

A RELATIONAL TA APPROACH IN LEARNING & EDUCATION – SOME EXPLORATIONS
 TRUDI NEWTON

Abstract

Relational transactional analysis is a fairly new term but in education and learning theory its antecedents are long and influential. Connections between experiential learning theory and eight principles of relational transactional analysis are explored to identify the latter's place in the educational field and ask what educational transactional analysis can contribute to the further development of the relational approach.

Introduction

Searching for a definition of 'relational learning' brings some interesting results. First you find the neuroscience research – which is not about the benefits of relationship but concerned with the process of learning by connecting one concept to another. The term 'relational education' yields a range of understandings, mostly about people learning better when they learn alongside others. We will be taking a different tack . . .

Over the last ten years or so a new school of transactional analysis has appeared on the scene – the relational school. This, according to editors Fowlie and Sills in their new book *Relational Transactional Analysis: principles in practice (2011)*, is a move to balance the cognitive-behavioural aspects and practice of transactional analysis with a more engaged, inter-subjective, relationship-oriented approach. The genesis and development of this approach is explained in the new book and also in Sills and Hargaden *Transactional Analysis: a relational perspective (2002)*. This movement, these authors say, is part of a 'relational turn' that has happened in many fields including psychology, philosophy, spirituality and education (and even in computer science) over the last twenty five years (Fowlie and Sills 2011 p. xxv).

'Relational Transactional Analysis' describes an approach in the work of transactional analysts that 'is characterised by the development of affective, co-created, conscious, non-conscious, and unconscious relational interactions as a primary means of growth and change.' (IARTA 2010)

My purpose here is to explore the connections between the relational approach in transactional analysis, learning theory and current thinking and practice in the field of education.

Although I am thinking of the whole range of education – parental and pre-school through to formal and informal adult education – I will use the terms 'teacher' and 'learner' throughout, rather than switch between facilitator, tutor, animator, practitioner and student, pupil etc. My own experience is mainly with adult learners and that is the context that I think of as I write. Please translate into whatever terms fit your own context.

I will use two questions as starting points for exploration: how do the principles of relational transactional analysis translate into the learning context? and how can we value and integrate the idea of the 'relational field' in education?

The 'relational' in education

A similar 'turn' towards the relational approach took place in learning theory and educational philosophy rather longer than twenty five years ago, and takes us back to the beginnings of modern ideas about experiential learning. In the early twentieth century the information-giving and knowledge-based tradition of education began to give way to a different kind of understanding of the educational process that used the learners' experience as the data from which knowledge could be gained and developed. This was not simply 'learning by doing' but a way of investigating and interrogating lived experience as a source of knowledge. The role of the teacher moved from being a source and expert to being the enabler and partner of the learner. Eric Berne, born in 1910, would have been aware of, and been influenced by, new ideas and philosophies such as the progressive methods of Dewey and his colleagues (Dewey 1938) – this is evident from, for instance, his belief in

observation as a basis for theory and the importance of direct personal experience in developing understanding (Stewart 1992).

In the early 1970s this way of thinking about learning reached its most radical form and found its most eloquent exponent and theorist in Paulo Freire. For Freire the true process of education was 'conscientisation', the awareness of one's actions in the world and the actions of others, the political consequences of these acts and the implicit purpose and function of traditional education (1972, 1996). The roles of teacher and student became transformed (in Freire's vision) into a relationship of mutual learning where 'we teach each other, mediated by the world' (1972, p. 52). Freire's writings have a strong political perspective. At the same time that Freire was writing, Carl Rogers was proposing a humanistic 'student-centred' education where the teacher becomes a facilitator, creating a 'learning climate' of acceptance and care (1978). Other writers such as Ivan Illych (*Deschooling Society*) Vygotsky (developing the concept of 'scaffolding' to promote autonomy), Kolb (refining the idea of the experiential learning cycle as a prime example of 'the human adaptive process') and, later, Mezirow (proposing the psychological aspect of learning as a change in the sense of self) all contributed to a fresh take on what education, learning and schooling are all about - to the extent that, today, many cultures *expect* learning, formal as well as informal, to be experiential and humanistic.

