Entering the University of Life: Understanding Mirrors and Triggers in the Classroom

Kim Kara
University of Alberta

Abstract
The following work looks at the influence an educator has on students due to the position of power held. It will address some of the less recognized elements of this influence through the concepts of mirrors and triggers. Thus, the intent of this paper is to increase awareness about mirrors and triggers; and to guide educators to understanding how one’s internal make-up can inadvertently negatively impact the learner. Greater responsibility and accountability are attainable through the cleansing of mirrors and triggers. This paper addresses the need in charting a course into a totally different kind of education in our learning society: a course inwardly aligned with the processes of learning in the University of Life.

Relationship: A Learning Environment

People who are in a teaching position and thus in a power position, can have a lot of influence over the learners they are working with. Sometimes this influence remains unrecognized and can result in great damage. I think as educators we need to go about our practice responsibly. Part of this responsibility is to recognize the power we hold and how easily we can (inadvertently in many cases) crush a person’s self concept as a learner.

Carolin Kreber (Personal Communication, October 2001)

In the University of Life there is one great schoolroom: relationships. Through them we are given ample opportunities to learn and grow. In healthy relationships, we are nurtured, supported, loved and therefor feel safe. This safety is created by firm, yet loving, boundaries. In unhealthy relationships the converse is true. Unhealthy relationships create hostile environments complete with power struggles, oppression, passivity, competition, sadness, and grief. Lessons of control, manipulation and avoidance prevail. The macrocosm reflects the microcosm: our external reality is a reflection of our psychological or spiritual nature (Keepin, 1991). Find love within, and the world becomes loving. Find acceptance within, and find acceptance in the community. People who have healthy relationship with themselves, will have healthy relationships with others. The converse is also true. Those who have elements of disease, or unresolved issues, are encircled by unhealthy relationships. These people look without and see fear and oppression. They are unaware that this is a reflection of their own inner reality. They remain in fear, and project fear on their external environment. They deny parts of themselves (heart and/or spirit), thus denying parts of others (DeRohan, 1986). In healing one’s injuries, the healing of the wounds that have been inflicted on our planet Earth occur in tandem (Lauzon, 1998).
Relationships of an educator with those in the classroom are not immune to the principle of the macrocosm reflecting the microcosm. As expressed in the opening quote, many educators are unaware of their influence. They do not see the connections between their inner reality and how it manifests outwardly. They sometimes forget that they too are learners in the classroom of relationship in the University of Life. Nonetheless, educators, in their role and position of power, have an obligation to their learners to create safe, loving, healthy environments. Yet, in order to fulfill the call to lead, teach, and inspire, healing is first required (Kornfield 1993 in Lauzon, 1998). This celebre of required health is possible when educators choose the personal manifestations of their inner reality outwardly through cleansing mirrors and triggers. Applying these tools allows the circumvention of mental structures, frameworks and censors, releasing repressed or denied emotions providing a wealth of personal information for reflection and deepening self-awareness.

Mirrors and Triggers

Mirrors and triggers are experienced through emotional highways, circumventing mental structures, frameworks, and censors. As such, the mind may choose to “forget” or repress events or circumstances due to the pain or grief associated with them. These events have become marginalized at some time in the past when, either consciously or unconsciously, an aspect of self was negated without voice and value (Weitzel, 2000). This aspect, whether linked to thoughts or feelings, remain connected to a moment in time: a memory. The heart and spirit work in unison to free the memories from captivity through mirrors and triggers. Healing can then take place. Since the microcosm reflects the macrocosm, the healing of an individual educator, like the ripples on a pond, extends outward through students to families, communities and workplaces. Awareness becomes key to detecting triggers.

From the time I entered a specific class room, I perceived something I was unable to articulate. Uncertain as to whether it was my own trigger, or something I was detecting in my environment, I asked a classmate to observe future exchanges between the professor and myself.

