

Creating a New Warm Up to Learning

GLENIS LEVACK

KEY WORDS

as if, coaching, doubling, encounter, learning style, mirroring, Moreno, parents, psychodrama, relationship, role, role training, warm up

Teenagers who are pregnant or who have a young child face many challenges in returning to school, especially when they have had a number of earlier learning experiences that have been discouraging. In this article, factors resulting in students feeling that they lack the capacity to learn are acknowledged and interventions that assist them to have a new experience of learning are described.

Theories relating to the concept of role, role training principles, warm-up, learning styles and spontaneity are outlined. Situations showing the integration of these theoretical concepts within the constraints of teaching mathematics in a school for teenaged parents are presented, particularly as they pertain to the work of creating a new warm-up to learning.

The context of the work is a school for teenage parents that bring specific complexities and constraints that demand creative approaches.

Aotearoa New Zealand has one of the highest rates of teen pregnancies in the developed world. A concern then becomes how to care for these teenagers and their need to continue their education while they have very young children, when many of them are no longer attending any educational facility. Many of the students have not attended school regularly, many have no positive experience of school and most have little experience of being successful learners. Drawing on my extensive work with a wide range of students in different settings and my close observation of these students, it became clear that a strong focus was needed on the students' warm-up to learning so they could develop a new response to what they perceived as an old situation and have a new and different engagement with learning.

Four key roles that are necessary for a good warm-up to learning and for sustained learning to occur are: the compassionate self-valuer, the creative organiser, the steady perseverer and the adventurous naive explorer. Over many years teaching I have noticed consistently that students' warm-up to learning is heightened when they have developed an adequate warm-up to these four roles.

The role of the compassionate self-valuer

For a student to sustain a good warm-up to learning, a sturdy ability to keep valuing oneself is required. A student requires courage to be involved in something new and to explore ideas without too much anxiety. They need to be willing to make mistakes and to be accepting when mistakes are made, to be willing to not understand and to ask questions. These are quite a challenge to anyone, let alone a student returning to school after absences or earlier unsatisfactory learning experiences. Many of the teen parent students I have worked with struggle with being able to continue valuing themselves in the face of the possibility of getting something wrong.

In every class, I encounter students dominated by self-criticism, full of self-doubt, with limited capacity to value themselves or to recognise their achievements and abilities – all of which are major obstacles to learning.

Getting to school is an achievement in itself

Mary walks to school pushing her baby in the buggy through her neighbourhood, head down, avoiding eye contact as she tries to ignore the stares, critical looks and comments from people in the street. This is how she arrives at school, fuming as she comes up the path.

Me: It's been hard work just getting here today.

Mary looks up at me silently, at first showing all her fury, then her eyes soften. She straightens herself and moves away towards the school room her body a little less stooped, her shoulders a little higher.

Comment

In this brief interaction I have warmed up as a double. I begin to enter Mary's world of feeling hurt by the jibes and rejection and her need to put on a brave face. I express myself in a way that is warm, accepting and companionable, applying the principle of doubling where I begin to enter the world of Mary as she is at this moment. By recognising and acknowledging the situation she has found herself in that morning, I validate her experience and demonstrate that her achievement in just getting to school is valued. I am modelling compassion, acceptance and valuing, which assists in developing the role of the compassionate self-valuer.

I express empathy and acceptance, which are essential components but only aspects of doubling. Empathy is a one-way feeling towards and into the experience of another. Doubling is a more intimate two-way feeling process where both parties are affected by each other. Doubling includes empathy and is also more complex. It involves tuning in physically, mentally and emotionally, as well as understanding, open enquiry, acceptance, imagination and genuineness.

A simple interaction such as this can help dissipate distress, counter

defensiveness and ward off a sense of failure. The small changes in Mary's demeanour indicate a shift in her warm-up where she is a little more relaxed and is valuing herself. It is a small moment in which I catch a hint of the role of compassionate self-valuer and in that moment a change in her warm-up as she moves towards the school room.

