to have done a good deal of work in preparation for each of his appearances. Lacan was popular; the lecture halls were packed full with students and French intellectuals. The sentence that I have quoted seems perfectly to encapsulate one essence of Fragile Learning: its jittery, anxiety-building *unknowability*. After all, if it is impossible for a student to ‘know’ (and by extension, to learn), then the practice of teaching is surely every bit as precarious as that of learning. Comparing teaching with the analytic supervision, Lacan adds that the experience is ‘where you bring along what you might know and where I would only enter the fray to impart the analogue of interpretation, namely, that addition by means of which something appears, which gives some meaning to what you believe you know and makes that which it’s possible to grasp beyond the limits of knowledge appear in a flash’ (Lacan, 2014, p. 17).

What is Anxiety?

For the purposes of this paper, anxiety is to be considered as a psychoanalytic function, by its psychoanalytic definition, and by its place in a psychoanalytic construct. In particular, I am keen to dispel the myth that ‘anxiety’ is a handy synonym for ‘fear’ or ‘stress’.¹ Any mention of anxiety in the work herein would seem to be in agreement with that in Charles Rycroft’s *The Innocence of Dreams*, in which it is written that ‘anxiety is not, properly speaking, a form of fear... but of vigilance; vigilance being that state of subliminal alertness with which we continuously scan our environment’ to ensure that we notice significant changes within it and can adapt to them by appropriate action’ (Rycroft, 1979, p. 103). On the other hand, the author notes that ‘fear is the emotion evoked by the appearance within our environment of something known to be

threatening and dangerous, while anxiety is the emotion evoked by the appearance within it of something unfamiliar and strange, something which seems to demand a response but to which we do not yet know what the response should be’ (*ibid.* p. 104). Anxiety, in addition, is

a state of mind in which we are poised for action but do not yet know how we should act, and we all experience it when a danger, a problem, a test situation, or an opportunity, has been encountered but its precise nature is not yet known – when we do not yet know what questions we shall have to answer in an examination, what kind of audience we are going to face when we appear on stage or give a lecture, whom we are going to meet at a gathering of strangers... how we shall manage if separated from familiar, protecting figures and are compelled to fend for ourselves. This last instance of anxiety has been honoured with a special name ‘separation anxiety’, since it is, in a sense, the opposite of other forms of anxiety, being evoked by the prospect of the disappearance of familiar objects rather than by the appearance of unfamiliar ones. (Rycroft, 1979, p. 104)

And the following – again, by Rycroft – is as good an unwitting description of Fragile Learning as any I have encountered. When the author writes that ‘intellectual activity seeks to master the unknown by understanding it but itself generates further uncertainty and anxiety by revealing unexpected pockets of uncertainty and ignorance in what was thought to be already understood’ (Rycroft, 1979, p. 105), he might have been describing contemporary learners in Higher Education – or their educators!

Anxiety is also a tool and can be used as a pedagogic implement. Rycroft calls anxiety ‘an emotion which we all experience intermittently throughout life, since both our environments and our bodies, our psychesomas, change in ways which confront us recurrently with unfamiliar situations which demand actions, reactions and readjustments the nature of which we cannot immediately define’ (Rycroft, 1979, p. 105). ‘Furthermore,’ he concludes, ‘it is an emotion which we can and

¹ It is also important to note that my work does not refer to anxiety *disorders*. At no point will I be referring to such explicitly clinical material.

do engender within ourselves by imagining, envisaging and rehearsing situations which we will, may or might encounter in the future... anxiety forms an unavoidable part of the human condition and plays a continuous or at least recurrent part in our waking life...' (*ibid.* p. 105).

'The concept of anxiety,' writes Donald Meltzer in *Sincerity*, 'has long held a central position in the psychoanalytic theory of personality functioning and disorders. And yet, much as it is talked of and written about, there is no consensus about it, and it is variously considered an affect, an ego state, transformed id energy, or a dynamism' (Meltzer, 1994, p. 3). He goes on to describe anxiety as a structural entity (*ibid.* p. 4) and then explains that anxiety takes two forms. '[T]he first form of anxiety, object (or objective) anxiety... it carries the implication of a persecutory origin. It is apparent that this earliest of anxieties produces phantasy in the ego far more germane to hell than death' (*ibid.* p. 8). The second form of anxiety is 'that arising from the ego's difficulty in predicting and controlling the internal world of organ tensions and their psychic representation (id)...'

