‘Our Best Work Happens When We Don’t Know What We’re Doing’ Discuss

Published as:

Abstract

The article challenges the dominant assumption that the key to working effectively as academics, organizational researchers, consultants, managers or teachers is to know what we are doing. Instead, it proposes that learning comes from working at the edge between knowing and not-knowing. Wilfred Bion’s assumption was that the mind grows through exposure to truth - but it is a ‘truth’ which must continually be discovered in the moment. The authors are less concerned with precise methods, practices or techniques than with the analysis of the disposition or state of mind, which can make it possible to bear the tensions and uncertainties that arise when one leaves behind the security of the known.

Key words: learning, edge, not-knowing, truth-in-the-moment

Introduction

Our aim in this paper is to explore how and why we do what we do, in our work as academics, with particular reference to some of the ideas and theories of Wilfred Bion.

It has been suggested that Bion’s: ‘only assumption’ was that ‘the mind grows through exposure to truth’ (Symington and Symington, 1996, p.3; their italics). By growth of mind, Bion meant the ability to act more consistently and rigorously in relation to truth. This truth Bion ‘named’ with the symbol ‘O’: the ‘imminent’ reality of anything whatever (1984a, p.147). We refer to this as truth-in-the-moment.

In keeping with our own thinking and with the specific context of our own work, our version of Bion’s assumption about the effects of exposure to truth is that learning comes from working at the edge between knowing and not-knowing. The core activity linking our organizational research, consultancy, management and teaching - namely, ‘learning’, or ‘growth of mind’ - involves exposure to truth-in-the-moment. This depends on the capacity to stay at the edge between knowing and not-knowing.

In this paper we do not intend to try to prove our assumption. Instead, we will explore the ideas behind it and illustrate its implications for our work. We argue that ‘not knowing what we are doing’ constitutes a working method which involves a focus upon truth-in-the-moment. This method requires the adoption of an appropriate disposition to engage with not-knowing, comprising (i) a conviction that learning may come from working at this edge between knowing and not-knowing; and (ii) a preparedness to wait until a pattern forms and the necessary insight is gained. We will illustrate the method of ‘not knowing what we are doing’ from our practice.
We conclude by considering the extent to which it is possible to call this ‘best work’ and the relationship between knowing and not-knowing.

**Working at the edge between knowing and not-knowing**

The task of learning involves working at the edge between knowing and not-knowing. This implies two necessary elements for effective work: firstly, an appropriate level of knowledge and, secondly, being disposed to engage with not-knowing.

At times all parties are prepared to work at this edge. The necessary combination of knowledge and disposition is shared. However, as teachers or consultants we are often expected to do this work on behalf of others because we are ‘the ones who know’. The edge between knowing and not-knowing is not attainable if one does not have the necessary knowledge-base, and in such situations it is a reasonable expectation that our students or clients are informed by us.

At other times, our situation is more reminiscent of that of the analyst as Bion characterises it: ‘An individual comes to see me; he thinks I am a psycho-analyst; I think he is a patient. In fact I don’t know.’ (1978, p.14.) Our students or clients want us to know because this takes the responsibility and anxiety of not-knowing away from them. But, the truth is that in many situations we do not know what others require us to know. What all parties need is not knowledge but something not known. The disposition that allows them to engage with not-knowing is the particular focus of our discussion in this paper.

Adopting such a disposition is difficult. For example, whilst our ignorance can sometimes be predicted it frequently comes as a surprise. Not-knowing is an experience which has two forms or dimensions. First, in the pressure of the moment, ‘what we know’ is, time and again, simply not available to us; what we thought we knew, or did indeed know once, disappears in action; when we are ‘under fire’, to use Bion’s metaphor, *we often simply do not know what we know*. Second, and more disturbingly, if we are honest with ourselves, it really is true that much of the time *we actually do not know what we are doing*.

However, it has gradually dawned on us that, as a way of thinking, this experience or state of not-knowing-what-we-are-doing can be extremely practical, providing we can deal well enough with its negative manifestations (our anxiety and uncertainty, for example, or the sense of futility or fear of incompetence). To know why things are the way they are, we need to attend to those elements of our experience that we normally avoid, deny or repress, to learn from the *un*-known, the *i*-gnored, the *un*-conscious, das *Un*-bewuβte. Not-knowing leaves the space empty for new insight, as long as we can deal adequately with the way in which our fear of this emptiness drives us to fill it with knowing (Bion, 1991, p.578).