It will be clear from this brief summary that part of this shift in perception lies in the change in the teacher's role from instructor to enabler, though the exact interpretation of what that means varies. What is apparent is that the teacher becomes engaged in and affected by the learning rather than being a detached, unchanging director of the process. The capacity for personal contact, connectedness, playfulness, openness, authenticity, vulnerability and self-awareness become part of the description of an effective teacher, along with the ability to hold authority while maintaining an 'equal but asymmetric' relationship with learners. The teacher is someone who creates a conducive environment and is able to stand back and let the learning happen without imposing themselves but nevertheless remains totally engaged; 'it's all about you and at the same time nothing to do with you' (Shmukler 2011, p.6).

This view of the teacher as enabler, facilitator or animator is well documented and discussed in educational literature (see, for instance, Knowles 1973), is the basis of educational associations such as Antidote (campaign for emotional literacy in education in the UK) and supported by educational transactional analysts (see for instance articles by Montuschi, Toth, Temple, le Guernic in TAJ Education theme issue, 2004); and summarised thus by Claudie Ramond 'the relationship is the main factor in curiosity and motivation, play is essential for the student as well as the trainer. My experience of teaching during 40 years with people from six to sixty years old is largely confirming this hypothesis, which has become a certitude for me' (personal communication, 2011). Respect and relationship matter, not only in schools but in adult learning, as the following example illustrates:

I really enjoyed the assessment. The reflection after the session created a great learning opportunity. I could analyse and voice what and why I did, what was my thinking, what choices did I see. The assessors' questions raised my awareness even more. They were respectful and curious about my thinking. Their feedback was constructive and based on evidence. I had the impression that during the hour of the assessment I learned as much as during a whole module. (Turai, 2011, personal communication)

Relational Transactional Analysis principles and learning

Educational practice and philosophy both reflects and influences cultural norms and cultural change. Some of the struggles between different understandings and expectation of the purpose of education are because we are on the cusp of that 'relational turn' and at times slip back into previous ways of thinking.

Transactional analysis offers many ways of analysing and intervening in educational cultures – examples include symbiosis and the symbiotic chain as showing how teachers and pupils traditionally

relate, teachers' scripts manifesting in classroom failure, stroke patterns based on predicted behaviour, discounting of pupils' experience and curiosity, self-fulfilling prophecy becoming embedded in script at the social level and many more. All these concepts can contribute a great deal in enabling better relations between teacher and learner, not least by offering positive models for thriving and for personal and communal growth, and helping schools to create environments where pupils are motivated and encouraged to learn.

But the relational approach is actually quite specific about the quality of relationship and what characterises it. Fowlie and Sills give eight 'principles of praxis' (involving a way of understanding as well as how that understanding is put into practice) that relational practitioners 'hold to be self evident' (2011, p. xxx). As I note these below I connect them with themes from educational transactional analysis (different from 'doing TA in education') and with some key ideas from the experiential learning theories mentioned above. In the examples and connections suggested I do not intend to be exhaustive or exclusive – there are overlaps between the principles and a variety of different models that could be used to illustrate each.

The centrality of relationship: the humanistic perspective

Just as relationships in the primary group of the family affect the script decisions each of us make about ourselves, other people and the world, relationships in school affect how we act out these decisions and whether or not we modify them. Many people decide how they are and will be as learners and carry these decisions into adulthood, influencing *how* they engage in subsequent learning experiences. Interactions with 'teachers' in adult life will reinforce or challenge these decisions; and teachers will be bringing their script decisions to the interactions too. Placing the relationship at the heart of learning, and acknowledging the mutuality of the experience, is the beginning of re-doing limitations to learning. The work of Carl Rogers is important to this perception, placing the student-teacher dyad at the centre (Rogers 1978). A particularly useful model for intervening to promote healthy relationships in school is symbiosis and the symbiotic chain (Holdeman 1989), as a picture of how we can project and discount at all levels of responsibility; enabling recognition of and freedom from collusion and competition in the classroom by honouring all egostates.

The importance of experience: the political perspective

Offering relational experiences that both embody and enact different meanings from those that relationships once did for the learner is restorative and maybe reparative. This is of primary concern; an example is quoted above, where the learner seems to have had previous experience of being judged and clearly found the new experience of equality and respect to be liberating. Putting experience at the centre of learning opens up the political dimension and the possibility of liberation for both teacher and learner. Freire was clear that he was not seeking overcoming of a powerful hierarchy through his pedagogy but the liberation of all (1973). Similarly, Steiner proposes addressing power structures by acknowledging them and finding sources of 'OK power', or potency, such as grounded-ness, passion and trust rather than competing for control (Steiner, Seven sources of power 1987).