Neither Rycroft nor Meltzer was the first to formulate his theories on the subject. Long before either was working in the field of psychoanalysis, Freud (1926) gives us an early full-length explication of anxiety, which is often cited to this day. 'If a mother is absent or has withdrawn her love from her child,' he writes (1926, p. 87), 'it is no longer sure of the satisfaction of its needs and is perhaps exposed to the most distressing feelings of tension.' His theory of anxiety having a root in childhood experience has been influential. Melanie Klein (1975, p. 25) writes: 'Freud put forward to begin with the hypothesis that anxiety arises out of a direct manifestation of libido'; and expands this opinion by stating that 'in young children it is unsatisfied libidinal excitation which turns into anxiety' and that 'the earliest content of anxiety is the infant's feeling of danger lest his need should not be satisfied because the mother is 'absent'' (*ibid.* p. 26). Klein (1975, p. 1) had previously written:

'In early infancy anxieties characteristic of psychosis arise which drive the ego to develop specific defence-mechanisms' – which made a link between anxiety and the systems of defence that we use in troublesome situations, or in the predictions of troublesome situations. She makes it clear in the later of these two papers that her belief is that 'anxiety is aroused by the danger which threatens the organism from the death instinct' and that 'anxiety has its origin in the fear of death' (Klein, 1975, p. 28). She adds: 'if we assume the existence of a death instinct, we must also assume that in the deepest layers of the mind there is a response to this instinct in the form of fear of annihilation of life... the danger arising from the inner working of the death instinct is the first cause of anxiety.' (*ibid.*: 29)

While it is not true to say that psychoanalysis and anxiety are inextricably linked (because both can exist without the other), there are notable overlaps. Copjec (2006, p. 104) informs us that: 'Anxiety is not only the feeling of suffocation that accompanies the encounter with being, but the felt need to escape it... Anxiety restrains the hand of the writer, preventing her from composing her thoughts; it stays the sword of Hamlet, preventing him from avenging his father.' She adds that: 'every social link is approachable as a response to or transformation of anxiety, the affect which... functions as a counterweight to existing social relations' (Copjec, 2006, p. 106). Slightly earlier, Woodhouse (1991, p.10) informs us that:

Anxiety is part of the human condition. Traced to their source, the roots of anxiety are to be found in the kind and quality of attachments in early infancy. Chaotic and threatening feelings within the infant can be rendered more manageable by the mother's intuitive responses... Derived from mother-child interaction – that is, a function of relatedness – and with causal connections progressively rendered more complex by later experience, our internal worlds come to be characterised by feelings and emotions attached to figures both succouring and frustrating, benign and destructive. 'Good' and 'bad' are experienced as incompatible and mutually exclusive, so that what began as a unitary system is now divided; internal conflict ensues... It determines the way we feel about ourselves and interpret our experience; it influences our interaction with others. Thus anxiety and

its management does much to shape our lives and our relationships. (Woodhouse, 1991, p.10)

Meltzer again, this time in *The Kleinian Development Part I*, says that Freud ‘never came to view anxiety as an affect, but saw it at first as a transformation of impulse, and then later, as a signal and therefore a type of internal information. Even when he passed on to a broader consideration of mental pain, it was tied to the concept of cathexis and thus with excessive accretions of stimuli.’ Whereas, seemingly proud that he can offer his learners a *period* of anxiety, Lacan contextualises the subject with reference to his own work: ‘Anxiety is very precisely the meeting point where everything from my previous disquisition is lying in wait for you’ (Lacan, 2014, p. 3). Or: ‘Everyone knows that projecting the *I* onto the inroad to anxiety has for some time been the ambition of a philosophy that is termed *existentialist*,’ he also states (Lacan, 2014, p. 7). Lacan’s contribution to the study of the subject cannot be downplayed. When he asks: ‘What is anxiety?’ (Lacan, 2014, p. 14), we can briefly imagine that we will finally get an answer to the question. But of course, our instructor being Lacan (and our overall topic being Fragile Learning), the best we can hope for is to be seduced by the promise of easy-assembly instructions and then dismayed that the manual is actually an intricate roadmap for a city that we do not recognise or want to visit. ‘We’ve ruled out the idea that it might be an emotion,’ Lacan continues (*ibid*, p. 14). ‘To introduce it, I will say that it’s an affect.’ Introducing Freud’s *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, Lacan writes: ‘When we do go into this text, you shall see very well what there is to be seen as regards anxiety, namely, that there isn’t any safety net. When anxiety is at issue, each piece of the mesh, so to speak, only carries any meaning in so far as it leaves empty the space where anxiety lies’ (Lacan, 2014, p. 9). This does not so much clear up the problem as remind us that a problem exists. ‘In the disquisition of *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, everything is spoken about, thank goodness, except anxiety. Does this