Triggers are experienced as emotional arousal as a result of a simulation of events previously experienced. Triggers occur when an event, situation or circumstance in the present closely resembles an event in the past. A trigger can be a relational dynamic, a phrase, a comment, a behavior, a scent, or even a location. Emotional escalation occurs as a result of the triggering event. The intensity of emotion felt as a result of a trigger is a reflection of the magnitude of the significance of de-activating the trigger to one’s personal growth. That is, the greater the emotional response the more imperative that a person look inward in order to decrease reactivity. Thus, triggers are created in a complex weave of experiences logged both consciously and subconsciously in our psyche. Any situation, event, occurrence, or element may constitute a trigger. What may be a trigger for one individual may not be for another.

Verification wasn’t needed as each successive class revealed the plethora of unhealthy behaviours displayed by the professor towards myself and others. Each time I spoke, my words, my ideas, my expressions were negated. Even my own reality was denied. Being in the classroom of an individual who seemed to have offered her own heart as a sacrifice
to the idol of academia was, for me, as if she was attempting to create her own mirror of disembodiment by injuring my connections to my own heart and spirit so that she could offer them on her altar of sacrifice. Would I or would I not give in to her reality? Would I or would I not give her my power?

*Mirrors* reflect people. Each person is a mirror to another person. All of you are a reflection of me. Each one of you reflects characteristics of myself that I either accept or not. You may also be a mirror of significant people from my life experiences. This can be expressed as pleasure, if the mirror is affirming, or discomfort when the mirror creates awareness of pain, lack of acceptance, (MacKeracher, 1996) and areas needing spiritual growth.

In this situation I needed to determine ownership of the mirror or trigger. Was what I was perceiving a representation of an event in my past, or was I signifying an element of her being which she was denying? Through introspection I was able to determined that what I perceived on the first day was not my trigger. My guess was that I was reflecting one or many aspects of the professor in which she was in denial. Or, perhaps I served as a mirror of significant others in her past. From my position I am unable to tell. What I know for myself is that as a result of her reaction to me I felt negated. This negation triggered a response in me, and a mirror from my own past:

Each week I exited the battle ground scarred. Entering the pit of despair, I opened my heart to a friend, the first step of acknowledgment. The grief, doubt, and pain gurgled to the surface. All hope had faded. Withdrawal became the only answer to escape the onslaught. Surrender almost complete. For days I walked around as a zombie: numb. My connection to the present severely altered. My emotions were barely contained below the surface. Tears were waiting to escape their confinement.

Once an individual is aware of a mirror or trigger, what can be done? The process of clearing a mirror or trigger is a de-activation process. The way in which an individual can clear a trigger or mirror is a four fold process:

1) reflect on the event or personal trait being presented in seeking understanding why this element is being replicated.
2) release the emotions connected to the experience.
3) determine the learning in the situation, apply what you have learned through time and allow healing of the wound.
4) find gratitude in your heart towards the individual(s) who chose to bring this opportunity for growth and healing to you; forgiveness will follow.

These steps take time, and may require professional assistance:

I sought out my spiritual armor, receiving blessings and council. My restoration began. I decided to change my weaponry. Now I was armed with tools of love and kindness, fasting and prayer. I entered the battle grounds of the classroom. I exited them unscathed.
Life continues to manifest mirrors and triggers even after the emotional release occurs, and peace settles in. As such “we’ve come to realize that so much of what happens in groups is a story that’s repeated again and again with a common cast of characters and people playing parts” (Weitzel, 2000). Experiences of previous mirrors and triggers will happen to allow a person to experience the event in the moment, to evaluate the depth of healing and for cleaning remaining residue:

In a different class with a new group of people, I observed that the instructor would not even look in my direction even though I sat directly before her. I mused knowing that an excess of energy was being spent in the avoidance. As she began to lecture, she held my eye with great intent. The words on her lips were, “Some people are good at arguing, but are not embodied. Some people are good writers, but are not embodied.” She looked away, the words relaying her perception of me. How was it that I could be experiencing the exact same negating situation with a different instructor?