The significance of subjectivity - and of self-subjectivity: the transformative perspective

The teacher as well as the learner is open to challenging and changing herself in new ways, using her own subjective experience in creating new learnings for herself as well as being engaged in those of the learner. Mezirow suggests that real learning happens through a 'disorienting dilemma' that leads to a change in self-perception at the psychological level; a challenge to some aspect of one's identity causes a change in the frame of reference. In relational work the process is mutual, as both participants are engaged in a co-creative process that results in new narratives and up-dating of script (Summers and Tudor 2000).

The importance of engagement: the mutuality/reflective perspective

Learning is a 'two-person' endeavour; the learner is not an object to be done to. Teacher and learner are actively involved in the process of finding new and more authentic ways of relating - 'an enquiry into the questions of common concern that come to the fore as a result of the adoption of a two-person model.' Benjamin (1995, p. 3, cited in Fowlie and Sills). The teacher is engaged, not neutral – as this example from a training course describes:

All participants were actively involved in every part of the training, including co-creating the competency requirements, and had increased personal and professional responsibility within the group. There was no opportunity not to be actively engaged, nor linger in preferred comfort zones. (Our experience) supports current and historical theory that emphasizes the critical role of the facilitator in establishing trust within a group and modelling potency, permission and protection. The quality of attention showed real awareness of each person as they are in the here and now, holding the space, and prompting authentic interactions. (Pratt 2009)

The significance of non conscious and unconscious patterns, as well as conscious patterns: the cultural perspective

All of us are constantly influencing each other in relationship, both in and out of awareness. In the context of learning this touches on the cultural dimension and deeply – though unconsciously - held beliefs about learning. Gender, family, social and cultural scripting all impact the available ways of relating. Different styles of learning and beliefs about learning become manifest. An important part of community development, for instance, is to understand the Cultural Parent, both valuing and challenging its influence in particular situations, and working alongside people to effect change (Drego 1983).

The reality of the functioning and changing adult/Adult: the andragogic perspective

Many learners slip into a Child mode in a demanding learning situation and expect to be told, directed and to have no autonomous responsibility for their own learning. In relational working the learner is seen as, and is treated very much as, an adult who is capable of a reciprocal and mutual (albeit asymmetrical) relationship with the teacher. This frame of reference challenges the familiar symbiosis of 'schooling'; the neopsychic, integrating Adult (Tudor, 2003) expands through increasingly empathic and co-creative relating. This is the principle of andragogy – the teaching of adults – but in fact it also applies to teaching children. The invitation is to adult-adult relating in age-appropriate ways (Knowles 1978). Barrow (2009) makes strong distinctions between schooling and learning in considering the influence of schools on individuals' 'learning scripts' and how script in relation to learning is rooted in experience of being 'schooled'.

The importance of curiosity, criticism, and creativity: the ludological perspective

Mutual curiosity and exploration of individual and joint experience leads to discovery. This is the playful aspect of learning which derives from joyful childhood experience of making discoveries and finding what one can do. It can easily get lost as we grow up and learning may be framed as hard or a struggle – we forget the enjoyment of learning (which is actually a producer of endorphins, the physical source of the pleasure of learning, particularly in relationship). The role of play in children's learning is well-known; playfulness and curiosity are also vital to adults. Re-cycling our stages of development, from childhood to old age, gives us the opportunity to learn and re-learn (Clarke and Dawson 1998)

The importance of uncertainty: the radical perspective

Not knowing the outcome, starting a class or event with an invitation to learners to decide what they want to learn and how they will learn it is a scary thing to do for the 'teacher'. It feels scary for

learners too as dependency is confronted – and then as possibilities open up there is a sense of liberation and a new ownership. New meanings and directions are investigated and co-created – everyone involved begins to discover what learning can be. The radical model sees education as a means of change and empowerment where everyone is equal no matter what their role or expertise. Outcomes are not pre-determined but grow out of the experience of the group as a whole (Newton 2003).

We can see connections between the relational approach and true learning – but what does this say to the educational field of transactional analysis? As we know, good therapy includes learning – and this was one of Berne's aims, for the client to gain self-knowledge through accessible language – and real learning is therapeutic, restorative and healing through understanding. The use of transactional analysis as a language and as a practical educational psychology names and illuminates areas of concern or areas for development and offers a positive take that things can change. At the same time, the contract is focused on facilitating learning and may or may not (but usually will) involve personal change.

Differences for the educational field

There are two immediate differences when we move from thinking about psychotherapy and begin to reflect on education: the context and the contract. All the principles noted above are derived from considering the two-person venture in therapy. In education we need to look at the group, the context or environment and the institutional culture as well as the individual face-to-face relationship. How do these principles translate?