mean that it may not be spoken about? Going without a safety net evokes the tightrope walker. My only rope is the title, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*. It leaps, if I may say so, to one’s understanding that these three terms do not sit at the same level’ (*ibid*. p. 9). ‘Indeed, the question,’ Lacan suggests,

is rather one of explaining how we can speak about anxiety when we subsume under this same category experiences as diverse as . . . para-normal anxiety, or even frankly pathological anxiety, which can seize hold of us at such moments, we being ourselves subjects of an experience that is more or less psychopathologically locatable – the anxiety we’re faced with in our neurotics, the everyday material of our experience – and also the anxiety we can describe and localize at the level of the principle of an experience that is more on the fringes for us, that of the pervert, for example, indeed that of the psychotic. (Lacan, 2014, p. 18).

Lacan states that anxiety is directly related to the presence of the Other. ‘In analysis, there is something that stands prior to everything we can elaborate or understand. I shall call this the presence of the Other . . . The Other is there. It’s on this path and with the same intention that we meet the indication I’ve already given you concerning something that goes much farther still, namely, anxiety’ (Lacan, 2014, p. 22). ‘. . .I’m dealing in the most certain and articulated way with the Other as consciousness. The Other is the one who sees me. . . The Other concerns my desire to the extent of what he lacks and to the extent that he doesn’t know. It’s at the level of what he lacks, and at the level of him not knowing, that I’m concerned in the most prominent way, because there’s no other path for me to find what I lack as object of my desire’ (Lacan, 2014, p. 23).

Seemingly in (no-doubt temporary) agreement with Meltzer, Lacan is more than helpful when he also avers that anxiety has a structure and that it is framed: ‘*the dreadful, the shady, the disturbing*... presents itself through little windows. The field of anxiety is situated as something framed’ (Lacan, 2014, p. 75, italics in original). But how so? ‘Now, a mirror doesn’t stretch out to infinity,’ he instructs us (Lacan, 2014, p. 72).

It has limits... This mirror allows the subject to see something from a point located somewhere within the space of the mirror, a point that isn't directly perceivable for him. In other words, I don't necessarily see my eye in the mirror, even if the mirror is helping me to perceive something that I wouldn't see otherwise. What I mean by this is that the first thing to be put forward concerning the structure of anxiety – and which you always neglect in the observations because you're fascinated by the content of the mirror and you forget its limits – is that anxiety is framed. (Lacan, 2014, p. 72)

Here is a question. Is there not something delicious – something *exciting*, something *perilous* – about this framing of our anxiety? Think back to when we were young. A very early equivalent of the mirror example is the anxious *frisson* that accompanies a childhood game of hide-and-seek. For the one who hides, the *ostensible* aim of the game is to remain hidden for as long as possible; the *latent* aim of the game, however, is to be *found* – an ambition that works in a largely unconscious manner (but not entirely). From the seeker's point of view, the ambition is both in the chasing and the apprehending, of course; but from the hider's point of view, the goal is to remain undiscovered *for just the right time*. As Lacan writes elsewhere in the same volume, 'absence is also the possibility of an appearance, which is controlled by a presence that lies elsewhere. This presence controls it very closely, but it does so from a site that is ungraspable for the subject' (Lacan, 2014, p. 45). In a game of hide-and-seek (and indeed in chess, mentioned above), there is likely to be a moment in which one of the two parties understands that he or she has lost. But there is also a moment – just *before the moment of comprehension* that s/he has lost – when s/he grasps that s/he might or might not lose. It is precisely *this* moment – the moment when s/he sees the seeker approaching and believes that s/he *might* be found (but it is not certain); or the moment when his opponent has gained a pre-regicidal advantage but has *not yet said the word Checkmate* – that is the moment of *framed anxiety*.

Psychoanalysis itself is a matter of reframing – seeing the familiar in a new way, from a new

angle – and so is education. It might be that we reframe an area of absence (in our understanding, for instance); it might be that we use a mirror to view an image in which our own eyes and face cannot be viewed (after Lacan, above). The permutations are endless; but they will share anxiety as a contributory factor – the anxiety that has no specific cause, but which might be sometimes resolved, in hindsight, as having been associated with a fear of solitude, a fear of misunderstanding, a fear of ridicule or self-ridicule, a fear of completion or of not being able to complete. Re-framing might also occur as the result of co-creating the *problem* (or task) in pedagogic interactions: co-creating the problem as opposed to co-creating the solution. For example, the educator sets a task, but it might be the educator and the Fragile Learner who reframe the problem and thereby co-create a methodology by which to solve it. Apart from the original setting of the task, each of the following steps might be pregnant with anxieties, because neither party knows what will follow.

