

Key concepts within transactional analysis



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In order for a student to learn and succeed within a classroom setting, a good and effective teacher is needed to facilitate the learning process. For a teacher to improve their performance, appropriate psychological theories should be studied and utilised, and the theory of Transactional Analysis offers teachers and trainers a means through which they can better understand what happens within the classroom on a social level.

Transactional Analysis was developed by Eric Berne, and has been defined as ' a theory of personality and a systematic psychotherapy for personal growth and change' (Joines and Stewart 1987, p. 3), and a knowledge of this theory is very useful in promoting communication skills, as ' transactions' refer to the communication exchanges which take place between people. This theory can assist teachers and trainers in enhancing their ability to direct transactions which occur within the classroom setting, thus creating a constructive outcome for both themselves and their learners. In learning to effectively apply transactional analysis, a teacher or trainer may gain more of an insight into the workings of human relationships. As Ashcroft and Foreman-Peck (1994, p. 137) observe: ' the point of transactional analysis is to examine what is going on in relationships that are not proving fruitful in order to decide whether the typical mode of interaction is helpful or not.' This allows them to derive more sense from the behaviour they see taking place around them and will ultimately allow them to assist their students more effectively and successfully.

Transactional Analysis is a very broad field which James and Jongeward (1996, p. 12) describe as:

A rational approach to understanding behaviour, and is based on the assumption that all individuals can learn to trust themselves, think for themselves, make their own decisions and express their feelings. Its principles can be applied on the job, in the classroom, in the home – wherever people deal with people.

The theory itself is highly complex, and is made up of a number of different concepts. However this essay will focus on three of the concepts within the field which are significant when discussed in relation to education; Ego States, Complimentary and Crossed Transactions and Stroking Patterns.

The notion of ego states is very prominent in transactional analysis, and Berne outlines ego states as ‘ a consistent pattern of feeling and experience directly related to a corresponding consistent pattern of behaviour’ (Berne 1966, cited in Stewart 1992, p. 12). According to this system everyone’s personality, regardless of their age or gender, is made up of three different ego states: Parent, Adult and Child, and each of these states represent certain behaviours. Claude Steiner (1994, p. 27) explains that ‘ The Parent, Adult and Child differ from the ego, superego and id in that they are all manifestations of the ego. Thus, they represent visible behaviour rather than hypothetical constructs.’ Each of us will express behaviour from all three ego states at times, and a healthy and balanced person will display behaviour equally from all three states, although it is true that many people will allow one (or possibly two) particular ego state to dominate them over the others. Hay (1996, p. 75) explains this more effectively, suggesting that we ‘ imagine that people are radios. An ego state can [...] be likened to a particular wavelength that a person is tuned to.’

Each ego state establishes the type of transaction which will take place between people, and Berne's model can be better understood when reacting to the recall exercises outlined by James and Jongeward:

Recall a childhood behaviour that you still use in getting something you want

– Child ego state.

Think of some rule or message received from a parent that you now repeat to your children and associates – Parent ego state.

Recall an incident during which – though emotional – you made a decision based on the fact and not based on urges and emotions – Adult ego state.

(James and Jongeward 1976, cited in Steere 1988, p. 27)

According to this description, the Adult ego state is evident when we are operating in a balanced and calm manner, and when we are making rational decisions before we act. However both Parent and Child could be considered as negative and disruptive in equal measure, as with Parent we are reproducing learned behaviour and projecting it onto someone else and with Child we are replaying thoughts, feelings and actions from our own childhood. Once a teacher is made aware of the ego states model, there are ways in which the knowledge is beneficial to them within the learning environment. For example, when dealing with conflict within the classroom, it is clear from these definitions that it can be very beneficial for teachers to adopt the Adult ego state and to be able to recognise the ego states of their students. Teachers should also be able to identify the psychological games which students may play when they are in the Child ego state, and should

consequently try to teach students to operate within the Adult. Furthermore, if a teacher is in the Parent ego state and a student is in the Child, a conflict will surely arise.

Conversely, this assumption can be problematic because as previously stated, an individual should (in theory) maintain a balance between all three ego states. Complicating this idea further, both the parent and child ego states can each be divided into two different styles, making it more problematic to maintain balance: Parent becomes Controlling Parent (negative, critical and unsupportive) and Nurturing Parent (helpful, comforting and supportive), and Child becomes Adapted Child (restrained behaviour, learned in response to others reactions - we are demonstrating that we know how to behave) and Natural Child (spontaneous and creative, yet rebellious) (Hay 1996, p. 81). When we divide the ego states into these subcategories, we can see more clearly that, however difficult, each individual should try to find a balance between them, as in education creativity and (constructive) criticism are just as important as rationality and problem solving. Taking these into consideration, it is evident that when combining the ego states, some combinations will unavoidably lead to negative communication and conflict. Each one of us has a preference of which ego state we like to be in, however in order for communication with students to be positive and successful a teacher must identify which ego state is speaking and respond accordingly or more effectively try to appeal to the students' Adult state so a more balanced and measured transaction can take place.