Learning may be a private endeavour – education is in the public space. It is 'seen to be done' and therefore up for critique and criticism as societal norms may be challenged and confronted. The contract must be overt and visible – what are we here to do? by what right do we do it? If we are to bring about change through our relational stance it still needs to be within a contracted understanding. We can envisage that contract as a series of concentric circles – the outer 'holding' the overall agreement, the middle circle being the empathic relationship that determines the 'feel' of the learning experience, the inner circle the immediate piece of work or concern (see figure 1).

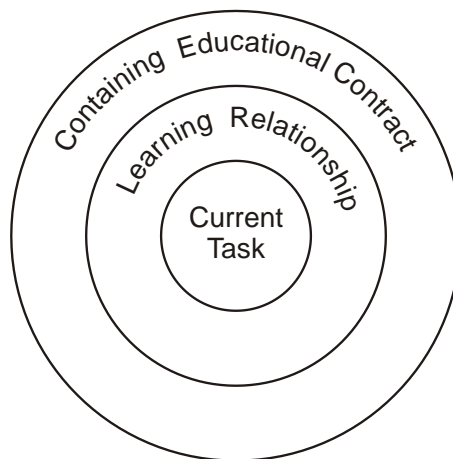


Figure 1 Concentric contracting

Another difference for the educational field is the need for cognitive learning to be kept in focus even when the emphasis is on growth and change through relating. Thus the *consequences* of the work are registered – the political, philosophical, societal meaning which takes the implications into the social context and promotes wider change than the purely personal. There will always be a social dimension to the contract as well as the personal and professional. Teachers have a 'cognitive

responsibility' as well as a relational one. The educational contract is primarily about gaining knowledge – the 'overall' contract; relational learning/relational education is the process within this primary aim – the middle circle where real change and growth become possible. Teachers are there to teach, just as psychotherapists are there to cure – the relational approach is *within* that contract – in the service of improving learning. The moment by moment learning task is represented by the inner circle.

Experiential learning and the relational field

Let us now turn to the place of the relational field in education. The experiential understanding of learning has psychological, philosophical and political implications. Kolb (1986) saw experiential learning as the main human adaptive process. He described a cycle of learning - to consider data (what happened), generate options, questions, meanings, then to develop an explanatory theory and plan future action in accordance. Kolb recognised this process as the basis of the scientific method, creativity, problem-solving; it is the way we learn from infancy onwards – even as babies and children we act like little scientists devising experiments and learning from the outcome (Gopnik 1999). This cycle (or spiral) of learning is also, inevitably, the way we write our script - the emerging Adult observing, investigating and drawing conclusions from the flow of stimulus in a continuous cycle (Newton 2006). We learn and develop in relationship, not alone but through social interaction. The key part of this cyclic process is the making of meaning. In script formation it is the meaning making that leads on to the creating of the script proper – the theory about the world and our place in it that we all make for ourselves. In experiential learning this is the place where we can align ourselves with established theories and accepted norms and mores or we can make something new – a fresh interpretation of our experience, a new narrative.

Recent research on cognition appears to give a neurological base to the experiential learning process. James Zull is a professor of cognitive science who undertook a project in his university to investigate ways of improving teaching in line with current knowledge about the workings of the mind. He was able to map the learning cycle onto areas of brain activity in different stages of learning (Zull 2002). As a result, he proposes a 'transformation line' within the meaning making (reflection) stage, corresponding to a transfer in brain activity from rear integrative cortex (taking in data and relating it to existing knowledge, identifying relevant information) to front integrative cortex (creating personal perspectives and new information by manipulating data) (p. 40). It appears that not all learners do the latter – some people (or all of us some of the time) simply reinforce existing theories without adjustment or addition, revision or rejection. For real learning to happen we need to go through all the stages.

The relational field

The relational field 'represents the mutuality and bi-directional nature of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee' where the participants 'maintain a curiosity about the relational processes between them that can act as supporting the supervisee' according to Chinnock (2011, p. 296-297). I propose that this inter-subjective relational field also exists between teacher and learner when the enclosing philosophy is one of authenticity, trust and equality.

What does this mean for 'relational learning'? If learning is a change in or expansion of the frame of reference we can also think of it as 're-doing' our meaning-making and some aspect of our identity.