Siân Bayne's work on online identities is pertinent here. During the process of co-creating a task (and thereby reframing the experience and possibly the pedagogic relationship), anxiety might derive from 'the fear of *loss of control* through the modes in which identities are expressed online' and the interesting concept of 'self-betrayal' (Bayne, 2005, p. 31). In the sense that both of these concerns (the fear of loss of control and the fear of self-betrayal) are theoretical concepts, we might say that anxiety is their driver. Anxiety is used in this submission as an awareness of discomfort relating to something that one cannot identify. Both the loss of control and the self-betrayal pertain to absence, to a removal or a deduction from what had been the whole. This is true even if the control had never been truly in place to begin with: the Fragile Learner had *assumed himself* to be in control. The Fragile Learner is afraid of what has *not* happened – and of what *cannot* be imagined. Alternatively, the source of anxiety might be divided between a fear of *personally* being seen and a fear of *not* being seen, as discussed below.

Far from being something to be avoided, anxiety is impossible to steer away from; arguably, it is at the root of all learning and can be employed strategically as part of the learning process. We can use the imagined presence of anxiety – what we believe will be present in our learners because it happens to be present within us – and make the education that we co-create both troublesome and conflictual. During the pedagogic interaction, both parties must expect – no, *demand* – to be destroyed and then recreated.

Reasons to be Fragile

If something can be created, it can be destroyed; however, it cannot be *uncreated*, which suggests a disappearance of that which had been created – a vanishing – or at the very least, a reduction back down to the original ingredients in tidy piles, whatever they might be. Even when something breaks, there is a good chance that we can see what it had been in its complete but fragile state.

Fragile Learning is not dependent on learners who might be *supposed* to be vulnerable or at-risk. Some of the barriers to learning that Fragile Learners face are external, and considered to be not of their own making. They are impediments that have been put in the way of their education, either with malice aforethought or in ignorance or error. *Some* of these obstacles, however, are localised and internal. They are created in the Fragile Learner's mind; they are of his or her own creation, though often they are not recognised as such, and the learner might blame other people or other situations for the failure to learn. Full-time students who have jobs (for example) might blame the difficulties that they have with their studies on an overbearing educator, a lazy or absent educator, on a lack of direction or on *too much* direction. And the same could be said of students with childcare responsibilities – or students who return to their families for the purpose of studying, and the complex dynamics that this introduces. As Ecclestone notes:

other factors in their lives such as family support, or work circumstances, as well as their own beliefs and feelings about learning, play a proportionately greater role for better or worse... Sometimes these factors combine with the teacher's efforts and make a significant difference. At other times they undermine teachers' and students' efforts to improved learning, by questioning confidence or preventing students from attending the class regularly. (Ecclestone, 2010, p. 152)

While we are discussing the subject of learners and home-life complications, Thomas and Quinn are also instructive, particularly on the issue of first generation entry into the university system. 'Parental education affects attitudes towards HE,' they write (Thomas and Quinn, 2007, p. 98). Furthermore, the experiences of one's parents' education might influence

the process of deciding to apply and enter higher education, transition, learning and teaching, social engagement and integration, and the decision to leave higher education. At all of these stages in the students' lifecycle, parents of first generation entrants can be perceived as supportive of their students, but the support tends to be non-directive and non-prescriptive. (Thomas and Quinn, 2007, p. 98)

The same authors commented on a 'lack of confidence about academic abilities and genuine academic struggle [that] were often accompanied by challenging circumstances, such as family responsibilities, concern about money, high levels of part-time employment and/or a significant commute to attend lectures and seminars' (Thomas and Quinn, 2007, p. 99). And on the topic of the breaking point, when the pedagogic adventure has proved too much and the learner has decided to move on, they note that:

students did not identify a single factor that prompted them to leave, but rather it was the combination of circumstances and the lack of alternative options that were open to them. Many of these students felt that they had to decide to stay or leave, rather than to negotiate a change in their situation... students left (and sometimes applied to re-enter) HE, rather than switching to a part-time mode of study, changing their programme of study, taking a semester out for extenuating circumstances or transferring to another institution. Students with access to greater social and cultural capital, which

can be understood as more knowledge of the higher education system, are more likely to have negotiated one or more of these alternatives if they needed to. (Thomas & Quinn, 2007, p. 99)