Evolving out of ego states is the concept of complimentary and crossed transactions. A complimentary transaction occurs when a particular ego state is addressed and responds from the same state, or when the sender of the transaction is given the intended response from the recipient. For example, when Adult speaks, and asks: 'When will the bus arrive?', and another Adult responds in the expected manner: 'It arrives at ten thirty.' As Hay (1996, p. 85) explains:

If I use controlling parent to address your adapted child, and you reply from adapted child to my controlling parent, we have a complimentary transaction. [...] The rule for a complimentary transaction is that communication can continue indefinitely.

For teachers, it is largely beneficial for transactions to remain complimentary, as this will allow communication with students to continue in an effective manner – communication will not be hindered.

The reverse of a complimentary transaction is a crossed transaction, which is a negative form of communication. This occurs when the receiver of the message responds to the sender in an unexpected manner, or when people communicate with each other through ego states which are incompatible. An example of this could be if Adapted Child says: 'I'm struggling with this task and finding it very difficult' and expects a reply from Nurturing Parent, which could be: 'It is a difficult task, but I am here if you need help', but instead receives a reply from Critical Parent: 'Be quiet and get on with it like everyone else, I am too busy to help you'. When responding in this manner,

communication cannot be maintained and a break will occur, as the message will be lost.

Crossed transactions can be very detrimental, and usually not allow communication to progress any further. However in some situations, crossed transactions are not ineffective and may lead to better results than a complimentary transaction. Sometimes, a complimentary transaction can be greatly unsatisfactory. A situation in which this may be the case arises when Controlling Parent is angry about a mistake that you have made. If you respond with Adapted Child and apologise, a complimentary transaction will occur, you are giving the Controlling Parent the opportunity to continue shouting at you. This complimentary transaction has no direction, and will not have a positive resolution. A more effective response is that of your problem-solving Adult in order to have a discussion. This transaction will be crossed, however if the complimentary transaction continues in this situation then the conversation will lead nowhere and no conclusion will be met.

Parikh and Gupta (2010, p. 243) presents the idea that:

Many times, in order to break the games of the other person, the prevailing ego state of the originator and the expected ego state of the responder need to be changed. [...] It will be a crossed transaction, but will lead to better results and would be in the interest of the [student].

As we can see, although crossed transactions will often result in arguments, disappointments and hurt feelings, they can also be useful when a negative ego response (for example from Parent or Child) is crossed with a balanced Adult response, and it is possible that the crossover may then develop into

an Adult to Adult conversation, which can be . Furthermore, a crossed transaction can be preferred to no transaction at all, due to a person's need for recognition, or ' Strokes'. Relating to the concepts of ego states and transactions is the concept of Stroking Patterns. ' Strokes' are a form of recognition, and during a transaction we exchange strokes and this can be both verbal and non-verbal. We all need strokes to thrive and survive both physically and psychologically, as Hay (1996, pp. 149-150) explains. She goes on to clarify that:

Any form of interaction with others is an exchange of strokes. We may touch someone, speak to them, or simply catch their eye and look away. Even the glance has shown we know of their existence and is therefore a stroke.

[...]Strokes may be positive or negative. Positive strokes make us feel OK about ourselves [...]. Negative strokes invite us to feel not OK about ourselves.

We can either continuously provide one another with (positive or negative) strokes, or conversely we can choose to withhold strokes from each other. By doing this we can build up a stroking pattern. The use of a stroking pattern can help build collaborations between student and teacher, which can then be used to try to create a greater deal of complimentary transactions, and to avoid crossed transactions unless they are necessary. When we use transactional analysis in education, we can build up a stroking pattern for ourselves as teachers, and furthermore we can understand how people give or receive positive or negative strokes and if we believe particular stroking pattern is detrimental or unhealthy within the classroom, we can change or

manipulate stroking patterns in order to provide a more harmonious and positive environment.

Not only can transactional analysis guide the teacher through transactions with students, but it can also assist in planning transactions by identifying which ego state a particular person is operating within and furthermore by inviting them to switch to a different ego state - one which will be more beneficial in a lesson. This way, a teacher is potentially able to resolve unacceptable behaviour. In conclusion, when examining and evaluating these concepts of transactional analysis, we can see that it is a tool which can be of great use to teachers within the classroom and can greatly assist in communicating with their learners.