The role of the creative organiser

This role involves thinking ahead and being methodical. An inner stillness and discipline are required. Although it is not always apparent, it is important to note that many of the teen parents at the Teenage Parent Unit have the roles of the creative organiser well developed in some aspects of their everyday lives. A teenage parent getting ready for a school day is creative in the way they organise themselves and their child. Supplies of nappies, changes of clothes and maybe special baby foods need to be gathered up. This all requires thought, planning and an orientation to time.

Mathematics diaries

I discovered that maintaining a mathematics diary is a valuable way to help students begin to warm up to organising themselves and their work more effectively. Such a diary helps create a structure for the students' learning. Initially it is important for the students to learn to keep track of where they are up to in their work and to create a focus for the next lesson.

Time is set aside at the end of each lesson for the students to reflect on what they have accomplished and what they might do next. The students come to see that picking up their diaries and looking over what they have written at the end of the last lesson helps them warm up more quickly to the work they need to do. It is important to note that the students are all working from different material in individualised programmes, so a level of individual responsibility is required.

After a while I begin to write in their diaries, very often reflecting on something that is assisting them, building on any sign of newly emerging roles relating to strategic effort and organisation. Again, this is an application of mirroring and as a result the students gain a new awareness of their ability to learn and what is required in their warm-up to organising themselves in order to learn. Most students take a lively interest in what I write and many write several lines back in response, so that over a week or so a conversation emerges.

Me: I notice that you stopped to review your work before rushing on to the next exercise. I see that you were pleased with what you had accomplished. You are developing very good skills in solving even quite complicated equations.

Student: Thanks for believing in me. It helps a lot.

Me: I notice that you picked up your diary, read over what you had written last time and quickly settled to work. You looked confident and quite willing to try out something you have never done before.

Student: I used to be good at mathematics and now I am getting good at it again.

Once the diary writing is established, I take it another step further. Towards the end of some lessons, I ask the students to reflect on their experience, particularly relating to how they organised themselves. As a coach, I ask explicitly: "Did you come with all the right books and calculator? Did you have a focus for the topic you were on? Did you have an idea of what you might achieve?"

The role of the steady perseverer

I am aware that for some students just turning up at school, despite the challenges of the morning, is evidence of persevering. This role involves commitment, patience, steadiness, hope, resilience, self-control and a vision for life. Understanding and accepting that failure is part of learning requires plenty of experiences of both succeeding and failing. Failing is inevitable but it is not the end of the road, as learning can occur as a result of not getting things right. As students come to understand this, they are less likely to immediately doubt their competence. Strengthening the role of the steady perseverer is important because very often perseverance, rather than a focus on ability, is a winning strategy.

The role of the steady perseverer is essential to making progress in many areas of life; for example, in sport or fitness training, saving money, or completing tasks that have a number of steps. It requires commitment from within the person, a steadiness, as well as effort and discipline. This is also true of learning; it is so easy to give up when the going gets tough or the situation is distressing.

This role is underdeveloped in most of the students in the Teenage Parent Unit. Many of them have no experience of the benefit of staying with something that is considered hard or grappling with something and ultimately finding a solution. When students do not immediately succeed, they tend to lose hope. If the work becomes challenging or if something else looks easier or more attractive to do, the student typically loses interest in the work in front of them. They will often then openly reject any idea of continuing, or they seamlessly divert themselves. They have a great repertoire of distracting and avoiding behaviours and the challenge is to warm them up to staying on the task a bit longer.

Doing maths is dumb

Rose is a new student to the school and has had a series of difficult school and life experiences prior to coming to this Teenage Parent Unit. She has zero confidence in being able to learn and minimal capacity to stay with a task. We have not yet established a working relationship and I have carefully chosen work I think she can manage.

It is the start of the lesson, and everyone settles with their work books in front of them. Rose suddenly becomes angry and bursts out with "I am NOT doing this, this is dumb! I am going to go and do something else!"

Me: You don't want to do this; you want to go and do something else. Doing mathematics is very frustrating and maddening.