With the road maps for most of our lives having been drafted during our childhood, it will not seem odd to surmise that the origins of a certain predilection towards fragility might lie in childhood as well. Let us, for example, take the example of Hannah (in Reay & William, 1999). Hannah is an eleven year-old schoolchild, worried about tests because of her difficulties with spelling and the times tables: she is worried that she will be reduced to 'a nothing' by examination. Although my conception of Fragile Learning would veer away from 'types' as such, we might nonetheless ask if there is any kind of typicality (or trend) to Hannah's experience. *Is this experience typical?* This is not the place to suggest that other schoolchildren, of approximate ages and of years either side, feel similar anxieties; but we might surmise, hypothetically, what Hannah – or a very similar learner, with similar concerns – might face if she reaches university.

Let us compound matters by providing the adult Hannah with an educator who means well but is not in control of his or her material. John Hattie tells us that 'Students who are taught by expert teachers exhibit an understanding of the concepts targeted in the instruction that is more coherent and at a higher level of abstraction than the understanding achieved by students in classes taught by experienced, but not expert, teachers' (Hattie, 2012, p. 30). Gordon Stobart would seem to concur: 'Expert learning needs expert teachers, and to become expert teachers we need to be expert learners ourselves... As in other professions, teaching expertise is the product of using experience to develop powerful frameworks in which to make sense of both familiar and unfamiliar information' (Stobart, 2014, p. 14). Or alternatively, our Fragile Learner might meet the situation that Martin Stanton describes (at book length!):

Education is one of those bad jokes that never seem to end. Few seem to have the courage to get up and leave.

It retrenches its ground annually. Abandons its claims to produce enlightened human beings and opts instead for administrators and technocrats. Those trained for special social roles rather than general chores like life. Each layer in the educational hierarchy then evolves a unique reactionary style of administering through its own specific difficulties. It preserves its own idiosyncrasies... Why get excited by subjects which seem to have died in the minds of the authorities a long time ago? (Stanton, 1983, p. 85)

If the subject is specifically *online* Fragile Learning, then it is possible that the problem is not only the gargantuan scale of what a user perceives when contemplating the Internet; the problem is his or her own tiny contribution to an entity so vast. Or let us think about the Fragile Learner who is missing some crucial tools? For example, what if the ability to *reflect* has never been developed or has been allowed to wither? As lifewide learners will agree, reflection provides an opportunity to make sense of an experience, and it can indicate how to handle a similar situation more appropriately another time, thereby minimising the chances for future anxiety (because what had been unknown can now be predicted). But what if the learner does not possess the skills for reflection? Boud *et al* (1985) defined three key stages of reflection in learning: first the need to return to the experience, then to consider one's feeling using an audit of positive and obstructive elements, then the re-evaluation of the experiences in order to find association, integration, and appropriation. If the Fragile Learner is without the skills to undertake any one of these steps, then reflection becomes all-but a meaningless term.

Similar debates might be entered into with respect to any of the following factors in Fragile Learning: the speed of teaching and learning; the uncertainty, the risks; the balances and equities; the ambiguities and identities; and the orders and authorities of Higher Education. Poor communication skills are bad for the learner (inevitably); but ironically (perhaps) an educator's poor communication skills also lead to a poor experience for the educator as well. Learning involves high expectations and clear goals; it needs motivation and strong

mental frameworks – for every one of the parties involved and not only the student. Where Meyer and Land (2006, p.22) suggest that learning involves the occupation of a liminal space during the process of mastery of a threshold concept, I submit that this is true for both the student *and* the educator – or to put it another way, for *both* Fragile Learners in the transaction.

It becomes a matter of trust. Teaching *is* a form of trust, after all: trust in oneself (the belief in one's intellectual stamina and one's ability to get the job done); also trust in the unconscious, which is perhaps the biggest daredevil leap of all. What I do when I begin a teaching session is alert the back of my head that there will be work to do in the future (and probably the near future); that it is time to start forging links in the chain, but to keep it quiet for the moment. Furthermore (and again, as an educator), I am aware that the student unconsciously might be considering any of the following questions. Is a good educator teaching me? Is a good educator teaching me how to think? Is a good educator teaching me to think at all? Is a good educator teaching me that I do not think enough? Is a good educator teaching me that I do not think *well* enough? Or is my educator a bad educator? Or am I a bad student?

