

John Dray

Set clear learning objectives and monitor the extent to which these are achieved

These are similar to last year:

1. Discern where the client wants to go.
2. Give the client time to process.
3. In group process look at my own process rather than rescuing the other.
4. Learn bracketing.
5. Tempo - somewhat too fast!
6. Learn to sit with difficult processes with compassionate curiosity
7. Get up-to-date with academic work

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N.B. References to page numbers in this document refer to my Personal Learning Journal  
(PLJ)

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## Reflection on the course experience in terms of your thoughts, feelings and behaviours

This year has been very different to last year. At the end of last year, I had a complete block on writing essays. I had spent many hours writing the notes, but when it came to finishing I was feeling a lot of anger and fear from the issues brought up in group process. I also felt a lot of shame at not being able to complete the work.

This was summed up for me by my reaction in the first group process of this year. I spent the first 30 minutes of the group process frozen in fear (p 1-2). This caught me by surprise, suggesting that unconscious processes were at play. Despite the change in constellation, the essay block remained. This was linked with a withdrawal from email and texting contact. Everything seemed frightening.

At the beginning of 2025 I did go on a 10-day silent Vipassana retreat. I found that this paralleled many of my experiences of mindfulness, but stuck with the sensation stage, rather than looking at emotions and thoughts. This really helped me strengthen my A - most notably in group process when I was both able to be involved by the process without being immersed in it (p 57). I have also taken up indoor climbing, as a new hobby. This has resulted in significant increase in physical sense and confidence. Finally, I had a stomach bug that both left me washed out, but with far greater mental clarity. All these seemed to lay the foundations for me writing all my essays (Objective 7). I have a theory about the stomach bug resetting my gut biome. But my recovery to getting 'back on form' was not due to a single factor.

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## Exploration of awareness of self in relationship

One of the things I am wondering about: As I have so much LGBTQ contact in my psychotherapy work, am I getting my 'quota'—leaving me open to people of all sorts in social contexts? I don't know the answer, but I do want to leave this as a marker to review next year. Reflecting on this, perhaps I am working through my own issues sufficiently that I am open to social contact with cis heterosexual men. One of the joys of being at the climbing centre is that, I am open about who I am, and it doesn't seem to have negative repercussions. It is great to feel accepted and acceptable. I am finding that the opportunity to explore my physical and mental capabilities in the context of climbing is amazing. The climbing community seems to be supportive of each other, as we literally have each other dangling on a rope in a life or death situation. I am still trying to remember why I went for that first taster session, but so glad that I did.

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## internal contact with self

I am a member of the local indoor climbing centre and I have learned how to 'top rope'. I like the irony of attachment here, as the premise of 'top roping' is that someone on the ground keeps the rope taut while I climb. Without the trust of a 'secure attachment' climbing in this style is impossible. This has been a regular pastime and results in me being physically fitter and healthier. It has also broadened my social network. This is not an LGBTQ echo-chamber, it is a space that seems to be accepting of the vast majority of people. In interacting with straight cis-males in an enjoyable, sporting activity I feel as if I am undoing some of the trauma of my childhood.

This fitness and social network has helped my mental health. It is an activity that requires total attention, so has 'flow'. It requires use of muscles, so is good at breaking down cortisol. It is away from social media and technology.

Recent personal therapy has involved noticing my legs. Feet are not a problem, specifically legs. At the residential I did a singing performance. While my top half was confident, my legs were trying to crumble beneath me. It was an act of will to continue to the end of the performance. It was interesting bringing this to therapy. Part of my poor relationship with my legs seems to be related to how my legs were pathologised - I had corrective heel inserts at age 3-4. Doctors were concerned that I sat strangely. At age 10, my teacher was worried about me being 'knock-kneed'. When my father was with us he would walk behind me when I was 3+ and deliberately kick my legs away. I was taught not to trust my legs. The work with climbing is teaching me to use my legs as a powerful part of my body that I can depend on.

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## quality of contact with peers

I still enjoy being with the peers I started with. There is a real joy of mutual care and 'looking out for each other'.

Being joined by the new second years felt very much as if I were joining their group.

The second years are a much larger group than us and they bring with them many processes from their first year. I do not know if it is because I felt silenced last year, but I do feel that there are members of the group who want to 'mother' men. I also feel that there are members of the group that want to 'rescue'. Some of these individuals act as if they have a high quality of contact with me, when they do not. I am wondering if my strong reaction to this is that I am trying desperately not to 'rescue' and 'therapise', so seeing others do it feels like a disruption of the emerging process, to one that is entwined with the rescuer. I see their 'faults' because they are also mine. Sitting with this seems to be an example of working towards objective 6.

