

# Reviews

Book Review

## ***Fragile Learning: The Influence of Anxiety***

By David Mathew

Publisher: Karnac Books (2015)

ISBN: 978-1-7822025-9-2

Price: £40

Rapid advances in technology and the resulting ubiquity of the internet have accelerated the development of a society that seems both aggressively fragmented, and yet interconnected to an unprecedented degree. As a result, twenty-first century learners and educators are presented with both challenges and opportunities unique to our time. *Fragile Learning* is a collection of essays attempting to explore, from a psychoanalytic perspective, how learners and educators cope with a range of demands and circumstances against this backdrop of modernity.

David Mathew, with contributions from former University of Bedfordshire colleague Susan Sapsed, seems well placed to make that exploration. A prolific writer, he has published academic, journalistic and fictional works on various subjects including psychoanalysis, distance learning, prisons, and online anxiety. His writing style is fluent and accessible, except for some of the sections dealing with psychoanalytic theories: here the reader is made to work a little harder. Although I have lived in a therapeutic community that uses a psychodynamic approach, I came to this book with limited formal knowledge of psychoanalytic theory. Perhaps the difficult language employed in such passages is to some extent an occupational hazard of engaging with the discipline of psychoanalysis, but I don't think the

language of psychoanalytic interpretation needs to be as dense as it is at times in this book.

The 15 chapters of this book are non-sequential essays not originally intended for publication as a volume, and the book has at times a shapeless, disjointed feel as a result. The material is grouped into two parts, 'Challenges to Learning' and 'Online Anxiety', the latter being much the stronger. The connection of some of the Part 1 material to the stated themes of the book is tenuous at best, the first chapter being a good example. 'Prison Language' examines prison dialect and the functions it serves from a psychoanalytic viewpoint. Mathew was employed at a jail in an educational capacity, but few of his observations relate to the roles of learner or educator. The tone is not a little patronising—reminiscent of some intrepid anthropologist intrigued and delighted by partial acceptance among a tribe, and by unpicking their codes of interaction. Reading this as a prisoner, I felt quite badly stereotyped—or as Mathew would no doubt expect me to say, 'Man was vexed, you get me?' The psychoanalytic explanations for prison slang are interesting enough, but a poor fit for this book. The same accusation can be levelled at Chapter 7, in which we return to the prison. This time, Mathew uses a psychoanalytic approach to explain the anxiety produced by a visitor's non-appearance, and from this he launches an exposition around the future of psychoanalysis.

'The Stable Group' (Chapter 3) is another misfit. It was conceived as an attempt to 'apply both psychoanalytic and psychological theory to group dynamics and leadership' (p.45) observed in a

livery stable over a ten-week period. Mathew reports that this activity serendipitously furnished him with 'a wealth of insights about equine-human interdependencies, and the psychology of human interactions with horses'. Firstly, I suggest that he exaggerates his harvest—the period he observes is so uneventful as to produce musings that border on the inane, such as 'In the absence of palpable tension or anxiety, can this absence itself create and brew up tension and anxiety?' Secondly, both the intended and serendipitous findings discussed are again of doubtful relevance to the stated aims of the book.

These chapters and others in Part 1 feel as though they have been included to boost this volume up to book length. This is a pity as it threatens to detract from better material around them. Chapter 2 considers the anxieties experienced by international distance learning students in challenging circumstances, and Chapter 4 examines the ethical issues in problem-based learning on a Masters programme in Public Health, and the emotions and anxieties provoked by troubling case studies.

