

On teaching Winnicott: the charms and challenges of Winnicott's concepts

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I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.

Albert Einstein

ABSTRACT

This article examines the responses of students on being introduced to several of Winnicott's major concepts: transitional space, illusion, good enough mothering, true and false self. Building on Ogden's idea that Winnicott's style of writing and form of presentation is inseparable from the ideas he wishes to convey, this article shows how students evolved a developmental framework for themselves with the aid of Winnicott's theory. The new theory itself becomes a transitional object for further use and elaboration. Various examples of student's responses to the paper on transitional phenomena are cited, in addition to an examination of their responses to the application of transitional theory to organisations.

Keywords: teaching, Winnicott, developmental frame, transitional phenomena, organisations.

Introduction

To my mind, Winnicott's writings present a challenge and puzzle to the reader. The intimate yet rather casual writing style is easy on the eye. The well-chosen, short case vignettes are illuminating and captivating. Yet the beguiling simplicity of his presentation can be somewhat deceptive. The immediacy of his style of writing understates the originality of the concepts he attempts to convey.

Take, for example, this quotation:

The transitional phenomena represent the early stages of the use of illusion, without which there is no meaning for the human being in the idea of a relationship with an object that is perceived by others as external to that being. (Winnicott, 1971, p. 112)

What does such a quotation mean? Students certainly felt mystified by the density of these ideas and often complained about the difficulty of grasping his ideas. They grappled with, rather than understood, what he was saying. Yet they remained intrigued and curious and determined to delve further.

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Fromm (2012) points out that Winnicott is the master theorist of “the unnoticed obvious”. He was concerned with simple questions such as what in the baby’s experience builds up a sense of continuity of being? What happens to the image of the mother when separations occur early in childhood? Is it sustainable? What happens if separations occur whilst the infant is not yet psychically mature enough to understand a notion of separation? Where is the separation lodged in the soma–psyche constellation and what implications do such breaks in continuity have for its further development?

Winnicott, true to form, did attempt to answer these questions and he did so from a particular perspective. He felt there were phenomena which he could not explain within a Kleinian methodology and so a paradigm shift was necessary. He was out to build his own theory which was distinct from Kleinian theory with its emphasis on innate aggression, envy, and the death drive. His theory was to lay more emphasis on “the environmental mother” rather than internal phantasy and in so doing open up the “intermediate area” as a proper field of investigation.

Ogden (2001), in a very thoughtful paper, proposes that one should treat Winnicott’s papers as a form of poetic prose; as meditations or musings to be read out loud. If one reads some of the sentences one notices the musical qualities, the cadences, the pauses, and how they strike the ear. Winnicott sometimes makes little asides as if he were letting you in on a secret. These are all part of his device, content, and style interweaving inseparably in both their intention and their meaning. Ogden (2001) puts it in a nutshell when he states: “He [Winnicott] uses language to create experiences in reading, that are inseparable from the ideas he is presenting, or more accurately, is playing with”.

They are, I think, partly the experience of his unconscious in dialogue with the reader’s own unconscious. Nevertheless, I do not think Winnicott intentionally plotted that readers should have these experiences. They are written as though Winnicott were telling himself a story and the reader is let in to the storytelling.

So what is it that Winnicott is playing with and what sorts of imaginative response does he evoke in a reader? What is his purpose? In his paper on transitional phenomena, Winnicott made it clear that what he was aiming to describe was not a taxonomy of transitional objects. “Whereas the thing I am referring to is universal and has infinite variety” (Winnicott, 1971, p. xii). He meant the pattern of development rather than the objects themselves as a field of study. It is in that spirit of scientific enquiry that he grappled, noticing that all faces may belong to the same class of objects, though if you look at them closely, they are all different. To carry on further with his spirit of scientific enquiry, I should like to draw on some examples of the impact of Winnicott’s (1971) paper, “Transitional objects and transitional phenomena”, after being read by a group of our students. Each of the accounts presented here illustrates how a Winnicott text conjures up some form of corresponding imaginative experience in the student.