There was something different. My reaction was different. I was better able to sense the subtle nuances in the situation. With great clarity of mind and heart, I was able to detach (Weitzel, 2000). In this new battleground I exited unharmed. In fact by being given the opportunity to come out without injury testifies a deep, level of learning. I was able to give myself voice in a situation where silencing occurred. Perhaps the personal power was due to the fact that I was merely auditing this class, giving me more freedom as a result of less fear from the impact of my self expressions of authenticity upon my grade. Perhaps it was the lack of threat I feel from the instructor herself. Perhaps it was in finding literature which supported my understanding and personal experience. Whatever it was, I felt free to express who I am, what my expectations were, how my needs were not being met, and how I felt about it. The cleansing of the previous trigger allowed self-knowing breeding confidence with my path in academia: I am an excellent teacher; I am pre-disposed as a caring facilitator; I will achieve great heights and obtain success as I define it; I feel free and unburdened. I am becoming a Clear Mirror.

Because of the degree and intensity of self-love a Clear Mirror holds for their own being, they see this mirror reflected in all individuals in their midst. They are able to accept and love others for their own unique talents and abilities; they allow others to see the reflection of a Clear Mirror in their own being. They are able to treat others with compassion and understanding because they have found understanding and compassion for themselves. They are able to ascertain with acute precision the ownership of issues empowering: responsibility, accountability, self-awareness, and self-determinism.

There was a certain solidification. I became the other, a mirror of those aspects denied. Her perception of me inconsistent with my own or that of my closest friends. The reality she viewed was not true, but tainted. Tainted by a projection of her inner reality. And what is within? I know not. I do not believe it is mine to know.

**Implications**

A healthy mature human being naturally develops an ethical responsibility for the earth.

*Keepin 1995*
When an individual in a position of great influence or power, as such an educator, harbors emotions and issues, the quality of their teaching and establishment of environments is greatly impacted. Individuals who do not address their own issues pose a great threat to those they come in contact with by subconsciously re-creating a reality stricken with illness, and imposing this reality on others. It is imperative that individuals involved in any aspect of the psychology of the soul (Lauzon, 1998), whether it be empowerment, emancipation, critical thinking, transformative learning, relatedness, connectiveness, leadership, social change, embodiment, emotional intelligence, spiritual intelligence or spirituality, heal their own issues. Otherwise, students unwittingly become recipients, through mirrors and denied triggers, of tainted information when an educator, espousing one of these elements of the psychology of the soul, are inconsistent in word and deed: where their testimony of saying and doing (Freire, 1998) are contradictory. It is important to remember the responsibility an educator has due to their position and power. The relationship between an educator and learner, or advisor and student, or a mentor and apprentice creates an environment for lessons dealing with issues of power and authority, gender, authenticity and trust, equity and respect, ethnicity and tolerance, in addition to creating triggers of past learning experiences. This learning is a process offered by the University of Life regardless of classroom number and instructor. It can be accepted or denied. When an educator make this choice, it is made not only for the educator but also those coming to partake in the quest for knowledge with said leader as their guide. The choice is yours. The responsibility is great. I can not emphasize enough the need for an educator to seek consistency in theory and practice, concerning the application of mirrors and triggers. These tools allow one to chart a course inward where a depth of knowledge will be recorded in the heart and soul, manifesting a completely different external reality; both for the classroom and life on earth. For, “whatever contributes to small scale social forms and personal empowerment nourishes the ecological ego” (Scull, 1999) because, “a healthy ecosystem is inseparable from a healthy psyche” (Gnome, 1998). It is possible to heal the earth, socially and culturally, one heart at a time.

Remember, mirrors reflect people; triggers simulate events. Both create emotional responses, which when followed can release a wealth of knowledge specific to an individual’s being, allowing a person to live in the moment. Life is to be experienced in the present. Allow this principle to guide you. Let go of yesterday. Choose today. All of your relationships will benefit, even those in your classroom.

Acknowledgments

I first was introduced to the concept of mirrors by a friend Peggy as she spoke of her partner Wil, over six years ago. This term was used freely and frequently in this circle of friends studying as apprentices to Butterfly Dreamer and Crystal Light Warrior. The concept of triggers was introduced to me by my Life Skills Coach Trainer, Wayne Dillalo (1999). It has taken many years to make personal meaning of the role of mirrors and triggers in the learning processes we are afforded in this great University of Life through the Practice-Use-Teach-Transfer principle of the Life Skills Program. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my Native American elders and teachers who guided me through the process of understanding how the healing of my heart enabled the healing of the Earth.
References


