

'Free Association:'

A Technical Principle or Model for Psychoanalytic Education?¹

Michael Guy Thompson, PhD

I would like to begin this essay with a dogmatic statement that is intended solely for the sake of discussion and, hopefully, not to alienate my many friends who teach in either psychoanalytic or academic institutions. I know that many of them are even involved in training psychoanalysts in universities and that they probably owe a great deal to such institutions and are understandably grateful for the education that they obtained from that experience. Others who are not involved in academia as such may be associated with free-standing psychoanalytic institutes that are nevertheless modeled on academic education and, for that reason, you may feel identified (at least in principle) with the academic model of education.

Though my psychoanalytic training was not at a university, I was educated, like everyone else, at a university in my undergraduate education and, like many, obtained a PhD in psychology at a graduate institute. So my experience is not that alien to yours, though I confess I sometimes wonder if I have lost my memory of having traveled here from another galaxy, when I realize how out-of-step I feel when I have the occasion to teach at a graduate school, which I do now and then, in California. Be that as it may, I believe that psychoanalytic education of some sort belongs in academic institutions, even if I am about to share with you my reservations about conceiving psychoanalytic training along academic lines.

What I wish to explore isn't the pros and cons of academic education but rather psychoanalytic training and the relationship between the technique of free association and the process of becoming a psychoanalyst. Having said that, I shall preface my remarks with a statement that I hope will put my sentiments into perspective. That statement is:

The academic model of education is ill-suited to train and educate people to become psychoanalysts.

¹ *Psychologist Psychoanalyst*, Vol. 20, No. 2. Spring 2000 (pp. 34-39)

Why do I say this? The first reason is perhaps the most obvious one, because *psychoanalysts are essentially concerned with the way human beings treat each other*. Psychoanalysts are human beings who help others come into their own by treating them as they would like to be treated themselves, with a modicum of respect, compassion, and honesty. After all, their patients are people who are simply struggling to survive in a difficult world by trying to come to terms with who they are while endeavoring to get along with others the best they can. This sounds simple enough, so I probably haven't said anything thus far that anyone would necessarily object to, though I am aware that what I am saying could be said another way, one that would place more emphasis on other aspects of the treatment experience that arises in the course of it, such as for example relief from mental anguish, the critique of one's fantasy life, increasing one's capacity to love, resolution of inner conflicts, making the unconscious conscious, and so on.

Such agendas are nevertheless less likely to succeed if the analyst reduces the cause of a patient's suffering to some "condition" or other that entails a lot of know-how and expertise in order to "treat" it effectively. Psychology programs in universities, for example, assume that students can learn how to be therapists by studying it in books. This, after all, is fundamental to academic education: a tautology, as it were. One reads the theory and what others claim to know about its application in the treatment, and then is evaluated on how well the material has been absorbed before finally being permitted to treat a patient oneself.

Now I'm going to add something that you may feel is even more provocative than what I said a moment ago, viz: I don't believe that this way of preparing to be a psychoanalyst is feasible. That's right; I'm not suggesting that it is a less "desirable" way of training to be a psychoanalyst, or even a more "impoverished" way, but that it is *not even possible to become a psychoanalyst by this method*. Though some people indeed become psychoanalysts in this fashion - and many of them become exemplary analysts who have contributed immeasurably to the field - the *becoming* of the psychoanalyst they have become has nothing to do with the academic component of their education. Let me explain what I mean by this apparently absurd statement.

The basis of my argument is based on a simple observation, yet one that many educators seem to have ignored in spite of having noted this observation themselves. That observation is:

We learn about human misery from our own suffering, and we learn to relieve it by coming to terms with the suffering that we have experienced, and continue to experience every day of our lives.

