
INTANGIBLE BENEFITS

AET works to support the profession of educational therapy so that it can reach communities with minimal resources, supports efficacy studies and also supports creating new educational therapy programs, including doctoral.

For AET to continue, and increase its effectiveness, we need to increase awareness of both educational therapy and AET. In fact, our 2015 Annual Member Survey revealed that this is a member priority.

HOW CAN YOU SPREAD THE WORD ABOUT EDUCATIONAL THERAPY AND AET?

- If you are an ET/Professional or a BCET, use the AET logo and website on your business cards, website or in your email communications.
- Share the word about educational therapy with your colleagues, parents, and the community by using the Ambassador Program PowerPoint presentation.
- Use your expertise representing AET at conferences. Add the AET logo to your PowerPoint presentation and to your handouts. Let AET know you will be speaking at a conference and we will add this to the e-News.
- Refer your parents and members of your community to the AET website to listen to a webinar. This is an extremely valuable resource.
- Send or distribute information about educational therapy and AET to your client's parents and to your network of peers.
- Become involved with AET. There are many opportunities to support our work. Contact Jeanette Rivera, MA, BCET, FAET, our immediate past president and chair of governance, or any of our board members to express your interest.

RESOLVE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

AET's goal is to provide the best possible services for our students and for our members. I am an ambassador for AET. I am a volunteer. Our board and our committee members are volunteers. We need your help to spread the word about educational therapy and AET. It is time for you to get out of your "comfort zone" – just as your students do every day.

Take the next steps: volunteer for AET, speak about AET, and spread the word about educational therapy.

Do not sit back and watch others. You can make a difference. Support our profession. You will never regret it. We have an obligation to ensure the best possible services for students and clients.

Alice P. Pulliam



Finding and Minding the “Therapy” in Educational Therapy

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INTRODUCTION

This column, written in a question-advice format, explores a newly emerging awareness in the field of educational therapy—that of the psychological space we share with our clients. In educational therapy, we can refer to this shared space as *intersubjectivity*, a term distinct from what psychotherapists call it: transference and countertransference. These latter terms refer on the one hand to the feelings of the client which arise in the shared space; and on the other to the feelings of the psychotherapist. Intersubjectivity, by contrast, implies more of a swirl of entwined realities (see Christopher Bollas' *Being a Character*, Hill and Wang, 1992). In addition, having separate terminology preserves the important distinction between the two fields. Intersubjectivity in educational therapy means the under-the-surface, co-created, ever-shifting, joint-reality of ourselves and our clients. Clients in the educational therapy situation refer to any combination of student, parents, guardians, teachers, other school personnel, and colleagues.

The educational therapist (ET) accesses the content of the *intersubjective space* through her own observations, feelings, thoughts, fantasies, memories, body sensations, and intuitions. We do not attend to the intersubjective space because we are wanna-be psychotherapists: indeed, we are trained to make referrals for work that focuses on the emotional and fantasy worlds of our clients. Instead, we seek understandings of intersubjectivity because we accept that, whether we attend to the shared space or not, the intersubjectivity contains in it significant dynamics of the learning environment and affects the choices we make about our central academic tasks. The higher our intersubjective awareness, the more effective our choices about how, why, when, and if we make what kinds of interventions.

The “advice column” format is deliberate. The nature of intersubjectivity is often vague, mysterious, and uneasy to plumb. When an ET tells her story to a trusted colleague and/or gets supervision and consultation, she opens her insight simply by giving voice to inner experiences that often fade under the imperative of the academic task focus, and she invites the scrutiny of someone who is not part of that case's intersubjectivity (though of course, there will be intersubjectivity between herself and her consultant.)

DEAR FINDING AND MINDING:

Amy was an eleventh grader when I began to work with her. At the beginning of twelfth grade, I agreed to help Amy apply for colleges and to prepare for entrance exams. Amy's family—and the school – always spoke of her “learning disabilities” -- which had resulted from a lack of oxygen at birth. Even though I began relatively early to question a “learning disability” diagnosis (which implies normal or above normal intelligence), no reference was ever made to “sub-normal intelligence” or to “developmental disabilities.” Amy is an especially plain young woman, whose main enthusiasm is swimming. She also likes to work out, to watch romantic comedies with friends, and to hang out with her family.