Rose stops sweeping up all her books, pens and calculator. She takes a breath.

Me: Mathematics can be very challenging because you know immediately if you cannot do the next line, you can't hide behind a whole lot of words. It would be so easy to walk away when this happens.

Rose stops. She does not walk away; she stays to have another go.

Me: Let's have a look at what you have done that did work out.

Rose settles back to the table and opens her book once more.

Rose is clearly surprised at my recognition of her frustration and the fact that I ignore her defiant challenge and accept her and the difficulties she is having. This acceptance, a key component of doubling, enables her to stay in relationship with me and I am able to build on this. Although Rose moves quickly into doubting herself, she can feel me alongside her and does not feel on her own in this time of stress as she faces the difficulty of the mathematics problem.

She feels accepted even when she hits a road block, gets angry and wants to give up. She experiences that it is one thing to have these feelings but that this is not the end of the road. She shows signs of an emerging willingness to stay with the task at hand, signs of a new warm-up. The role of steady perseverer that has been quite underdeveloped, both in this moment and in general, is in a process of developing.

If a student believes they are going to have the same outcome no matter what they try, or that they are just not smart enough, they will be reluctant to persevere. The focus needs to shift away from perceived lack of ability to what it is to persevere through sustained effort. I work with Rose so that she can realise that abilities are learned over time and that practice is required. As students persevere and experience the positive effects of doing this, hopelessness drops into the background and a new warm-up emerges.

The role of the adventurous naïve explorer

The role of an adventurous naïve explorer involves having a curious, questioning mind, a willingness to move into the unknown and an interest in trying out new ideas.

Many teen parents are challenged by the need to experiment, to take thoughtful risks and to come out of isolation and ask for help. Most students are fearful of admitting that they don't know something. They are also fearful about making mistakes. This makes it difficult for them to take a first step in a learning task. The role of the adventurous naïve explorer is underdeveloped and it takes significant effort to work with them to warm up to more openness in their learning.

I frequently encounter dependent and counter-dependent learning styles with these students. Their warm-up tends towards safety rather than to experimenting with different approaches to a problem. Linked in with the underdeveloped role of self-valuer, the students are often so uncertain about what will happen if they don't know, or if they are seen not to know something, that just trying something or asking for help is very challenging. A student needs to feel they will not be judged, rejected or humiliated if they ask a question or make a mistake. They need to warm up to the idea that it might be uncomfortable not to know something and that this is part of a learning process.

Understanding dependent learning styles has been invaluable in assisting me to work creatively with students where the expression of dependency can vary considerably from one student to the next.

Waiting, waiting...

Tyler is an unsettled and often disruptive student who is not familiar with learning success. At this point she has some proficiency but is still very lacking in confidence. It is common for her to act as if she doesn't know anything and she presents as helpless. After many months of working with her I decided to tackle this overdeveloped role.

Tyler arrives with her work, flicks her books open randomly, folds her arms, sits up, gives me full eye contact ... and waits. After some time, she bursts out, "I can't do this stuff!"

Me: It is not so comfortable when you think you can't do something. Not knowing is just part of learning but you are acting as if you don't know anything about this topic. What's more you haven't thought about looking back at any of the work you did yesterday.

Tyler looks surprised. She is quite still as she listens to me. She stays engaged with me.

Me: How about you look back at what you did yesterday and in a couple of minutes get back to me with any questions you might have.

Tyler turns to the correct page and looks down at her work with interest.

Tyler: I need to go over changing fractions to decimals again.

I remind her of the steps involved. Tyler then moves easily between fractions, decimals and percentages.

Tyler seems to have no idea about how to get started by herself or how to warm herself up to the next thing. She appears to be lost, as well as stubbornly dependent on me to begin. From what I know of Tyler, her defiance and her challenging attitude are a cover for her feelings of helplessness and it does not occur to her to ask me for help. She is clearly waiting for me to initiate something to assist her.