If Part 1 feels unfocused and patchy, Part 2 has more to recommend it. In it Mathew tackles topics including cyberbullying, the role of an online learning personal tutor, and how conflict can be harnessed as a tool to stimulate productivity. The ways in which learners and educators interact with the internet, the anxieties those interactions provoke, and the psychoanalytic explanations underpinning these responses inform these chapters. This is thoughtful and interesting work,

but it is hard not to think that the author could have taken the material from the essays of which Part 2 is comprised, and reformulated them into a sustained analysis, with different sections. Instead, these thematically connected pieces sit side by side with no acknowledgement of their neighbours, and the opportunity to build on or interact with analysis from previous chapters is lost. For example, in 'CE-Learning, time, and unconscious thinking' Mathew draws on the work of Klein, Bion, Freud and Lacan in discussing the anxieties bound up in learners' perceptions of time and memory—but also makes psychoanalytic observations about the student/tutor dynamic in online learning. The subsequent piece, 'The role of the online learning personal tutor' could clearly have picked up this thread and developed it; that this does not happen feels like an opportunity missed.

Ultimately this book stands or falls on the value of the psychoanalytic approach. To my reading, the approach is unevenly applied. While some chapters include sustained efforts to understand the research material through this lens, in other places it feels reductive and cursory. Where it was followed, I was often left feeling unsure that the psychoanalytic explanations had 1) been particularly convincing, 2) increased my understanding of the dynamic or anxieties under discussion, or 3) had served much in the way of useful purpose. For example, in 'E-Learning, time, and unconscious thinking' I expected the mapping of e-learning experiences onto a psychoanalytic model to conclude by extending the theory to imagine how the delivery of e-learning might be tailored to anticipate and alleviate anxieties predicted by the model. This didn't happen, reducing the purpose of the analysis to little more than an intellectual exercise. Mathew himself

comments: 'Psychoanalysis tells us much about the human condition, albeit largely at the level of metaphor. It is the charge of the educator to employ this knowledge, in order to improve the student experience.' (p. 175). More discussion of how this might look would have been welcome.

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#### Book Review

##### ***Transgender. Behind Prison Walls***

By Sarah Jane Baker

Publisher: Waterside Press (2017)

ISBN: 978-1-909976-45-0

(paperback)

Price: £14.95 (paperback)

Sarah Jane Baker, as the book explains (p. vii), is a transgender woman serving a life sentence in a men's prison. She was formerly known as Alan Baker before her transition in 2011 and has spent over 25 years in prison having received a discretionary life sentence for the attempted murder of another prisoner. With a rise of interest in and acknowledgement of transgender prisoners seen through the introduction of Prison Service Instruction 17/2016, this is the first book to detail the experience of being a transgender female in a male prison.

The book is arguably divided into three sections. The first looks at the practical realities of being a transgender prisoner. This includes sections on cell sharing, make-up, clothing for transwomen, change of name and who to inform and applying for a gender recognition certificate. Also covered is advice on toilet use, how to cope with media attention, wigs and hairpieces, gender identity appointments and the use of hormones. In many respects these

short 'chapters' offer a bible for those prisoners undertaking a similar path to Sarah Jane.

The second section then looks at the real life experiences of Deanne (HMP Oakwood), Nicola (HMP Dovergate), Laura (HMP Downview) and the authors own story. These share the many traumatic experiences which these women have had to endure during their transition process. Many have experienced verbal abuse and some physical abuse. Nicola speaks about being 'laughed at, ridiculed and called many colourful names' (p. 79); while Sarah Jane reports a catalogue of physical assaults received from both prison staff and fellow prisoners. The postscript ends with a confession from the author of having performed her own bilateral orchiectomy.

The third section is made up of seven appendices which contain Prison Service Instruction 17/2016; gender identity clinics in England; suppliers to transgender prisoners (for clothes and other items); relevant magazines and books; transgender support groups; specialists in the field of gender dysphoria; and, other key addresses. In short it is a catalogue of useful information to help transgender prisoners circumnavigate themselves through a process where often there is very little external support. For this reason the book is useful for those prisoners facing this journey but I think is also useful for prison staff to try and help them understand the complexities of this process. The author argues that in many cases it is for the Prison Governor to decide on matters such as having female clothing and make up and having an awareness of this book and its contents may help Governors in this position to make better informed decisions.

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