To give background context, the students I refer to were students between the ages of twenty-seven and sixty-nine, on a two-year part-time counselling and coaching/consultancy training course run along systems psychodynamic/psychoanalytic lines at the University of Utrecht. The purpose of the course is to apply psychodynamic concepts to organisational settings for the improvement of these systems. Content wise, a core concept running through the training is system psychodynamics. Students learn a methodology that takes into account unconscious factors that influence working practice.

The students on whose material I have drawn represent a cross section of students from different individual courses run over a period of ten years. Most of the students' native language was Dutch, although a lot of the course material is in English and most of the seminars are conducted in English.

I should mention some of the students had undergone various forms of psychotherapy themselves; a few had even been in psychoanalysis. But, for most students, this way of thinking about unconscious patterns and their impact on human behaviour in groups and organisations—broadly speaking The Tavistock Tradition—was a newish venture. These concepts were thus fresh to them.

Transitional objects

I introduced students to the idea that any mother, even a not especially good one, intuitively knows that giving her baby a teddy bear or security blanket to hold on to provides baby with some source of comfort; also most mothers realise that the baby and this object become inseparable and allow the baby this *little indulgence*. To anchor these concepts and make them alive, I would then ask students to break into small groups to discuss their own experiences with transitional objects. They could refer to either their own autobiographical memory of their security blankets as data, or those of their own children or other children they knew. I would ask them to note what had happened to the object in question over the course of time.

Some personal resonances

Example 1: space to have the space

One student, whom I shall call C, remarked that one of her children, her daughter of seventeen years, still resorted to thumb sucking, especially if she was distressed. This activity would soothe her. By contrast her other daughter's development had been normal. C recalled peeking into her daughter's bedroom when she was a baby to see if she was sleeping soundly, only to discover that all the teddy bears had been thrown out of her cot, as if she were in a form of protest. At the time it had considerably worried C as she didn't know what to make of it. C described the struggles she and her husband went through when her daughter was four or five years old in order

to wean her from having to use a pacifier to fall asleep. In the end, they were taking it in turns to stay at her bedside until she fell asleep, hoping to get her used to the idea of falling asleep without a pacifier. This new regime worked well for quite a while. Then suddenly, some time after, they found their daughter soundly asleep with her thumb in her mouth. She had never done this before and the parents decided to give it time. However, the daughter never fully outgrew the habit of thumb sucking.

This is an unusual example of the use of a transitional object in that the daughter uses a part of herself as a comforter. However, if we think of Winnicott's schema, he spells out the path of development of the infant starting with a stage of absolute dependence and moving to a state of relative independence. It begins with the relationship with the breast which is substituted by the thumb and moves on to the security blanket/teddy bear. The energy then gets diffused rather than concentrated over a wide variety of activities in the social realm. C realised that her daughter had got stuck and was using her thumb more as a comforter than as a true transitional object, another subtle distinction that Winnicott touches on. McDougall (1986), in her own elaboration of Winnicott's concepts, distinguishes between what she terms "transitory objects" as opposed to "transitional objects". Transitory objects give temporary relief but they do not give enduring holding in the way that a true transitional object will. It seems that the daughter's thumb sucking was used primarily to give her a feeling of calmness, thus her thumb was probably functioning more as a transitory object rather than as a true transitional object.

On a personal note, C found the idea of transitional objects to be a very emotional matter, one which touched on raw nerves. Thinking about it brought tears to her eyes. She said it came from her feeling of having been a forgotten child, as a middle child in a large family of ten children. She was one of the siblings taken for granted and her role was that of having to look after the younger ones. The idea of transitional objects made her recollect the loneliness of her position during these years. Nevertheless, despite the sadness evoked by these memories of aloneness in her separateness, she found the concept of transitional space to be both significant and useful. "It gave me the space for there to be a space which wasn't there before," was how she described it. C understood it to be about the actuality of the "space between" which "the cuddly" comes to represent. If the object does its work in a developmental sense, it will shore up the hole left by a mother's act of detachment. C felt the function of a transitional object as a stand-in for the breast was easy enough to grasp as a theoretical notion. However, mapping out just how a transitional object alleviates anxiety is understood by posing questions such as when it works and when it fails in its function, or what counts as a true transitional object. All required a far more focused process of observation, abstraction, comparison, and reflection. Learning to think of transitional space with this new conceptual paradigm gave C new tools to understand these phenomena.