Training in psychoanalysis should be concerned with helping students get in touch with the roots of their suffering, by devoting themselves to the practical task of alleviating that suffering, from a psychoanalytic perspective. Once they have managed to do this they will have obtained the necessary authority to help other people with such a task, the nature of which they will have experienced first-hand. Why are academic institutions ill-equipped to provide the rudiments of this experience? Indeed, why are psychoanalytic institutes, which are modeled on academic education, not as suited for this form of education as they once were? On the other hand, by what criteria can one claim that psychoanalytic institutes are doing such a bad job of it when, after all, they have educated nearly all of the psychoanalysts who are practicing today? I would be the first to admit that the enormous success that the institution of psychoanalysis has enjoyed - until recently - can be explained by the fact that most psychoanalysts have been educated in psychoanalytic institutes. On the other hand, in some people's minds this also accounts for the terrible mess that psychoanalysis is currently facing, not only in the United States but, with the odd and perhaps momentary exception (Argentina), all over the world.

I'm not trying to lay all of psychoanalysis's woes at the doorstep of its training institutions - there is no question in my mind that recent developments in psychopharmacology partially account for its current malaise - but I have formed the opinion over the past quarter of a century that the untold numbers of exemplary psychoanalysts who have been educated in those very institutions and are eminent members of their field have achieved such renown, not *because* of their educational experience, but *in spite of it*. Moreover, it is they who have given their institutions the good name they enjoy - not the reverse.

Don't misunderstand me: the last thing I want is to do is engage in a tirade against psychoanalytic institutions. As I have already intimated, some of my best friends have been educated in them and I am a member of one myself. What I do wish to do is simply share my observations with you and the implications I have derived from them. The principal lesson that I have drawn from these observations is this: psychoanalytic *education* should mirror the experience of psychoanalytic *therapy*, yet the analytic training experience is, in virtually every case that I know, a fundamentally different animal from the experience of psychoanalysis itself. Thus, if psychoanalytic training is to be modeled on psychoanalysis, what feature of psychoanalysis is essential to one's experience of it?

Simply, psychoanalysis revolves around the experience of "free association." Without any agenda in mind and with no ostensible goal or plan, a space is created in the consulting room wherein analytic patients are free to roam around in, deepen, and gain access to previously unacknowledged dimensions of

their experience while confiding its mysteries to another person. This is a process that obviously invites and, in turn, depends on self-disclosure. Though there are currently many schools of psychoanalysis and each has a different notion about how such disclosures should be treated, the essential element that binds all the analytic schools together, no matter what their theoretical orientation may be, is that free association is an indispensable element of every analytic encounter. Whether one perceives in this experience the mutative element of analytic therapy or simply a method for gaining access to the unconscious, virtually all psychoanalytic practitioners employ free association in their treatment scheme, even if they disagree as to what free association is. What, then, is free association? Like so many of the technical rules that govern psychoanalytic technique (e.g., neutrality, abstinence, working-through, analysis of resistance, handling of the transference, confidentiality, the art of interpretation), there isn't a definitive description of what free association entails anywhere in the psychoanalytic literature, not even in Freud. Hence, it means different things to different people. Typically, Freud said next to nothing about free association so one may interpret the basis of its method and the rules of its application any number of ways, given the paucity of instruction that Freud offered about it. Therefore, all I can offer are highlights of what the irreducible elements of free association are for me, and how these elements inform the manner in which psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic candidates learn:

The process of self-disclosure to which the act of free association refers provides analytic patients the freedom to simply speak their own minds and to think their own thoughts, while making whatever sense of their experience they are able to, for whatever length of time it may take, for however long that may be.

One of the cardinal principles of psychoanalysis is that the analyst doesn't direct the treatment or coerce the patient to follow one course of action over another. Yet, upon entering a typical psychoanalytic institute, little of this atmosphere is in evidence. Indeed, everything that will be learned is more or less determined in advance. Students are told what is important to know and what isn't, and candidates are evaluated according to how well they have learned what the instructor thinks they should know. *My thesis is that this manner of instruction is more suited to academic education than to training analysts.* Whereas academic institutions are obliged to quantify the knowledge they profess to know and disseminate it accordingly, the training of psychoanalysts follows virtually the *opposite* direction. Analysts are taught - if this is the right

word - to "forget" what they think they know and, when this is accomplished, to learn what they can; not from this supervisor or that, but from the patients in their care.