In a recent weekend I was able to work through part of this relationship with a peer over an issue that arose. I was deeply grateful to the group for giving time to this. I was also relieved that although group members did not agree with me, we were still able to review the relationship and effect an honest, authentic repair based on a greater understanding of each other (p 77-79). While I still did not agree with other people, I was in admiration of their willingness to process. This felt to me a great point of learning about processing without being confluent. I also commented to the group that I was grateful for their willingness to work with male anger.

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## quality of contact with staff

I feel that WPI has been through a difficult, forced transition since last year. This has left a lot of 'shrapnel' and unexploded 'bombs' around. This was brought to the fore during the Shame weekend (p 40-46). It **seemed** to cause a lot of rupture between staff and individual students. However, in their communications the staff and those students did not feel as if they were seeing each other. I think they were speaking to situations, rather than each other. For me, it brought back feelings of being a small kid while the adults argued. I am impressed by the efforts that WPI has made to facilitate the possibility of repair.

The foregoing is relevant, as my response to this situation, rather than a reaction, brought about a real change in my quality of contact with another member of staff. They had changed my contact with my own emotions through their demonstration of projective identification (Page 1, 20-9-24). They listened when I spoke of my difficulties with my essays. As a result of my response, some time later they said kind words and gave a hug on the residential. This meant a lot.

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## quality of contact with clients

Although I had my Affordable Therapy Service (ATS) application processed at the beginning of the second year, I did not activate it until the beginning of the third year.

I have had a steady stream of clients applying. My advertising has been about being an LGBTQ-safe space. This has yielded a majority of my ATS clients from this community. As this is a relatively small community from relatively small towns in SW Wales, there has been discussion with my supervisor about managing boundary issues.

Work in 'real therapy' has addressed objectives 1 & 2—my pace and direction with clients is slower and more appropriate than in fishbowls/triads. Part of this is probably due to 'performance anxiety' in fishbowls and triads.

Bracketing seems to be coming easily. Although I deeply care for my clients, they are not perpetually on my mind, unless I have some safeguarding issue to advance. This works towards objective 4. There are still some clients that stay with me long after I have ceased seeing them. Similarly, the work with Deb Dana on Polyvagal Theory has helped towards objective 5. I notice my activation state before a client arrives and try to ensure that I am in a ventral vagal state. I can then see if I am departing from that state during a session. In a recent session with an activated client he kept thanking me for breathing for him. My exhales reminded him that he was holding his breath.

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## quality of contact with significant others

A new year, a new significant relationship. This year I asked a friend if he wanted to be more than just a friend. He did. For the first time, I think I have found an adult to be in relationship with. Perhaps all the work in therapy and on this course has finally paid off. He is respectful. If one of us cannot make a time to meet, then we may be disappointed, but there are no recriminations. He is a counsellor, so has done a lot of work on himself. When we meet it is a pleasure. We have discussed the parameters of the relationship and have agreed that we would like an open relationship, to satisfy areas where our sexualities do not overlap.

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## Discussion of your ability to relate personal development to professional practice.

The significant work of my personal therapy has been looking at strengthening the Adult (in a Transactional Analysis context). In addition to therapy, there have been a number of activities that have helped with this:

- Attending a two-day course on Polyvagal Theory really allowed me to notice the activation state of my nervous system.
- Climbing - for me this has achieved many of the goals of Mindfulness.
- Vipassana retreat - I really got a lot of benefit from noticing how certain sensations could relate to different historical experiences.
- One-day Internal Family Systems (IFS) course - this seems to build on the work of the Vipassana retreat in terms of talking about protective parts and burdens.

Bringing these together, I have been able to be more present in the therapy room. I am more aware of what is going on for me. I am more able to notice my self and I link this to the work on Adult. Learning about the questioning of protective parts in IFS has given me insight into an even more **compassionate** curiosity when exploring issues with clients and myself.

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## Comment on your level of participation in experiential aspects of the training

I have continued to offer to do fishbowl as therapist. With the larger group, this year, I have had far fewer opportunities to do this.