In writing about his own personal and intellectual development, Paul Tillich chose the image of the ‘boundary’ to symbolise the experience of living, working and searching for truth at this edge between knowing and not-knowing:

> The boundary is the best place for acquiring knowledge. ... Since thinking presupposes receptiveness to new possibilities, this position [between alternative possibilities for existence] is fruitful for thought; but it is difficult and dangerous in life, which again and
Tillich’s notions of disposition and tension capture essential elements of the experience of the search for truth and for learning at this edge. Bion’s genius was rooted in just such a disposition and tension: on the one hand, his uncompromising disposition to seek truth with passion and rigour; on the other, the tension between this disposition and his conviction that the truth always remains out of reach: ‘the unknown, unknowable, “formless infinite”’ (1984b, p.31).

**Tension**

The uncertainty at the edge between knowing and not-knowing can be exciting and can provoke significant learning. However, it is often unsettling and anxiety-provoking. It can inspire a sense of incompetence, fear and loss of control, and can obliterate all sense of role and identity and of the task in hand.

This edge has been described - in the language of the apophatic tradition which Bion explicitly adopted - as a ‘cloud’ or ‘dark night’¹. This is not a night as we know the night in our electrified and urbanised experience, but a truly bewildering and terrifying night, where nothing can be seen, where there are no clear roads as we know them, and where there are, by contrast, real dangers to safety and even to life. This is the basis for Bion’s comment that ‘In every consulting room there ought to be two rather frightened people: the patient and the psycho-analyst. If they are not one wonders why they are bothering to find out what everyone knows.’ (Bion, 1990, p.5.)

If it were possible to have perfect faith in truth-in-the-moment then it would be possible always to hold on to this disposition and to contain its inherent tensions. However, it is asking too much of anyone to become always at the mercy of what is unknown and unknowable.

Far from focusing exclusively on the ‘unknowable unknown’, we are, of course, preoccupied with day-to-day issues and problems, with time, finance and relationships, with choosing the right clothes, and with developing a career. Our capacity to move fully to the edge of knowing/not-knowing is tempered by our resilience and by our courage, as well as by our knowledge-base and our choice. For example, in a group on a course for senior managers the most obvious single dynamic was that, week after week, two members, one male and one female, never spoke. Everyone ‘knew’, and yet for most of the time it seemed that no-one had even noticed - and I [RF] did not know how to intervene. At that time, I had not learned to conceptualise such moments as being at the edge between knowing and not-knowing. I was caught up in having to know before I could intervene, in having to ‘get it right’. My failure of courage at that edge meant that I did nothing.

**Disposition**

To work at the edge between knowing and not-knowing requires a ‘disposition’ that has two elements. First, the fundamental ‘assumption’ that ‘the mind grows through exposure to truth’, that *learning comes from working at the edge between knowing and not-knowing*. Without this
unswerving conviction the experience of not-knowing will not be tolerable and may be perceived as pointless.

The second, related element of the disposition is that one must ‘wait’, until a pattern forms and the desired insight comes: ‘an attitude of pure receptiveness ... an alert readiness, an alive waiting’ (Eigen, 1985, p.326). Exposure to truth in this manner, whilst ultimately unattainable, creates the potential for growth of mind by offering possibilities for new thought. (See, for example, Symington and Symington, 1996, p.123.)

For example, the final large group session at a group relations conference began with a participant recounting a dream in which she had returned home and had not been recognised by her husband. This dream gave voice to her fear of the profound level of change that she was experiencing, but the fear of the implications of new learning was not hers alone. Some way into the second half of the session, I [RF] had made one contribution. My male colleague had spoken three times, but the third consultant, a woman, had said nothing. At this point she spoke, and I had a strong sense that she and my other colleague could see much better than I what was happening in the group and that I should keep quiet. With a sense of failure and uselessness, I felt caught in the middle between two people who knew. Before I went into a ‘free-fall’ of self-deprecation, however, it occurred to me that I might, in these very feelings of inadequacy, be in touch with the imminent reality of a part of the experience in the group. Fortunately the insight had come without having to wait too long! I had a feeling of certainty, which was in stark contrast to my previous mood. I suggested that some people, far from feeling they had changed beyond recognition, might be feeling that they had learned nothing and that they would never be able to change however hard they tried.