Hence, the key to analytic education isn't the acquisition of knowledge, but the cultivation of naiveté.

So why isn't this the model that has been adopted for the way analysts are actually trained? In fact, analysts were trained this way in its infancy, before vast amounts of analytic literature had been accumulated, and before the psychoanalytic community was dominated by analysts who were determined to make psychoanalysis more acceptable to the scientific (read, "academic") community. Over time, as the ideas that began to emerge from analysts were collected, disseminated, and published, the institutes that followed in their wake were organized, initially in haphazard fashion but eventually in a direction that was specifically modeled on academic principles. Though institutes are quite small when compared to academic institutions and the size of their classes offers the potential for an aura of intimate informality, the attitude that is typically fostered is - forgive this generalization - antithetical to the way psychoanalysis is practiced.

Indeed, the atmosphere in analytic institutes isn't "free" but *compulsory*. If they possess a character, I would diagnose it as obsessional. There are rules for the sake of having them and the educational experience is run, not like a journey, but a tight ship, to borrow a Naval metaphor. This is apt, I believe, due to the air of military precision that one invariably encounters there, one that is diametrically opposed to the enigmatic nature of the typical treatment experience. Moreover, the comparison to obsessional character type is descriptive of how psychoanalytic treatment is taught. This observation is not news to you, I know. The analytic community's identification with the obsessional view of the world has been noted by numerous analysts over the better part of this century, none more eloquently than Hans Loewald (1980):

In psychoanalytic theory we are accustomed to think of the relationship between ego and reality as one of adjustment and adaptation. . . This conception of the relationship between ego and reality presupposes a fundamental antagonism that has to be bridged or overcome in order to make life in this reality possible. . . [Hence the psychoanalyst's conception of] culture and the external world are representative of . . . a hostile-defensive integration of reality. It is a concept of reality as it is most typically encountered in the obsessive character neurosis, a neurosis so common in our culture that is has been called the normal neurosis. (p. 30)

Loewald, like many analysts before him, recognized that the psychoanalytic conception of reality is essentially obsessional in nature, but I would go even further. I would add that *the way psychoanalytic training is conceived and conducted has inadvertently followed suit*. I have noted elsewhere (1994, pp. 205-212) that psychoanalysts seem drawn to fostering for themselves a culture that is obsessional in spirit. Often, the candidate in analytic training can be identified as an obsessional type: serious, determined to succeed, dedicated to a mission, self-sacrificing, humorless, resourceful, studious, ambitious. Indeed, many of the features that characterize psychoanalytic theory and writing are consistent with the obsessional type. The most obvious feature of this trait among analytic institutes is the rigid manner in which psychoanalysis is generally taught, and the way psychoanalysis itself is conceived. I'm not the first to suggest that it more closely approximates the preservation of Church doctrine than the open-ended exploration of a discipline that is, given its nature, impossible to define.²

The question is this: is there an alternative to the "tight-ship" model of training, one that more closely approximates the spirit in which psychoanalytic treatment is conceived? I believe there is, and I cannot think of a better example on which to base such a model than the free association method, adapted from a confidential treatment experience to a milieu environment in which candidates come together with a view to applying the instrument to which they have already been inured.

In 1998, at the invitation of a group of students who were seeking psychoanalytic training but were unsatisfied with the strictures of conventional psychoanalytic institutes, a group of colleagues and I formed a psychoanalytic *salon* in San Francisco for the purpose educating psychoanalysts in this fashion. We called it *Free Association*, a double entendre because it was not only a school that was devoted to helping students learn the free association method, but an organization that saw itself as an association of equals devoted to the free dissemination of ideas. The group included psychoanalysts, philosophers, historians, and other educators who had backgrounds in phenomenology or psychoanalysis or both, and who viewed psychoanalysis as a philosophy, in the Socratic sense of the term. In other words, rather than attempting to delineate the potential interface *between* philosophy and psychoanalysis, we saw psychoanalysis as inherently philosophical already, a form of philosophy that saw its roots in the ancient Socratic, sceptic, and Stoic philosophical traditions, when ethics was conceived as a therapy whose purpose was the relief of psychological suffering.