Towards the end of the course, students have to counsel or coach a client and write up their case linking it to psychoanalytic concepts appropriate to the case. C had asked her client to do a drawing of himself before the coaching and one after its completion. The client depicted himself as rather rigid before the coaching, whereas after the coaching his drawing of himself was more free. He felt this transformation came about as a direct result of the coaching sessions. What he valued most of all was the method of holding a reflective space with minimal intrusion during the sessions. The client was grateful for the experience as he worked in an organisational setting that emphasised tangible results rather than reflective processes. C attributed to what was by now her internalised skill set of holding onto a “potential space” without arriving at premature conclusions, to her learning to work within the Winnicottian framework. I think this example illustrates how the concept of transitional space, which was taught early in the first year, was internalised, worked with, and applied over the remainder of the course. It also shows something of the complexity of a genuine engagement with Winnicott’s thinking and where this might take one.

Example 2: connection across a space

Another student, whom I shall refer to as U, responded to Winnicott’s paper by emphasising the connection between experiences. Whereas C had spoken about “the space to have a space”, emphasising the separateness between objects, U emphasised that transitional space had made her far more aware of “connectedness”. In her words: “You become connected to the feeling that you are always in some form of connection, whether you know it or not.” In particular, U was thinking of how mobile phones provide the illusion of a sense of security. The fact that they are there ready for use, whether one uses them or not, allows the illusion of being in perpetual connection. U then reflected how the virtual world could become either a transitional arena, or else form a barrier to any form of authentic contact. The mechanics of the concept of transitional space had given her a vocabulary with which to think through these thoughts. This had profound implications for her professional role. It made her realise that one is “there” in one’s role, both as the private and the public person. They do not necessarily have to meld and become “one”. There is always a space between the two. They can comfortably coexist alongside each other, though one may be drawing on one of the roles rather than the other at any given time, depending on the context.

This realisation gave U license to just be herself in her role without having to feel inadequate if she was drawing on both experiences whilst consulting. U also felt that embedded in the notion of transitional space was the underlying assumption of having to make do with a world that is less than perfect and situations that are less than perfect. Here I assume the breast universe represents the perfect world and the teddy bear world a making do with an imperfect substitute. U felt this attitude of acceptance of the presented world and herself as a less than perfect instrument gave her great freedom to feel

“good enough” about her work as a coach, knowing always that her interventions were “approximations” rather than fixed truths. She personally felt Winnicott’s concepts stood in stark contrast to Klein’s theories where she felt one was always striving for a perfect understanding or attunement which she found to be more superego-ish and persecutory.

These two student’s responses, when considered side by side, illustrate the dual nature of Winnicott’s formulation of transitional space: a space that enables separateness of the self whilst being in connection with the object. Separateness in connection and connection in separateness. It rests on those irresolvable paradoxes of which Winnicott was so fond, which he uses as a methodological device. They defy binary categories and linear thinking and they combine in a new order of higher structure. Thus what is, is other than what it is becoming.

Example 3: from transitional “objects” to transitional “space”

I would like to move to a poignant example of the understanding of the third space. When E cast her mind back to her early childhood (three to four years), she recalled the pressure in the household and the tensions of her parents’ unhappy relationship and their quarrels of an evening. Before falling asleep at night, in her imagination, fairies and elves would come by to pick her up. She found their company convivial and enjoyed herself with them. And within that warm happy state she would fall asleep. This was not an act of conscious intention. The magic state happened by itself. The elves came by themselves as it were, to play with her and to keep her company.

