

# Catching Them Early: Teaching Psychoanalysis to High School Students

Leon Hoffman

I was invited to lead a discussion on psychoanalysis with a group of eleventh- and twelfth-graders at a private school in New York City. The students who attended were in an advanced-placement history class (studying nineteenth-century European history and its impact on modern times) and an AP psychology class. There were about thirty-five students present.

The class prepared by reading an article I had written on Dora (and the lesson from Freud on the centrality of listening) that was published on Medscape (<http://www.medscape.com>). My comments to the class focused on the relevance of Freud's discoveries and his place in our world similar to those of Einstein and Darwin. I compared Freud's ideas to Copernicus's revolutionary proposal that the earth is not the center of the universe; both men attacked humans' egocentricism.

I led off, in my ten- to fifteen-minute opening (the class was forty minutes altogether), with a summary of central psychoanalytic ideas: the unconscious, how the past influences the present, and the centrality of the individual. I briefly presented contrasting views of the centrality of sexuality in mental life over the decades. I explained that people continue to be frightened of the idea that all of us have passions of which we are aware and not necessarily in control. I explained a broadened concept of sexuality that includes a variety of passions beyond genital sex.

I then went into a discussion of the *Interpretation of Dreams*. I gave some historical background, describing Freud's self-analysis following his father's death and his activity as a neurologist (working with children and writing the aphasia book). I explained that Freud eventually gave up his attempts to reconcile psychology with neurology because of the primitive state of neurology at the time, in contrast to where we are now a century later.

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Photo: Mervin Stewart

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It was striking to me how intently everyone was listening, although I was not sure what was being absorbed. I then opened things up for questions.

After less than a minute of silence, one student asked the first question. Many more questions followed. The rest of the period was Q&A, with the teacher eventually saying we had to stop.

## DEFENSE ANALYSIS IN PLAIN LANGUAGE

One question was asked many times in various permutations: "How do you know that the psychologist, therapist, analyst is not putting ideas into the kid's head? If so many people have criticized Freud, why should we believe in him?"

Responding to this allowed me to discuss the importance of the analyst undergoing his or her own analysis to understand his or her own blind spots. I told the students about all of the discussions analysts have about the validity of their hypotheses and how analysts are trying to study how psychoanalysis works.

On the topic of sex, as in "Didn't Freud only talk about sex?" I said that at first Freud's idea was that if you simply identify symbols in dreams or other things, the patient would be cured. This is what many people still think psychoanalysis is all about, I said, but Freud and other analysts discovered that this doesn't work all of the time (or even most of time). Therefore, psychoanalysts have learned that what we have to do is understand how a person's blind spots affect his or her thinking and action.

I realized that for the first time I had found a way to explain in non-technical language what defense analysis is: the analysis of blind spots. I gave as an example the task of showing a patient his difficulties in talking about anger at the therapist

by pointing out how the a patient shifted the topic away from expressing anger at the therapist to expressing anger at Saddam Hussein.

In response to some questions about false memory syndromes, I was able to talk about perception and memory and compare analytic ideas with the theories of "bottom-up" and "top-down" brain activity, which the eleventh-graders in the psychology class knew about. They understood very well that perceptions depend on one's past experience (top-down) and not on the exact nature of the stimulus (bottom-up).

I also discussed the concept of transference using the example of Mayor Giuliani on September 11, 2001—how New Yorkers trusted him and regarded him as a parent-like figure during a time of stress. I also gave the example of coming home from the office and unconsciously taking out your anger with your boss on your spouse.

Finally, there were several questions about hypnotism and self-analysis. One student asked, if Freud performed self-analysis after his father died, couldn't we all do self analysis? I said that since we are all not Freuds or Einsteins, we need to have someone else point out our blind spots.

The teacher asked the final question: What was the future of psychoanalysis, given all the use of medications today? I quoted the *New York Times* from 1996. On the hundredth anniversary of the Sunday magazine, the *Times* said that both immunology and psychoanalysis would be around 100 years hence. I told the students that our goal as psychoanalysts is to achieve a better integration of how the mind works and how the brain works. I mentioned the journal *Neuro-Psychoanalysis* as a venue for this kind of integrative work.

I ended my class session with the idea that psychoanalysis stresses the importance of the individual. I had earlier said that in the 1930s both Stalin and Hitler banned psychoanalysis because the psychoanalytic emphasis on the individual is a threat to the totalitarian state. We are learning that medication is not enough and that talking and understanding are important.

This was a marvelous opportunity to sharpen my skills in communicating complex ideas in simple language. Talking with these bright youngsters was an energizing moment.

APSA