²For a recent example of how psychoanalytic institutes are typically organized, see Kirsner, 2000.

While our principal purpose was to train analysts, we believed that the conversation in which the fundamental issues of psychoanalysis occur should be situated in an historical context that not only takes into account the historical roots of psychoanalysis, but learns from those traditions (whether medical, philosophical, or religious) that, throughout history, have tackled the same problems that contemporary psychoanalysts are endeavoring to address. Moreover, we saw psychoanalysis as merely the most recent development in a long history of antecedents that were concerned with the relief of human suffering, one that has necessarily absorbed into itself the fruits of its pre-history while situating the lessons learned in a contemporary context.

Naturally, our curriculum didn't resemble the curricula of conventional analytic institutes, because we didn't have one. We specifically decided not to organize our seminars in conformity with curricula that adhered to an academic model, a model that, no matter how innovative or cutting-edge it imagines itself to be, is nevertheless interchangeable with the curriculum from any other psychoanalytic institute. This is hardly a model to engender original thinking. Instead, we tried to create an atmosphere in which students would be invited to grapple with the *unexpected*, *the unexplained*, and *the ambiguous*, by approximating to a considerable degree the experience of a typical psychoanalytic session. With no curriculum or course outlines to follow, we believed that students were more likely to approach the seminars with a sense of apprehension, fueled by an attitude of curiosity. Because students weren't pre-judiced with the comfort of reading assignments, we hoped they would be more likely to follow what was presented with an "emptied," which is to say, open state of mind.

The meetings were organized according to the predilections of the instructors who convened them, based on the vicissitudes of their professional interest, in other words, what happened to be of interest on the given day of their seminar. In lieu of a fixed, generalized curriculum which could be taught by any number of qualified instructors, the content of each seminar was derived from the unique and, by necessity unrepeatable, here-and-now experiences of the faculty who were involved with the program. If there was a bias, it was the more seasoned the analyst (or instructor), the better. Consequently, the education offered more closely approximated an apprenticeship or mentorship model than a more typical academic one, a model that is typical in art academies but virtually absent in conventional psychoanalytic institutes. This, it seemed to us, was the basis on which any of us could offer what we had to offer, so why pretend to be conveying knowledge that is presumed to be derived from "science" when the only thing that we knew with confidence was what we had ourselves *experienced*, that which moved us personally, and which by its nature was constantly evolving? By abandoning a dogma of literature that students were expected to

integrate into their education, seminars were conceived as a source of provocation, controversy, and inspiration for further, independent, study, a catalyst, as it were, to think for oneself.

A typical seminar may be devoted, for example, to the phenomenological method, the principles of intentionality, intersubjectivity, and self-disclosure, with a view to determining the origins of the free association method, including antecedents that could be traced to forms of meditation, the Christian mystics (such as Meister Eckhart), and the essays of Michel de Montaigne. Other seminars may be devoted to tracing the origins of the technical principles that guide psychoanalysts, by locating the origins of the rule of neutrality, for example, in the Ancient sceptics, or the rule of abstinence in German Romanticism, and so on. In other words, whatever the topic explored, the idea was to offer a depth to the concepts discussed that is typically lacking in psychoanalytic institutes which, with their inordinately narrow focus, treat methodology as if it was invented by the latest psychoanalytic guru. With an appreciation for the history and pre-history of psychoanalysis to call upon, we found that students are more likely to grasp the importance of history, for example, in principle, offering a framework from which the historical significance of their patients' lives could also be appreciated. History was conceived, not as a series of facts or events that are assessed in terms of their accuracy or chronology, but as a *living dimension* to everything one experiences in the present.

Because there is no agreement in the international psychoanalytic community as to what psychoanalysis is, we invited our candidates the opportunity to answer that question themselves, by virtue of their own experience and practice. Consequently, no certification was offered upon completion of training because we felt that the fate of such recognition necessarily resided in the hands of each student. Similarly, the criteria for acceptance into training was, like analysis, more or less self-selecting. Anyone was free to join the seminars if they wished, whether they intended to pursue analytic training or had other, more intellectual, agendas, with whomever they pleased, and seek supervision, relevant, with whomever they wished to, and so on. As to whether the patients they treated were invited to adopt the supine position or attend sessions so many times a week, was left to the discretion of the students and their patients.