To illustrate how these ideas can come together I will use a model that I find invaluable, derived from Sills and Mazzetti in their article on the Comparative Script System in supervision (2009). The focus of their article is on the value of using this model of the script in operation to enhance supervision in any field. Supervision is an archetypal example of experiential learning – reflecting on lived experience and making new decisions. I believe that the same ideas are fruitful in understanding the process of the relational approach in learning. While Sills and Mazzetti give examples of how the

model, with its understanding of the relational field, can be used to help supervisees work with clients, I think it can also be a straightforward picture of the learning relationship.

We designate four areas of script formation which correspond more or less to protocol, palimpsest, script proper and manifest, and also to the stages of the adaptive process mentioned earlier. In Figure 2 the four quadrants in each circle represent these aspects of experience and function. Early experience of relationship and interpersonal interaction is our primary data – consciously and unconsciously we hold onto it and replay the same dynamics (A). Our human process is to create meaning, through the repetition of experiences or sometimes because an event so profoundly affects us (B). This meaning, or the stories we tell ourselves about our experience, becomes our personal theory of existence, resulting in particular thinking and feeling which we believe to be ‘givens’ and lead us to expect certain outcomes (C). So we communicate and act in ways that derive from these habits of thinking and feeling (D), or we experiment with new behaviours and assess the result.

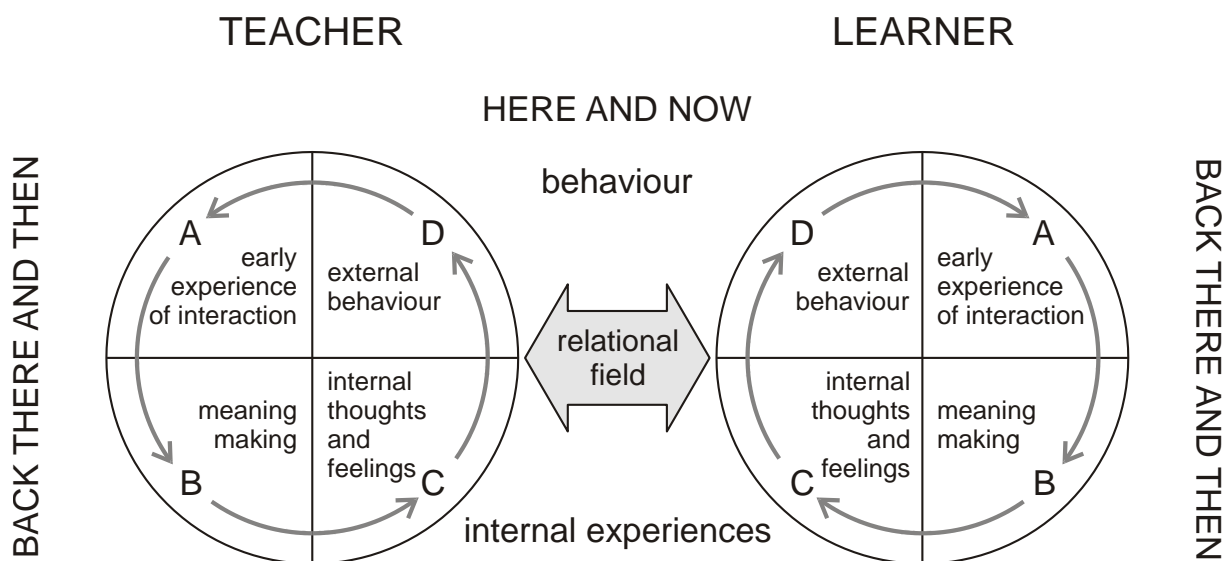


Figure 2 The relational field in learning (adapted from Sills & Mazzetti 2009 p. 309)

When we encounter each other first D and then C interact. This is the relational field, working with the interpersonal dynamics of both partners. The diagram gives visual impact to the insight and appreciation of the process at work in transformational learning. B and A are ‘back there and then’ in the past, and beyond the boundary of a learning relationship. But they profoundly affect what happens here and now. By interrogating and exploring here-and-now occurrence for both (or all) partners we begin to bring B into the light – though not always consciously. What happens next is the mysterious process of transformation – we can change the meaning we give to our experience. This re-doing is real learning, learning through lived out experience and it is mutual – both (all) will be affected. Shifting fragments re-align in a new pattern – a new story emerges; attitudes, beliefs and decisions about the self in learning are updated.

