

INTRODUCTION

Meg Harris Williams

‘What *are* you when you *cease* to be a student of psychoanalysis?’  
(Bion, see below, p. 203)

The purpose of this book is not to summarise or interpret Bion’s thinking in a comprehensive way, and it is not an introduction to Bion. As far as Bion goes, the reader will find nothing new here. Instead, the aim is to picture the experience of those who have been teaching Bion’s ideas in seminars, talks and supervisions for many years, and who have evolved their own modes for conveying their personal experience of those ideas. The hope is that this may be useful for others who are teaching not just Bion but psychoanalysis in both clinical and applied fields.

As Donald Meltzer said, in his discussion of Bion’s *Memoir of the Future*:

I am sure, from many personal contacts with Bion, that he never wished to implant his thought in other people’s heads. His vision of the air, like Prospero’s island’s air, being full of thoughts seeking thinkers places the artist-scientist (for they were never separated in his mind) in a position of using his special recep-

tiveness and gifts for making public his experiences as an intermediary for others to catch the thoughts that are in the wind at the moment. (Meltzer, 1994, p. 523)

Or as Bion himself jokes in the *Memoir* itself, in the voice of one dinosaur speaking to another: ‘Ow! What’s that? You’ve shoved your thoughts into me, you vile creature’ (Bion, 1991, p. 84). Teaching, as the authors of this book are well aware, is not a matter of manic projective identification – pushing one’s thoughts into others’ heads – still less of pretending to push in the thoughts of somebody else. Rather, teaching is just another form of learning from experience with the aid of students who reflect struggles, difficulties and moments of illumination which are brought into view through the special teaching relationship, which is perhaps as much a matter of transference and countertransference as psychoanalysis itself. Teaching demonstrates modes of identification with the author, and is accompanied by evidence of the internalisation of other past teachers. Style, cultural context, personal bias and interests are all important in making the teaching situation a live and authentic one from which all the participants can select what speaks to them.

This is not to say that knowledge is not important; ‘knowing about’ is always the basis for ‘knowing’, and ‘without memory and desire’ doesn’t mean one is let off doing one’s homework. As some authors have observed, one of the problems with the current Bion bandwagon is the belief that his ideas sprang from nowhere, in terms of psychoanalytic thinking (never mind philosophical thinking in general): as if his contact with Kleinian thinking were purely theoretical, rather than an actual life-experience of personal analysis with Mrs Klein which was continuously redigested in the context of the prevailing ‘winds’ of circumstance and research, his own and others’. Scholarship and due awareness of the context of psychoanalytic history are the background from which a teaching style then emerges, through selecting what appear to be the essentials. Students learn from this selective attention, not from disembodied ideas. Correspondingly, what they learn is personal to themselves.

The teacher is not a barrier between the student and the author but rather an ‘intercessor’ to use Bion’s term, or a ‘midwife’ to use Socrates’.

The book begins with ‘Wilfred Bion: clinical thinker’ by Chris Mawson (UK), who sets Bion in the context of some his colleagues in the British society of that era, as well as that of Freud and Klein, and of Keats’ wellknown principle of negative capability. Introductory seminars are founded on *Learning from Experience* with reference back to Freud, in particular his ‘Recommendations to physicians’, and forward to later Kleinians. He explains his choice of texts and the reasons for focusing in detail on specific passages, with a view to tracing the evolution of key concepts such as container–contained, the oscillation  $Ps \rightleftharpoons D$ , alpha-function, the links of LHK and their negatives.

In the next chapter, Claudio Neri (Rome) formulates the teacher’s role as that of a ‘Go-between’ whose aim is to put the student in touch with Bion’s thinking. In this he offers four principles: the idea that the most ‘difficult’ formulation of an idea is probably the best or closest to whatever Bion was trying to formulate; advice to read the text closely not just to cite the slogans that are so often extracted; a warning against joining the mythical group of ‘Bionians’ which tempts against the loneliness of individual thinking and self-discovery; and the further warning to avoid what Bion has called ‘arrogance’, to be differentiated from the legitimate self-respect which also entails respect for others.