The disposition required to work at the edge has been described in many ways, for example:

- Keats’ ‘Negative Capability’, used by Bion (for example, 1978, p.8; 1984b, p.125): ‘when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’ (Keats, 1970, p.43);
- Freud’s ‘evenly suspended attention’ - not in the sense of providing a ‘blank screen’ for the patient to ‘project’ onto, but of providing the conditions for one evolving O to intersect with another evolving O;
- Needleman’s capacity for ‘intermediate being’, in the tradition of Meister Eckhart and St John of the Cross, which Bion used so creatively: ‘the soul of man exists only for a moment, as long as it takes for the Question to appear and then to disappear’ (Needleman, 1990, p.167);
- the ‘yoga of knowledge’, from the Bhagavad Gita, from which Bion also quoted: ‘renunciation of fruit [i.e. work done without anxiety about results] is yoga, the art of living’ (Bhave, 1981, p.17; Prabhavananda and Isherwood, 1972, p.41);
- Hugh of St Victor’s teaching on the discipline, or ascetics, of learning: ‘The wise student, therefore, gladly hears all, reads all, and looks down upon no writing, no person, no teaching. From all indifferently he seeks what he lacks, and he considers not how much he knows, but of how much he is ignorant’ (in Illich, 1993, p.16);
- St Thomas Aquinas’ valuation of different ‘levels’ of knowing: ‘the slenderest knowledge that may be obtained of the highest things is more desirable that the most certain knowledge
obtained of lesser things’ (Summa Theologica, I, 1, 5 ad 1, quoted in Schumacher, 1978, p.11).

A consultancy project - Part one

Recently, I [PS] took on a consultancy assignment with a team that was described as malfunctioning. They were looking for two team-building ‘away days’. However, on setting up a preliminary meeting with the team, it turned out that there were two factions within the one ‘team’. In the event, only four of the eight people turned up and, in addition, all eight were keen to put their point of view to me individually, rather than meeting together as I had offered. By the end of the week, I had interviewed all eight members of the team. It was very clear that the group of five, which included the manager, Phil, was the positive, upbeat ‘wing’, while the remaining three, also with a clear leader, Martin, were resistant and negative about the work, the management style and the reputation of the unit.

I spent the weekend in a state of not-knowing. However, I could not give up the desire to know. I could not get the project out of my mind, and tried to find a ‘constructive’ way to approach it. I saw constantly in front of my eyes a single sentence, spoken by Phil, which I had written at the top of one page: “Martin is a problem.” It was so clearly right, partly because of Martin’s stance and personality, but partly also because he was being scapegoated. That much was obvious, and it seemed to me important that Martin was offered some individual consultancy - role analysis, perhaps - as a way of helping him to understand and to come to terms with the situation. However, I also could not shake the dark mood that had settled upon me, nor could I get away from the feeling that I was missing the point.

Truth-in-the-moment

We have argued that truth may be sought but that it cannot be known. The possible consequence of engaging with truth, at the edge between knowing and not-knowing, is growth of mind or learning. This view requires an understanding of truth as only ever accessible in-the-moment. We may have memories of truths experienced in the past, and desires for truths as we would like them to be (now or in the future). However, these are constructions that fall into the realm of the known. The unknowable but imminent reality is available only in and for the moment. Once the moment has passed, our minds may have grown, we may have learned, but we do not have the truth; what we are left with is knowledge. We are left to pursue truth in each and every moment as it occurs. We must resist the temptation to believe that somehow, in our knowledge, we now know the truth.

It is this that led Bion to urge the analyst to eschew all forms of memory, desire, understanding - even the desire for understanding or for ‘cure’ (1967, p.273; see also, 1984b, p.31). These are all variations of the threat that knowing represents to accessing truth-in-the-moment: ‘Discard your memory; discard the future tense of your desire; forget them both, both what you knew and what you want, to leave space for a new idea.’ (Bion, 1980, p.11.)

Bion’s thinking, as well as our own, is influenced by esoteric traditions which share a focus on truth-in-the-moment: the ‘nothing’ of Meister Eckhart (Smith, 1987, p.68-9) and the nada (nothing) of St. John of the Cross which is the beginning and end of knowledge. (See also
Hadot, 1995). In Bion’s view the very capacity to think develops from the infant’s experience of ‘no-thing’ which, well enough contained, can become a thought (Bion, 1962, p.31-7; Symington and Symington, 1996, p.102-3).