Amy was accepted into college and the academic task appeared straightforward. I have spent nearly four years helping Amy understand her textbooks, structure her study time, prepare for tests, and write papers. She has great difficulty with comprehension and, no matter the subject, shows almost no curiosity. “I'm not really interested,” she says flatly. In fact, her affect is almost always impassive. The exceptions are the times I bring us chocolate when she rewards us both with a rare smile. Nevertheless, this young woman, in complete congruence with her family's values, has seemed consistently determined to earn a degree. She has missed only two lessons in four years, both of which her family insisted on paying for, despite having given me more than my required twenty-four-hour notice. She does what she is told – she clearly wants to be told and she shows up for every in-school class and assignment.

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The whole time I have felt dedicated and loyal to Amy's family and to Amy. I have told myself a thousand times, “Either I do this cheerfully, or I don't do it -- and it's not my job to change what this family wants.” Patience is the main quality I've had to conjure. And, I've sometimes barely been able to. I got in the habit of having an extra cup of coffee before she comes. Once I stuck my tongue out at Amy behind her back, and I've fantasized yelling at her or knocking her over the head with one of her big textbooks or just saying, “Can't you spark about something??” Then at the beginning of year three, a colleague said to me, “This girl should never have been in college,” and I suddenly filled with a doubt that I now think had been simmering all along.

I began to feel guilty, to wonder about the ethics of having agreed to work with Amy at all. I feel a need to confess: I am worried about the “sham” this all may have been. The truth is, although I believe Amy may have learned a few time management skills, I'm certain that Amy has retained zero content from any of her classes.

(As I put into words all this “content” in me about this situation, I suddenly realize I'm having a memory of something I haven't thought of in years. My cousin, who was eleven when I was five, had cerebral palsy and, it turned out, was also developmentally disabled. I remember standing at the edge of the sandbox in the park, watching my aunt carry her out into the sand, and arrange her against the swing set. I had no words for it at the time, but I remember feeling a strange, heavy mystery. Looking back, I think my aunt desperately wanted my cousin to look good. I can see right now that this memory might point to my sense of a similar attitude in Amy's family.)

At my most sanguine, I believe I have performed a service to the family and to Amy. Other times, I question what this service has actually been. When I think about Amy in contrast to her high-functioning, handsome siblings (I've seen their pictures), I feel grief for her fate and moved that I've been able to help her achieve a certain brand of success. But, given the amount of help she's had, has she really earned this success? Will she treasure this college diploma, a type of success so valued by her family, or will she come to discount it or to need to rebel against it? Have I really given Amy a great gift? Or, have I helped her to dissemble or to pass for someone she is not?

Recently, Amy's mother asked to meet with me to find out what kind of work I think Amy would be good at. Amy is good at neither people nor concepts – but given her family's upper-class standards, I think even Amy would call menial any job to which she might really be suited. I feel trapped; I want to do the right thing; I'm not sure how to handle this meeting.

Dubious Giver

DEAR DUBIOUS:

You vividly connected your memory of your aunt's grief and determination about her daughter to a fantasy about what Amy's family might be feeling and doing. Indeed, the theory of intersubjectivity suggests that your own feelings, thoughts, and sensations a) live in the educational therapy space you share with Amy; b) that they may be yours alone; and, c) that they may also be feelings you are picking up from Amy, her parents, her teachers, or even her siblings. In other words, Amy's family, in this case, is almost certainly dedicated, loyal, and perhaps also filled with doubt, and, certainly, grief. They may feel fear about Amy's future; they may feel trapped. Amy herself is clearly dedicated, loyal, and patient and, just as you have worked to cover your less acceptable feelings, perhaps Amy has also covered feelings like jealousy and grief with the more acceptable feelings of love and need for her family. Maybe Amy also feels trapped and obliged.