In ‘Identifying with existential unease’, Antonello Correale (Rome) considers in depth the definition of teaching as how we put things inside us, as distinct from simply transmitting knowledge, even though this will always remain the nucleus of the teacher’s work. The parallel is drawn between studying Bion and conducting psychoanalysis, both of which demand a loyalty to this existential unease in the face of Bion’s giving epistemological matters the primary place. There is conflict both in our relation to Bion and in our own search for truth, as appears in the processes of learning from experience, alpha function, and ‘becoming O’, Bion’s way of describing the process of introjecting the object.

Luiz Carlos Junqueira, Jr. (São Paulo), in ‘Teaching Bion, living life’, begins with the way he presents to students the

story of Bion's development as a psychoanalytic thinker, using as a basic structure the comparison of Bion's early works and his subsequent *Second Thoughts*. He then summarises his own encounter with Bion's thinking, followed by a list of the courses he has devised and adapted over the years, with some detailed examples of 'significant landscapes' and the texts chosen to illustrate them. 'Teaching' is thus an ever-changing procedure which, like life, is always searching for new links to elaborate.

Lee Rather (California), in 'Building a Bion container', focuses on Bion's emphasis on psychoanalysis as a probe or process of inquiry more than a body of knowledge, and discusses the advantages of critical pluralism: that is, the usefulness of Bion's 'unsaturated' concepts in helping people to discover their own subjective experience, whether teacher or student, so that teaching can be a genuine learning or 'becoming' activity. A 'culturally unsaturated' model also has advantages when teaching in very different societies and in forging links with other disciplines.

Charles W. Dithrich (California) in 'Maintaining a relation to O' discusses the teacher's role in moderating the group atmosphere such that a sense of humility and toleration of uncertainty can prevail and enable shared discovery. He takes Bion's clinical seminars as favourite introductory texts, since they show students Bion's spontaneous and humorous aspects; then proceeds to select passages from the major books, organised on a conceptual basis. A limited amount of reading is given per session so that students are not overwhelmed or persecuted by unfamiliar ideas but find the group a containing setting for the emotions aroused.

Angel Costantino (Buenos Aires) in 'Group learning' considers his primary function as study group leader is the selection of topics for discussion, without any specific goal other than that of facilitating its progress, which entails acknowledging both regressive and progressive moments in its evolution. The inclusion of their own clinical material strengthens both the group and its idea of Bion. Over the course of time, an anchorage was discovered in the concrete description of patient X, who (whether a real or generic character) emerges recognisably in a series of Bion's

texts, and offers a model for Bion's way of interpreting that puts his more abstract formulations in a human context.

Michael Eigen (New York) gives a substantial number of student responses in 'Tiger stripes and student voices'. He narrates the story of his first encounters with Bion, in books and in person, and his own movement from 'K-Bion to F-Bion' with the publication of *Attention and Interpretation*, explaining Bion's influence on his own life and writings: 'When I teach Bion, Bion teaches me.' He uses two teaching approaches: the formal setting for students who need a historical overview, and the intimate seminar, which is organised by focusing on the evocative properties of selected words or phrases and the student responses they invite.

Howard B. Levine (Massachusetts) describes the method he uses for 'Dreaming the patient into being', a method which in his personal experience harks back to practising jazz improvisation with the saxophone part left out, so that each student could interpolate their own voice into the existing basic musical structure. An analogous approach to students in a psychoanalytic seminar can enable free associations and the sharing of 'wild thoughts' by way of rehearsal for the 'analytic mind-set' recommended by Bion which focusses more on process than on content.

Leandro Stitzman (Buenos Aires) offers a 'Model kit' of tools he has found useful in recommending a Bionian spirit of proximity to emotional or psychoanalytic 'facts', including awareness of animal origins, wild ideas, and an effort to search for accurate modes of notation. The kit comprises such items as evenly-suspended attention and tolerance of uncertainty; appreciating the difference between theoretical and abstract in Bion's notations; the use of Grid and the 'selected fact' as tools for observation; the value of Bion's recorded seminars as a way to introduce students without jargon; and the value of a shared sense of humour in indicating valuable work is being achieved.