Some have suggested that without discernible criteria on which to assess one's performance, there could be no acceptable standards with which to determine what students had learned, if anything. Others have protested that without even minimal requirements for graduation, one's education would become so unremittingly *laissez-faire* that there would be little incentive to improve oneself, via the ordeal of rigorous assessment.

I can only say in response to such objections that in my experience it doesn't seem to work that way. It is true that the notion of assessment would necessarily be compromised by such an educational schema, but our point of departure was that such standards are ultimately arbitrary and, so, ineffectual. Candidates are typically graduated because institutes have a commitment to graduating them, whether they have accomplished such and such in the interim or not. In fact, it would seem that completion of training — at any institute — is just as ambiguous a process as the termination of a typical analytic treatment. Each of us entertains different criteria for how treatments should be ended and when, and in retrospect it is never that obvious who has benefited and how much, or has not. Personally, I believe that treatment has effectively ended (whether we recognize it or not) when a patient has had enough. Similarly, education reaches its terminus when a student reaches a similar conclusion. In other words, *no one is in a position to certify psychoanalysts other than psychoanalysts themselves*, save in the most artificial, arbitrary manner. While I am perfectly aware that students typically crave certification and oftentimes demand it, it is also my observation that when no one offers to assess their performance such students are more liable to adopt even more demanding standards for themselves than they would permit someone else to.

This is the same principle, after all, that governs the termination of every treatment. We allow the patient's conscience to be his or her guide, no matter how developed or impoverished that patient's conscience may be. At the end of the day, a person's conscience is the only authority that counts, because it is the only authority, when all is said and done, that the analyst is able to call upon when alone in the consulting room with a patient.

Admittedly, the model I am proposing stands or falls on the principles of self-reliance, self-motivation, and an inordinate sense of personal responsibility. Many analysts today had no access to training institutes when they sought training and they were obliged to more or less train themselves. They got themselves into therapy, arranged for supervision and, if they were resourceful, gathered around themselves a group of peers with whom they could meet and share their experiences together. This is not the easiest way to become an analyst, to be sure, but it is no less effective than any other. Section I (psychoanalytic clinicians) of Division 39 (psychoanalysis) of the American Psychological Association was established on precisely this principle, viz., that there are many roads to Rome and each is just as valid, in principle, as the other. But whereas Section I nevertheless inclines toward conventional, institutional training if it is available, I doubt whether conventional psychoanalytic institutes are adequate to the task for which they were conceived, for the reasons I have just stated.

For those who pursue the more conventional psychoanalytic model, once an institute is created and the first class of candidates has graduated, the institute becomes a self-perpetuating organism. Even if the experience of that first group was fresh, vital, and alive, as succeeding groups of candidates are admitted and educated, the noose systematically tightens until it is only the shadow of how vital, open, and alive it was at its inception. We all know that the principal function of such institutes is not solely for the purpose of training future analysts, but to serve as a cash-cow for those same analysts once they have graduated. The politics of every psychoanalytic institute in the world revolves around who gets to be a training analyst and who doesn't, and who gets to teach those candidates, because the ones that get to enjoy an undeniable advantage over everyone else in their access to affluent and properly impressed patients. Once an institute comes into being, it is obliged to survive and to perpetuate itself, and this obligation insidiously compromises the selection of candidates to be trained, thereby corrupting the very process by which those candidate's analysts and supervisors are selected, and so on. The waters of therapeutic excellence become inexorably diluted so that those who do not make the cut will be excluded from "training analyst" status. Where has the educational integrity gone when the principal purpose of institutes is to increase the income and prestige of a handful of select individuals, whose connection with the real problems of the typical analytic patient is increasingly compromised?