She was an energetic little girl who needed to get into a peaceful state of mind before falling asleep. She described it as the state where she let go of her daytime world and prepared to enter the unknown world of sleep. This in-between state did not have the pressure, tension, and anxiety of the daytime world bearing down on her. It was freer, lighter, funnier, easier, and friendlier.

Reflecting back on it as an adult she realised that this “buffer state” was a state of its own, with its distinctive characteristics and boundaries. The buffer state could hold and absorb reality without requiring her to act. This space had always been there. Only she did not have the words to describe it. This theory had given her tools and a language to describe these “in between” states.

This is an example that examines the transitional state as a state of its own rather than being about the objects. Imaginative reality is employed to create this state of mind. It is also about a playful reality, if one could call it that. The elves are figments of the imagination who transport E to a peaceful state of mind. Outside reality is softened and redefined through the use of these imaginal states of being. She plays with the externals and brings them closer to her inner world. It reminds me of what Winnicott says about playing: “In playing the child manipulates external phenomena in the service of the dream and invests chosen external phenomena with dream meaning and feeling”

(1971, p. 63). It is in the transitional arena that the external world and what I wish to call fantasy reality weld together.

Application of the transitional phenomena concept to organisations

One might rightly ask what do babies with transitional objects have in common with a workforce in an organisation and their management. After all, babies don't form groups with a purpose around their cuddly object. Winnicott's famous statement "there is no such thing as a baby" refers to the two-person unit entity and the developmental interactions between them. Yet a mother and a baby is the most rudimentary and original form of organisation, whereas an organisation, as we commonly think about it, is defined as a system of agreed roles delegated around a task. It is perhaps but marginally concerned with the development of independence.

These were precisely the kind of dilemmas students were engaged with in trying to find some common ground between transitional objects and their role in infantile development, and the application of these concepts to organisational settings.

One student, R, a highly placed change manager in a large international organisation, could see it was quite a leap in logic to move from Winnicott's paper on transitional objects to how a manager manages a task force in an organisation. Nevertheless there were some parallels. He understood that the transitional objects as fantasy objects containing the original parents, allowed one to "spare" the original parents from having to be killed off in fantasy. He himself had moved countries and studied overseas as a young man. Looking back, he realised that he had been driven to substitute his family system with another coherent system of relationships. He viewed a transitional space along a continuum, an extension of an original secure area to a new space one is beginning to inhabit. He grasped the idea of having to transport the original feelings of security to the new situation via some medium. Therein lay the magic.

R was an astute observer and had some very interesting reflections about his pet dog, Orion, who "used" a transitional object in the true meaning of the word. Orion was very attached to a blanket which he would tear into and bite. Particularly when either overexcited or frustrated at not getting food or attention he would bite into it. When Orion came back home after being boarded out at a kennel while his owners were on holiday, the first thing he would look for was his blanket. He would also urinate on it and bite holes in it. R felt this act of possessiveness, the making of a not-me object into mine, a me object, was an act of primitive oral possessiveness, the equivalent to possessing the breast. It met Winnicott's condition for an object to be deemed transitional. It stood for the breast or was the object of the first relationship while it was also the other. So it was neither an external object nor an internal object.

Thus based on R's personal experiences of having to re-establish safe boundaries in which to operate, and based on his observations of how his dog reacted in relation to his security blanket, R could extrapolate to the

metaphenomenon; namely how necessary a basic illusion of safety is in order to ensure psychological survival and further development early in life.

And it was not so different with change management psychodynamics and a team. Hence he posed the question of the kind of equivalents of transitional objects which a manager needs to provide a workforce within an organisation undergoing a transition. One of his ideas was that the change must not proceed too quickly. R had seen many teams hang on to action plans which might look obsolete and unrealistic to the change manager. However, he came to regard these action plans as having a containing developmental function much like the security blanket. They would be relinquished in the team's developmental time rather than the manager's time. On many occasions he had come across the phenomenon of his ideas of change being sidelined rather than implemented. It puzzled him. He began to see that in the systemic process of change in the team, the manager had to factor in developmental time, one where the team's unconscious fantasies should not be killed too quickly. Otherwise rigid defences would set in.