This is an example of splitting. Splitting creates instability in relationships because one person can be viewed as either personified virtue or personified vice at different times, depending on whether they gratify the subject's needs or frustrates them. It is a common defence mechanism that invites the subject to believe that an individual's motivations and actions are *entirely bad* or *entirely good*.

Is the question, then, one of knowing when to compromise? Should we attempt to find a space in the middle? *Should* we compromise? Sometimes, the very act of compromising is the sound wave that breaks the fragile glass. 'Nothing structures the psychic life of humans,' writes C. Fred Alford, 'more than the need to turn our aggression inward, doing violence to ourselves so we might live with others' (Alford, 1998, p. 61). Although Alford's

contention is not specific to the learning process, it is easy to adapt it to the latter's purposes. The permutations for what comprises Fragile Learning are infinite. Some of our learners (for example) are *obliged* to study, either under the cosh of parental or peer pressure—or are engaged on a programme of learning at the behest of the organisation for which they work. Such learners, of course, might be fragile: they might not *want* the space in their intellectual apparatus so comprehensively filled—and in this circumstance, they might seek out a reason not to be 'bullied' by the pedagogy with which we as educators seek to impregnate them. In which case, perhaps the consideration of Fragile Learning is also a consideration of ethics.

Conclusion

This paper is about barriers to learning. In *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, Reber defines *barrier* as: 'Any impediment or block preventing an organism from reaching its goal. Although the barrier is often physical it is not improper to refer to barriers which result from an individual's emotional or mental limitations or, more metaphorically, those which are of purely psychological origins' (Reber, 1985, p. 82). These words, I feel, some up my formulation of the Fragile Learner.

If anxiety is an important part of the education process, what would the opposite situation look like? Perhaps the opposite would consist of learners entirely free of anxiety. Paradoxically, this would seem to suggest Fragile Learning as well: the possibility for drop-out and failure is surely high. One factor that helps to create learning is the risk of failure. It is in the spaces between complacency and terror – these spaces marked by a psychoanalytically-defined object-free anxiety – that the richer, deeper learning can be said to take place. Perhaps it is the very possibility of fragility that opens the gap that allows the deeper learning to take place; and perhaps the moment of breaking is the moment of making – of education-making, that is to say.

There is a type of learner (and a type of educator) who embraces the comfortable and

longs for the familiar. In the pedagogic relationship between these two, there exists the understanding that Higher Education is basically a slightly-more-grown-up version of school; that any material relating to cognitive challenge will appear late in the syllabus (if it appears at all). Fragile Learners are not necessarily students in institutions of Higher Education, as we have discussed; nor must they be students of an academic or practical subject. We as educators are also Fragile Learners: or at least, if we are to develop our practice, we are Fragile Learners. Those among our number who show no doubt in their work are those whose teaching has not evolved – possibly for years or decades. The imperative to experiment and to fail from time to time is the best possible spur to invention and evolution. We can destroy and we can re-create; but equally, we can *be* destroyed and we can *be* re-created. When we talk of barriers to learning, we should probably remember that barriers are sometimes erected for our own good, for our protection; they stop us entering a dangerous area. Alternatively, a barrier might be put in place in order to prevent us from seeing something that we have been told that we must not see. As an example of the latter, the ribbon that designates a crime scene springs to mind: a tokenistic boundary-assertion if ever there was one, the ribbon would be insufficient a deterrent to anyone was genuinely keen to enter

(for whatever reason). The barrier appeals to our intermingled senses of wilful naivete, self-protection and paramnesiac blindness.

The moment of revelation is not a moment at all. It is more akin to the oscillation between the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive positions. Or to put it another way, the so-called ‘moment’ of revelation is apt to appear and disappear: the joy of acceptance is only made the sweeter by the unconscious understanding that it might leave you while you take the next breath; and similarly, the seeking is as satisfying as the apprehending. And if we accept this, perhaps we can accept that the relevant question is not about how we might reduce the probability of fragility, but of why we would want to do so. But in this moment of completion, however, allow me to stick with the first of these questions.

How can we reduce the probability of fragility? We can emphasise an approach of incremental learning. Of our learners we can expect more and challenge more. We can encourage deep learning approaches and find (or create) ways to motivate those who do not seem engaged. Even with entry requirements in place, students of a very wide range of abilities might be brought together in Higher Education. But perhaps, when all is said and done, it is a case of: *once a Fragile Learner, always a Fragile Learner.*

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