Applying aspects of doubling and mirroring together with some coaching helps Tyler get hold of something in herself and to begin to warm up to what she does know, which in this case is not insignificant. We are then able to build on this. Repeat experiences of being encouraged to review her work and to focus on what she does know helps Tyler build her courage to explore ideas on her own and also to accept me as a resource that she can feel free to call on rather than wait to be rescued.

It is an important part of a teacher's work to assist students with the transition from the outside everyday world into the learning environment. This involves working in a way that creates a fresh warm-up. Teachers who are willing to attend to the students' warm-up to learning before presenting content are likely to improve their relationship with their students and achieve better learning outcomes. This is particularly necessary when working with young people who have had earlier negative experiences at school and who face significant challenges in their warm-up to learning.

For anyone involved in teaching and learning, it is important to include a focus on the warm-up that is emerging moment to moment in the student, at the same time as attending to the content of the lesson. With appropriate interventions, it is possible to shift a person's warm-up so they are more open and focused on learning. An assessment of this warm-up forms the basis of interactions whether they occur between a teacher and student, a trainer and trainee, or a supervisor and supervisee.

A person willing to act as a stable auxiliary with a regular on-going and accepting relationship in a young person's life will be more effective if they learn to double them. This will help students overcome feelings of anxiety, shame and hopelessness as they approach learning. For teachers, it is important to train themselves to notice and mirror a student's functioning

as this makes it possible for them to build on what is adequate in what they are doing even when their warm-up is embryonic. A wider implication is that learning to be an auxiliary and to use doubling and mirroring would be beneficial to include as part of teacher training.

Moreno's role theory, the concept of warm-up and the principles of role training (Clayton, 1992, 1993, 1994; Clayton & Carter, 2004; Fink, 1962; Hollander & Hollander, 1978a, 1978b; Moreno, 1977; O'Rourke, 2005; Williams, 1985) have been integrated together with other learning theories to identify four key roles that are essential for learning, namely: the compassionate self-valuer, the steady perseverer, the creative organiser and the adventurous naive explorer. Specific moments working in situ with students where these roles have been identified as being largely underdeveloped, confirm that with thoughtful interventions it is possible to assist a student to develop these roles, creating a new and positive warm-up to learning.

Maintaining a strong focus on the warm-up of a student as they approach learning has a significant impact on whether they will be successful and be able to take advantage of a second chance at education. They begin to develop new responses to learning and move away from old patterns of behaviour that have not been helpful. The cumulative impact of interventions made with Teenage Parent Unit students to address previously negative learning experiences and create a more adequate warm-up to learning has shown that students can achieve considerable academic success.

REFERENCES

- Clayton, G.M. (1992). *Enhancing life & relationships*. Caulfield, Victoria: ICA Press.
- Clayton, G.M. (1993). *Living Pictures of the Self*. Caulfield, Victoria: ICA Press.
- Clayton, G.M. (1994). Role theory and its application in clinical practice. In P. Holmes, M. Karp, & M. Watson (Eds.), *Psychodrama since Moreno*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Clayton, G.M. & Carter, P. (2004). *The living spirit of the psychodramatic method*. Auckland: Resource Books.
- Fink, A.K. (1962). Some implications of Moreno's concept of warm-up for education. *Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama* 15(1)
- Hollander, C.E. & Hollander, S.L. (1978a). *The social atom and sociometry in education*. Denver: Snow Lion Press.
- Hollander, C.E. & Hollander, S.L. (1978b). *Action relationships in learning*. Denver: Snow Lion Press.
- O'Rourke, P. (2005). *Working with the warm up. The application of infant mental health principles and the psychodramatic method* (Thesis #10, AANZPA)
- Moreno J.L. (1977). *Psychodrama first volume* (4th Ed). Beacon, New York: Beacon House.
- Williams, A. (1989). *The passionate technique*. London and New York: Tavistock/Routledge.



Glenis Levack is a retired school teacher and school volunteer. Over 42 years she has taught in 7 different secondary schools, the last being a school for teenaged parents. This is where she most consciously brought her experiences of psychodrama training and supervision to the fore.