In group settings, despite the perceived danger, I have grown in my levels of honesty. At the residential I was able to do a couple of numbers during the social evening. I seemed to surprise a few people with my vocal and musical talent. It was a great pleasure to do, and a great pleasure to have so much positive feed-back. It was fascinating to notice that while my top half was confident, my legs were trying to buckle under me with nerves. It was good to spend time processing this with my therapist afterwards.

At the residential, I was also able to explore deep emotions surrounding 'global environmental catastrophe'. This helped me engage enthusiastically in the sculpt that we produced as a group.

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## Demonstrate your commitment to personal growth and development

I have committed a lot of time to Continuing Professional Development (CPD) this year. This amounts to more than 80 hours in addition to my time with WPI.

- Marian Fry Lecture (The Enormity of Now) (in person)
- Erotic Transference - 2 day course exploring erotic transference in psychotherapy (online)
- OU Online Counselling: advancing your knowledge - building on the OU course I took last year (online)
- Agored Cymru: Working in Sexual Violence Settings (17/12/24) - I completed the academic work for this, in conjunction with New Pathways, and received 4 units at level 3
- Working with Transgender and Gender Questioning Clients - two day course with New Pathways (in person)
- Volunteering to participate in interview process (online)
- Introduction to IFS - one day course (in person)
- Safeguarding with WPI - one day course (in person)

In addition to my personal therapy, I have also engaged in some group therapy facilitated by my therapist. (2 days/12 hours).

I have also taken up the new hobby of indoor rock climbing. I am finding that this is not only a physical exercise, but also improves my understanding of my body.

I have volunteered with a number of groups:

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- Men's Group/Lived Experience Group (NP<sup>1</sup>)
- Men's Group (WPI)
- Men's Group/Lived Experience Group (NP)
- LGBTQ Research Group
- Peer supervision (with WPI students)

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<sup>1</sup> New Pathways

## Clearly demonstrate reflective practice in relation to your fishbowl and triad experiences as both therapist and as client

For me, fishbowl is an opportunity to try things that I would not necessarily try with a 'real client', even though I acknowledge that the client is bringing real issues and, from an ethical point of view, should be worked with in a respectful manner—the same as a client in one of my placements. That is **not** to say that I wish to experiment in a cruel manner, but I do wish to find out what works, in a contract with a real person, in the context of the safety of a fishbowl. I could sit and use very 'bland' techniques that I know work in most situations, but that would significantly stunt my opportunities for learning. From an ethical stance, I do stress that I attempt to do this in the context of contracting with the client and that I am intending to cause no harm.

I find being a client for triad and fishbowl work very trying. I do not enjoy small-talk and the bringing of 'small issues' seems difficult—it feels dishonest, and when a small thread is pulled in a woven garment it can still leave a big hole. In one instance, I found that I was left with a lot of shame (pp 4-8) In another, I felt that the therapist danced around the issue so that I was left unsatisfied (pp 12-13). In another experience (pp 85-86), I found that the therapist did not listen. I knew that to close my eyes would be very destabilising. Despite stating this clearly the therapist **still** asked me to close my eyes. This did give me opportunity for self-reflection on my (then) frozen state.

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## Comment on your learning from written assignments and identify any areas for further development

At one stage in the year I hit a real block on writing essays. I set aside many tens of hours to complete them and would find ways to look at virtually anything else.

I know that I enjoy writing the essays. I am always challenged by the material. I enjoy the learning. Yet, I avoid writing them at all costs. I find this very frustrating. Only recently have I begun to discover the depth of this process. I can see where it comes from. I can see how I cultivated it growing up. Recently, I had a conversation with my mother about the incident where my father attacked me with a garden spade. This was the first time we had really spoken about it since it happened. She remembered a lot about the aftermath of the incident, but had not witnessed my dad throwing the spade at me. Whenever I mentioned the word spade she would attempt to verbally delete that part of the sentence. I took that to my therapist and explored my mum's avoidance that I had learned to enact in my own life. Now I am beginning to be aware of how the process works, I hope to be able to successfully challenge it.

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## Identify areas of learning and development that you wish to focus on in the year ahead

I am continuing to enjoy working with New Pathways. I am expecting that this will come to an end in around November. It was particularly lovely to hear from my supervisor that she had put me forward for 'best volunteer'.

My private practice through the Affordable Therapy Scheme (ATS). Using the marketing techniques that I learned in earlier careers, I know to market to a niche. My niche has rewarded me richly with interesting and diverse clients. I currently have clients with 5 different gender designations and I hope for many more!

With this diversity comes the responsibility to do more study in the areas of gender-diversity and neuro-diversity.