Intimations of truth at the edge of our attention are the object of the search for truth-in-the-moment: ‘O does not fall in the domain of knowledge or learning save incidentally; it can be “become”, but it cannot be “known”’ (Bion 1984b, p.26). Bion called such movements from truth into knowing ‘transformations’. Truth-in-the-moment can never be known and yet glimpses are possible. We can, as it were, sense the imminent reality of things.

It could be argued, for example, that such things as ‘green fingers’, the painter’s brush stroke, the actor’s gesture, the confident tennis stroke, the consultant’s intervention, or indeed the scientist’s insight, depend on being in touch with truth-in-the-moment. In none of these situations can the moment of insight be either controlled or predicted. The knowledge gained is a ‘gift’, rather in the way a forgotten name is often remembered or the solution to a mathematical problem is ‘discovered’, only when one stops thinking about it.

A consultancy project - Part two

When I met with RF on the Monday afternoon following my troubled weekend, I talked him through the project, and particularly my preoccupation with it and my sense of being at a loss about how to proceed. The more we talked the greater was our sense of confusion and despair at ever finding an effective way of intervening. We felt the sense of incompetence and mild panic that arises when we ‘don’t know what we’re doing’. After about an hour and a half, apparently out of nowhere, he started to say again what could be done, but this time in terms of what he would like to be able to do, if only it were possible. Almost as soon as he started, I felt my dark mood shift. By the time he had finished, we had both realised that till that point I - to an extent both of us - had become completely caught up in the process of the group, the splitting into positive and negative, the scapegoating of Martin, and the despair about ever changing him. What I knew was the historical fact that “Martin is a problem”. This knowledge stopped me from making the transformation from the truth-in-the-moment: that the dominating pattern within this team was of splitting and projection (scapegoating).

Working with Truth-in-the-moment

Truth-in-the-moment is accessible as a feeling, a mood, a thought, a realisation: at best only being or becoming truth-in-the-moment is possible. It therefore involves attending to the emotional texture of the situation, to one’s own experience, to the play of fantasy and metaphor until something happens. By working in this way the possibility of being confronted by truth-in-the-moment may increase.

The challenge is to stay with the moment rather than to retreat into what Needleman (1990, p.167), in an idea reminiscent of Bion’s notion of basic assumptions, has called ‘dispersal’. Dispersal manifests as a flight from the anxiety of the meeting with the unknown into explanation, emotion or physical action.
The method depends, therefore, on developing an awareness of one’s own particular valency for dispersal, as well as of the strategies of others. Such work requires a training and awareness equivalent to, though not the same as, that of the analyst. This is a training in learning to wait. Bion and Winnicott wrote of ‘waiting’ in the method of psychoanalysis (Symington and Symington, 1996, p.178; Winnicott, 1980, p.101-2). We, as well as our clients, also have to learn to wait at the edge where knowing and not-knowing meet.

The key is to be aware that the edge has potential for both creativity and terror.

The temptation to avoid having to address truth-in-the-moment can lead to a dependence upon truth-from-moments-past. However, this addresses a known abstraction (of the present situation) with another known abstraction (of past situations). This method of working may be efficient, and may seem necessary under conditions of time pressure and other limited resources. However, it addresses only what is known and controllable. Our intention is not to control reality but to allow ourselves to be affected by it. In working with truth-in-the-moment all we can hope to do is to expose ourselves to its influence.

A consultancy project - Final part

Despite a clear understanding that the group was scapegoating Martin neither of us had recognised that I too was identifying Martin as ‘the problem’. What helped us most was that we managed to continue working explicitly with our awareness that we did not know what to do - even to the point where we realised that not only did we not know what to do, we had even lost our sense of how to deal with not-knowing. This double pit, as it were, actually helped us to wait for something to happen.

Once the dark mood shifted and, to our relief, a way forward appeared, we quickly became aware of another layer of not-knowing. I did indeed have a sense of what needed to be done - to offer this interpretation to the team and the manager. However, I feared that this intervention would not be welcomed and might not lead to learning but to a destructive, uncontainable conflict with me and/or within the team. I really did not know what the outcome would be, and felt the mixture of apprehension and anticipation, uncertainty and certainty, which accepting that we do not know what we are doing can bring.