A participant in a recent workshop for supervisors expressed her response in this way:

This model made clear to me for the first time the ways in which I can work with script in supervision. The correlation of experience and making meaning (A and B) with the past and thinking/feeling and behaviour (C and D) with the present helps me to be very clear about where the script becomes useful rather than destructive. As I turn to face my supervisee, we meet in the present where the work is co-creating a new meaning for both of us. The work we are doing is internal, reflective work, facilitated by the supervisor. The supervisor

acknowledges that the work is mutual, my script now interacting with her script, within the contracted boundary of supervision, in order to change behaviour mainly for the supervisee, but acknowledging the change effected in me as supervisor by this encounter. It helped me to move from doing supervision to being a supervisor (Diane C, 2011, personal communication)

Discussion and conclusion

After these explorations we are left with some questions. How do we create a learning environment that encompasses the relational perspective? How do we incorporate it into regular education?

I have not attempted to provide a behavioural guide but to explore the psychological level of what happens in transformational learning, to offer a way of understanding for educators.

So what, as educators, do we do? First, create a psychological environment for learning that recognises and accepts the learner (while acknowledging the possible limits of his past experience) - and offers hope. Second, be authentic, open to change in oneself, and adventurous in learning relationships.

Education is the foremost means through which we construct and maintain our culture. We know that relationship is the ground for growth, development and change, not only for individuals but for families, groups, institutions and societies. How we are part of that change, day by day and moment by moment, is for each of us to decide – and to share and celebrate together.

References

- Barrow, G. 2009, Teaching, Learning, Schooling and Script *Transactional Analysis Journal* 39:4
- Chinnock, K. 2011 Relational Supervision in: Fowlie, H. & Sills, C. (eds) 2011, *Relational Transactional Analysis: Principles in Practice*. London: Karnac, p.295-303
- Clarke, J.I. and Dawson, C. (1998). *Growing Up Again (2nd edition)*. Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden.
- Dewey, J. 1938 *Experience and Education* New York: Macmillan
- Drego, P. 1983 The Cultural Parent *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 13:4, 224-227
- Fowlie, H. & Sills, C. 2011 *Relational Transactional Analysis: principles in practice* London: Karnac
- Freire, P. and Ramos, M. 1996, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (2nd ed, rev). London: Penguin Education (original work published 1973)
- Gopnik, A., Kuhl, P. and Meltzoff, A. 2001, *How babies think: the science of childhood*. Phoenix
- Hargaden, H. & Sills, C. 2002 *Transactional Analysis: a relational perspective* Hove: Routledge
- IARTA, 2011, International Association of Relational Transactional Analysts
www.relationalta.com
- Illych, I. 1972 *Deschooling Society* New York: Harrow
- Knowles, M. 1973 *The Adult Learner* Houston: Gulf
- Kolb, D. 1984, *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall
- Mezirow, J. 2000, *Learning as Transformation*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass
- Newton, T. (2003). Identifying Educational Philosophy and Practice through Imagoes in Transactional Analysis Training Groups, *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 33(4), pp. 321-331.
- Newton, T. 2006, Script, Psychological Life-plans and the Learning Cycle. *TAJ* 36
- Pratt, K. 2009, Creating conditions for the optimal functioning of Kolb's learning cycle. *Institute of Developmental Transactional Analysis Newsletter* 4:2 (available on www.instdta.org)
- Rogers, C. 1978, *Carl Rogers on Personal Power*. London: Constable

- Shmukler, D. 2011, The Use of Self in Psychotherapy. Key-note address, London IARTA Conference, in: Fowlie, H. & Sills, C. (eds) 2011, *Relational Transactional Analysis: Principles in Practice*. London: Karnac
- Sills, C. and Mazzetti, M. 2009, The comparative script system: a tool for developing supervisors. *TAJ* 39:4
- Steiner, C. (1987). The Seven Sources of Power: An Alternative to Authority. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 17:3, 102-104
- Stewart, I. 1992, *Eric Berne* London: Sage
- Summers, G. & Tudor, K. (2000) Co-creative transactional analysis. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 30(1), 23-40.
- Transactional Analysis Journal Theme Issue: Education, 34:3, 2004
- Tudor, K. 2003 The neopsyche: the Integrating Adult egostate in H. Hargaden and C. Sills (eds) *Ego States*, London: Worth p. 201-231
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zull, J. 2002, *The Art of Changing the Brain*. Stylus

Trudi Newton is an educational TSTA, writer, researcher and consultant on learning. Her background is in social work and adult education – she works nationally and internationally with educators to facilitate radical learning and community development.

4797 words