One of Winnicott's comments about the "good enough" mother seems apposite in this context.

Nevertheless at the start adaptation needs to be almost exact, and unless this is so it is not possible for the infant to experience a relationship to external reality, or even to form a conception of external reality. (1971, p. 12)

In other words, adaptation has to begin with the adult's adaptation to the infant's conception of the world, not the other way round.

Thus R worked out the parallels between the good enough tactfully disillusioning mother who uses transitional phenomena to bring about changes, and the change manager who realises the need to create a stable support medium, by initially adapting to the team's need as a prerequisite which underpins all successfully negotiated transitions.

Holding a transitional state of mind within an organisation

There was a vexing problem for all of the students. What exactly did it mean to "hold" a transitional space within an organisation? Amado and Ambrose (2001) devoted a whole book to the topic to illustrate how, whilst changes can be managed, transitions involve states of confusion and uncertainty. How then, if one is a manager, is one to go about managing a transition? What are its characteristics and boundaries? What are the implications for good or bad holding practices in organisations in transition? Students were hard pushed to come up with examples and definitions. Nevertheless they grasped the idea that it is a space between reality and fantasy. It is the third space. This "not-me area" needs to be respected as a collective malleable boundary of its own which needs to remain unowned by a particular group.

In this regard, Winnicott states:

If ... the adult can manage to enjoy the personal intermediate area without making claims, then we can acknowledge our own corresponding intermediate areas, and are pleased to find a degree of overlapping, that is to say common experience between members of a group in art or religion or philosophy. (1971, p. 114)

This statement about enjoying the intermediate area without making claims has many implications. For one thing, Winnicott is musing about the nature of a mature tolerance. If we can enjoy our intermediate area and let others enjoy theirs without too much envy, it brings about a state of tolerance and democracy. No one group claims special privileges over another. That “without making claims” is a very important stipulation. Here, Winnicott begins to formulate a blueprint for a theory of “groupishness”. This is the concept that Winnicott explored in his paper “Some thoughts on the meaning of the word democracy” (1950). He postulates that there has to be enough of the collective quality of ordinary good enough citizenship in the public space to outweigh the bid for power posed by particular antisocial groups. These concepts helped students to rethink what participative leadership might look like in terms of creating a good enough and sane enough public space. With the aid of this theory, they understood that fantasy and imagination needed a free reign as well as boundaries. Both played a role in deliverable results.

I brought in an example from my own coaching work to illustrate the importance of protecting an unowned, unclaimed space. A coachee described being one of a team of five which designed online web brochures for various companies. He was a creative designer, and his colleagues were from IT support technology and graphic design. They had designed a web brochure for a client using different colours in the layout, each colour designating an area of expertise of the organisation. A great deal of thought had gone into the overall layout, colour combinations, blending of colours, balance of content and form. The director who had been kept informed step by step of the process, unfortunately did not like the end product. He found the colours too hectic. He told the team to redo the design using only one colour, the company’s original colour, which was Prussian blue. The team felt very undermined and deauthorised.

They wanted to refuse to obey orders. However, in the end, for many political reasons, they redid the brochure as requested, but without “any heart for the matter”.

This example gave a lot of food for thought. It was interesting because students could grapple with the notion that if what is required of a workforce is a total accommodation to the directorate’s wishes, it kills something vital of the team’s collective spirit. Translating it in Winnicottian nomenclature, if there is a total accommodation of the child’s inner life to the adult’s world, there is no space for adaptation of the world to the child’s own fantasy dream life and thoughts. Then there is basically no stage of omnipotence which becomes problematic. Transitional space needs to bring together an accommodation to the outside world and an adaptation where the world fits to the child’s fantasy. Winnicott stresses this as a healthy aspect of primary omnipotence.