These are only some of the reasons the Free Association experiment was conceived, as a compromise between a conventional institute with its undeniable ability to foster a sense of fellowship, and a self-directed model which imposes extraordinary self-discipline on the candidates who are able to manage it. I wish I could claim some originality for this model but, ironically, the credit for that would have to go to Freud, who thought of it first. What I have just described is more or less how analysts were trained in Vienna when the first circle of Freud's followers gathered around him. Institutes were subsequently formed years later in a variety of locations and followed parallel paths, which in turn developed alternative standards until they finally coalesced into what has become the contemporary psychoanalytic institute, modeled on the academic standard first fashioned in Berlin. From a scientific perspective it is argued that psychoanalytic training has improved and evolved over the years, and that the treatment instrument has also improved for the better. But if you reject the claim that psychoanalysis is a science — hard, soft, or otherwise — it could just as persuasively be argued with as much veracity that the task analysts have set themselves does *not* necessarily improve (like medical technology, for example) over time, with ever increasing newer and more effective discoveries on the horizon. If our principal concern is with *how human beings experience*

themselves and why, then this very process must be rooted in the discipline of self-discovery, beginning and ending with the fruits of one's personal self-examination.

I am not suggesting that we should do as Freud did because Freud got it right and we can't do it better. On the contrary, I am suggesting that we shouldn't ignore him as we have become prone to simply because he is no longer the latest fashion. There are other analytic schools besides Freud's that evolved along similar, non-academic, lines, far removed from the rarefied atmosphere of Vienna. Another example for this design was personally related to me by Otto Allen Will, Jr. (1998), who received his training from Harry Stack Sullivan and Frieda Fromm-Reichmann in this fashion, during the embryonic days of the Washington School of Psychiatry. By Will's account, contemporary analytic training today is a radical departure from the more relaxed, *laissez-faire* attitude that characterized Sullivan's milieu in the 1930's and 40's. But the influence to which I am most personally indebted was my own analytic training experience with R. D. Laing and his colleagues in London, at the Philadelphia Association. For Laing, it was imperative that students discover what psychoanalysis is about for themselves, taking into account other disciplines throughout history, East and West, that have sought to relieve human beings of the angst of simply being human. While Free Association has chartered its own course and is a product of the people who have taught there, it is also profoundly indebted to Sullivan's and Laing's respective experiments (The school of Jacques Lacan was founded on similar principles in Paris).

What Freud, Sullivan, and Laing shared in common was that *they founded their respective schools themselves*. They were extraordinary and original thinkers who possessed the charisma and wherewithal to collect around themselves students who wanted to learn from them. When they died their survivors created institutes in their name and, over time, they too grew into the "institutions" that they are today. Perhaps this is inevitable. It may be that the only way to preserve the psychoanalytic instrument is to periodically create it anew, by forming new institutes and dismantling the old, permitting successive generations of analysts to discover its uncanny uniqueness for themselves.

This is what we decided to do at Free Association from the outset. There would be no line of succession, no hierarchy of good students demarcated from the bad ones, separated by the promise of spoils that, by their nature, engender competition, envy, jealousy, unbridled ambition. Our aim was to train the group of students we had collected around ourselves, however long that might entail, and disband that moment in history when it was completed. Those who graduated were free to found their own schools, or join others, but their fate, like the patient who has finished analysis, would rest in their hands.

I know that ours is a necessarily isolating profession and that we bear this alienation to degrees that we may not have expected, and at times we no doubt wish it were otherwise. If this is the case, then it is only prudent to remain vigilant against our inherently corrupting, all-too human nature, wherever and whenever it arises, however tempting it may be to capitulate to our incurable sense of loneliness, by compromising our best efforts to be true to ourselves.

March 28, 2014

References

- Kirsner, D. (2000) *Unfree Associations: Inside Psychoanalytic Institutes*. London: Process Press.
- Loewald, H. (1980) *Papers on Psycho-Analysis*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Thompson, M. G. (1994) *The Truth About Freud's Technique: The Encounter With The Real*. New York: New York University Press.
- Thompson, M. G. and Thompson, S. (1998) Interview with Dr. Otto Allen Will, Jr. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*. Volume 34, No. 2: April, 1998.