R. D. Hinshelwood (UK), in 'Teaching Bion's teachings', warns of the dangers of fashionably idealising Bion, which often result in glossing over any problems that may arise from Bion's own teaching methods. He suggests there is a lack of continuity in Bion's own ideas and methods which, together with the fact

that Bion's own wide-ranging sources are not readily familiar in their totality to most interpreters, makes it especially difficult for teachers to convey his thinking as a unified whole. Copying Bion's own method with groups can arouse anxiety rather than responsibility in the members, so it is a challenge for the leader to find alternative ways.

Robert Harris (UK), in 'Teaching Bion in Russia', is in a position to make interesting comparisons between the different learning climates of Russia and the UK, whilst at the same time picking up certain deep linguistic, humorous and aphoristic ties between the two cultures that are highlighted in the process of 'translating' Bion, in particular his views on group behaviour. He finds that the excellent educational practice endemic in Russia is employed here in the service of a thirst to understand social trauma, and *Experiences in Groups* in particular has a deep resonance.

Igor Romanov (Ukraine) tells of 'Bion's adventures in a country without psychoanalysis', though some would say students are very well informed both in the university setting and from the Kleinian clinical point of view. A long-distance learning approach, he suggests, devolves responsibility onto making links within as wide a context as possible, when forging a professional identity in a pluralistic context. He concludes that Bion's works contribute to communication though not necessarily to consensus between analysts, and that despite their complexity, they provide a good introduction to psychoanalysis.

Dawn Farber (California), in 'On conveying the style of living analysis', compares and contrasts teaching in California and South Africa. The nature of teaching depends on the felt relevance to individuals not only *per se* but as they are in the context of their society and culture. In San Francisco the focus is on 'waking dreaming', yet ideas may be stymied by the American dream of egocentric 'happiness'; while in South Africa Bion's ideas on the tyranny of group basic assumptions are found most valuable, since they offer hope of understanding and therefore escaping from the corruption and violence incurred.

Dorothy Hamilton (UK) describes her experience of 'Teaching Bion through clinical example', using vignettes of

several patients to illustrate the motifs of the K link, containment, moral judgement and minus K, catastrophic change from K to O, and Bion's idea of 'suffering'. She says that any potential distortion that might occur in teaching theory primarily via clinical work is amply compensated by the vividness of the interaction between real people, including the relationship between patient and therapist.

Gertraud Diem-Wille (Austria), in 'Teaching theory in the context of child analysis', similarly demonstrates the teaching value of presenting ideas through clinical work, this time focusing on a single case study of the analysis of a three-year-old child, and on the emotional responses aroused in the therapist. She shows how Bion's extension of Kleinian concepts, such as the dynamic link of  $Ps \rightleftharpoons D$  and the move from beta-elements to alpha-function, enriches clinical understanding and supports the analyst's capacity to tolerate projections.

Meg Harris Williams (UK), in 'The living mind – Bion's vision', describes two scenarios in which she teaches Bion: in groups and through writing. In the academic setting, she concentrates on Bion's model of the mind and its post-Kleinian context, rather than on his theoretical formulations, which are brought in secondarily; this encompasses the question of what is a psychoanalyst, the way the mind grows by digesting thoughts, and the hindrances to this growth. She then discusses her experience of writing about Bion's autobiographies, in particular that of co-writing a filmscript based on Bion's *Memoir of the Future*.

Finally a paper of Martha Harris (who worked closely with Bion) is reprinted here from 1978: 'The individual in the group: on learning to work with the psychoanalytical method'. In the context of the foundational principles of the teaching method at the Tavistock Clinic, she describes how Bion's insights into group behaviour can be used to modulate the tension between the individual and the group, making it container rather than constrictor. Through a correlation of vertices, the individual can be enabled to learn through 'transformations in O' despite the establishment group's pressure to reinforce basic assumptions.