You and Amy used primary reinforcers (chocolate and coffee!) to persist through work that has been essentially uninteresting to you both: Amy has not liked any of her subjects and you have often not enjoyed teaching her. You have both coped by displaying remarkable steel, aided by high extrinsic motivators to complete the tasks you've set for yourselves. Furthermore, your own anger, hidden under your professional demeanor, has seemed verboten in circumstances requiring patience and tact. Is it possible that Amy, too, hides anger under her flat affect?

At the outset, you, like most people in ethically ambiguous situations, simply set aside the troubling margins of the question. In order to proceed, probably with only the vaguest awareness of what you were doing, you shelved your worries about Amy's and your own interactions with the educational and family systems. You followed the lead of the family in their use of the pragmatic, but perhaps misleading label of the *learning disability*. Undoubtedly, as suggested by the story adhered to at home, school, and in your office, you preferred to think of yourself as a guide to a struggling young person. Nonetheless, a hazy counter-story beneath the surface suggests you often felt more like a pair of hands. Your colleague's comment forced open the ambiguity: troubling thoughts of shame and guilt rushed in. According to the theory of intersubjectivity, it's quite possible that Amy's family, perhaps even Amy herself, at some level, has kept similar thoughts at bay.

It is the nature of the intersubjectivity to be of awareness. It takes great effort, and direct diligence to awaken to the hints it provides about the situation. Short of possibly having made an early decision not to work with Amy, what might have this multi-faceted understanding done for your relationship with her? First, your understanding may have changed how you read literature with her. Certainly the fates of many characters in literature are unfair and make them feel sad and mad. Perhaps some of the books she had to read – say *A Slave Narrative*, or *The Story of a Geisha* – might have come a bit more alive if its essence could have been simplified to a complaint: *Why is everyone telling me what to do? What do I want?* Second, perhaps, you might have simply acknowledged the difficulty of working so hard on something so intrinsically unrewarding (in response to her repeated "I'm not really interested" remarks) and might have worked out, say, a chocolate schedule so Amy herself could take responsibility for organizing her own reward system that would have been outside the approval rewards generated by her family. Third, on other reading assignments, say a science project about birds, she might have included trying to imagine what it might be like to be a bird having trouble trying to fly – or even to leave the nest. Any of these experiments might also have brought you the kind of meaning that would have made you feel more a guide, than a pair of hands and, thus, mitigated your own boredom and anger.

Suppose, with the family, you had been able to access much earlier your full intersubjective experience? Sooner rather than later, might you have chosen simply to describe the teeth-pulling nature of the sessions to her parents, and thus raise the

issues of right placement? Or, even earlier, say at the end of high school, might you have wondered aloud about the best use of Amy's time? If, as a result, the family had simply found another practitioner, would Amy and her family have lost a valuable continuity, or was a natural breaking point and truth-telling squandered?

Right now, however, the mother's request opens another chance to raise important questions of purpose and acceptance. It may be that part of the termination with Amy and her family is to simply acknowledge the long row Amy has hoed, and *not* to answer job-related questions. Part of the work here may be to realize that the situation is much larger than the ET role can manage – and perhaps to make referrals, both to a job placement consultant and to a psychotherapist who specializes in helping the parents of children with special needs cope with the complexities of their young adult's life transitions.

I encourage you to get consultation and support to explore the many questions raised for you by your willingness to explore the intersubjective space. Accessing the intersubjectivity, after all, does not necessarily mean getting answers – it means asking better questions. Perhaps you will create a termination process that takes a paradoxical professional stand in which you make gentle room for the ambiguity of everyone's experience and simultaneously draw a clear line within yourself and with the family about your own continued involvement.

Carolyn Edwards, M.Ed., BCET, has long been interested in the cross-fertilizations of our field with that of psychotherapy. She is grateful for the intellectual support, among others, of Maggy Hughes, Ann Gordon, Donna Lifrak, and Diana Kennedy. She welcomes descriptions of about your own troubling case at info@turning-point-edu.com and will answer your query whether or not your story is used in a future column. If she uses your story, your identity and case details will be carefully disguised.