The Method In Use

During a Role Analysis consultation (Hutton, Bazalgette and Reed, 1997; Triest, 1999), my [RF’s] client said: “I want to ask you a question. You know me quite well. Do you think I’m naïve?” He had been told of his naïveté on two recent occasions and it was clear that he had experienced this as an accusation and that he was now seeking some kind of reassurance. I was hesitant. I said something about how I experienced him, though without using the word naïve. I felt I was stalling for time, but couldn’t quite bring myself to wait in silence. For the first time, however, as a direct result of writing this paper, I became consciously aware of working with the ‘method’ of not knowing what I was doing. I assumed for a moment not that I knew - the client, his problem (naïveté) and the solution (reassurance) - but, instead, that I did not know and nor did he.
The change was immediate. We were able to explore what ‘naïve’ might mean to each of us and to the two others, his partner and an aggressively competitive male colleague; why he assumed that to be called naïve was derogatory rather than, for example, a high compliment. It turned out that all of our assumptions of agreed knowledge were themselves naïve. A wide range of issues was opened up in relation to the leadership, management and teaching dimensions of his role and their relation to his own personal and professional history.

The situation was reminiscent of a comment by Bion in one of his Brazilian lectures: ‘The tendency is for our listeners to say, “But we know all this - we all know about sex and anxiety - what about it?” The reply is a difficult one because it will have to be, “But you don’t know; and if you will study our approach to this subject and you are able to benefit by it, at the end of the analysis you will discover that you do not know.”’ (Bion, 1990, p.10.)

Conclusion

In Goethe’s Faust, the starting point for Faust’s transformation and quest was his anguished recognition that, despite his mastery of all the branches of knowledge of his day, despite knowing everything - “we can know nothing!” (Goethe, Faust 1, 364). It was the fact that he never allowed himself to be seduced into self-satisfaction - never gave in to the temptation to know - that in the end saved Faust’s soul from the clutches of Mephistopheles, even beyond death.

At the edge between knowing and not-knowing, one is always confronted by uncertainty about what is going on but one can also have a sense that, tantalisingly, the desired insight may be only just out of reach. It is at this place, a place of faith (Bion 1984b, p.40; Eigen, 1981, 1985; Simpson, 1997), that the unknown may indeed be approached and new forms of knowing constructed. This is learning.

In the context of truth-in-the-moment all everyday definitions of ‘best’ work dissolve. What might ‘best’ mean in the face of the unknowable? In a rather similar way, complex systems theory undermines our common sense notions of ‘best’ by showing just how distant in time and space the links between cause and effect may be (Stacey, 1993, p.168).

For example, one of the doctors in a primary health care team with which I [RF] was working, suddenly came to the thought that for as long as he continued to treat asthma in children rather than fighting to ban cars from the city centre, he was not only missing the point, but was actually contributing to ill health. ‘Doing his best’ to treat individual children supported the identification of asthma as ‘the problem’; ‘doing his best’ to relieve suffering may have stopped politically-minded parents from taking action to reduce pollution; and using the ‘best’ drugs may even have been running the risk of unknown long-term side effects. Thus, in relation both to the long-term cause of the condition and to the long-term health of individuals and of his practice population generally, he stuck to what he ‘knew’ as a medical scientist - doing his ‘best work’ according to that definition. In doing so, he both turned his back on what he ‘knew’ at the edge between medical science, environmental science and social science, and refused to engage with what he did not know - that is, what else to do.
There is an irony in the relationship between knowing and not-knowing. It seems that if the importance of what we have called the ‘edge’ between them is forgotten, so that the importance of not-knowing is ignored, then it is knowing that is the primary casualty: to ignore not-knowing is to devalue knowing. If we cannot see that we do not know what we are doing, then we even fail to take account of or to take seriously what we do know and look instead for more knowledge in the wrong place. We stand at the edge perhaps, but with our backs turned firmly towards it. Or we may simply refuse to step out onto what Martin Buber called ‘the narrow ridge’: ‘a narrow rocky ridge between the gulfs where there is no sureness of expressible knowledge but the certainty of meeting what remains undisclosed.’ (Quoted in Friedman, 1993, p. x.)

References


Footnotes

1 Bion acknowledged his debt to Freud for his notion of ‘the piercing shaft of darkness’ (Bion, 1984b: 57). However, he was also influenced by the Dionysian tradition of the ‘dazzling darkness’ of God (McGinn, 1998: 129; also McGinn, 1992: 175-6).
2 The ‘truly emblematic’ stature for Freud of Goethe’s Faust is discussed in Prokhoris, 1995.