It is as though the baby needs to create the breast/world if development is to go forward.

Conclusion

I would like to return to the question which provided the impetus for writing this article. What was the impact of being introduced to Winnicott's ideas for students and how did these concepts influence their thinking?

My overall impression was that here were some examples of profound learning. Winnicott's methodology, the acuteness of his observational skills, opened up a world full of surprising yet familiar connections for the students. It is the observations and the way he makes sense of them that was so revealing. When I make this statement I do not mean that students had an imitative response to Winnicott's work. I mean quite the opposite. Each student could find resonances within their own personal histories and begin to construct their own theory of transitionality and how it works. Winnicott's explication encouraged their own familiarisation. Once familiar with his conceptual framework, the students built new learning and interpretive frames. Transitional space, potential space, illusion and disillusion, good enough mothering, the true and the false self, all began to make sense as parts of a comprehensive theory about the conditions which are necessary for a "true" self to develop. The theory itself became a form of scaffolding, a transitional phenomenon as it were, which altered their perceptions. It released possibilities where before students did not have these tools. It brought a great deal of new learning in its wake.

Winnicott displays much wisdom and sensitivity in his understanding and dealing with separations which have essentially been unbearable. Examples such as "the string boy" (as he has become popularly known) who tied string between objects and furniture to deny separations, or the example of the woman patient emphasising the negative "all I have got is what I haven't got". These make a great deal of sense of desperate measures resorted to so as to deal with separations.

This particular woman was evacuated to the countryside as a child during the war. What she missed—her real parents—is all that she did not have. Because these examples make so much "good" sense of separations, they are useful and useable. Otherwise they would fall on deaf ears. The concepts chime which is why they are useful and useable. (Both of these examples can be found in Winnicott's paper "Transitional objects and transitional phenomena (1971).")

This leads me to some of the differences in the Kleinian and Winnicottian approaches. Klein believed in a separation of the infantile personality from the mother occurring from birth and that splitting was an active process. Winnicott, however, believed that in early infancy the infant was fused with the mother, an extra uterine pregnancy protected by the mother's primary maternal preoccupation, too undeveloped to project its emotions, as it is itself unseparate.

Which of the two of them were right? In a sense they both were, with a different nuance or emphasis. Their theories should be seen as a form of dialogue. However, their different beginnings in conceptualising the newborn infant have profound implications for their methodology and treatment.

Winnicott worked on the environmental mother aspect, aggression from without. Whereas Klein worked on primitive aggression within. He worked with children who were evacuated to rural areas during the Second World War, helping them and their families and foster families to contain the effects of these separations. He also worked with hostels for children who were unmanageable as a result of separations. He had a clear sense of the systems that needed to be in place for containment to occur. Out of these experiences he constructed his theories of the importance of the “environmental mother” and “the object mother” and her role in development; the emphasis on the environmental mother and what needs to be established for further development to take place. This lends itself well as a theory to the application of how to create a developmental frame that is resilient and that can survive changes in organisational settings.

Klein’s work on splitting and projective identification, the aggression within systems, allows one insights into how organisational systems become infected with unconscious dynamics. The two strands of theory considered together make a potent model when considering overall system psychodynamics. Nevertheless, there are both areas of overlap and areas of incompatibility between their theories.

This brings me to my parting thought. Intrinsic to Winnicott’s ideas is the capacity for authentic, imaginative play. To use Winnicott’s ideas well you need to have a capacity to be able to play with your own thoughts. A play space is necessary for the creation of a symbolic universe. Yet by no means everyone knows how to play, let alone play with their imagination. The letting go of a previously held mindset can prove to be quite a formidable task. To use his theory well, you need to trust it to guide you to a place—and here I mean a mental conception of space—where you will come to know of something, though it probably is not quite what you originally had imagined.

It requires an act of trust or faith in the unknown.

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