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Experiential Learning in Groups I

The Development of the Leicester Model*

Introduction

The Tavistock/Leicester Conference—or, as it is now more often called, the Leicester Conference—is an intensive two-week residential event devoted to experiential learning about group and organizational behavior, with a particular emphasis on the nature of authority and leadership. Its purpose is educational. The conference brings together an international membership of, usually, 50–70 people drawn from a wide range of occupations and professions, in industry and commerce, education, medical and social services, the voluntary sector, etc. The staff group of ten or so is similarly diverse. The conference has been held once and sometimes twice a year since 1957—over 40 altogether. All have been sponsored by what is now the Group Relations Training Programme (GRTP) of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR), sometimes in co-sponsorship with other organizations.

The first seven conferences were jointly sponsored by Leicester University, and almost all have been held at Leicester in one of the University's halls of residence.

The essentials of the approach, including its theoretical underpinnings, were largely established by the mid-1960s. Since then, the "Leicester model" has provided the basis for numerous other conferences, some run by the GRTP and very many more by other institutions, in Britain and a dozen different countries around the world. In most cases these were developed with the active support of the Tavistock Institute. Around the conference work and its applications there has emerged a substantial literature. For a decade or more, the A.K. Rice Institute (AKRI), the principal exponent of the Leicester model in the United States, has been organizing a biennial scientific meeting focussed on the conferences and their ramifications; the First International Symposium, jointly sponsored by GRTP and AKRI, was held at Oxford (July, 1988) on the theme of "applications to social and political issues."

*A requested overview.

History

ORIGINS

The first Leicester Conference was explicitly an experiment and it was meticulously planned and documented. It was reported in *Exploration in Group Relations*: a residential conference held in September 1957 by the University of Leicester and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (Trist and Sofer, 1959). The late Professor John Allaway, then Head of the Department of Adult Education in the University of Leicester, was Chairman of the Executive Committee that planned and ran the Conference; Eric Trist was program director.

As Allaway noted in his introduction to the monograph, this was "the first full-scale experiment in Britain with the laboratory method of training in group relations." This was a direct reference to the laboratory method that had developed at Bethel, Maine, since 1947 by the National Training Laboratories (NTL). Based on the T-Group, it was a model of intensive experiential learning that had sprung directly from the work of Kurt Lewin, whose group theories had strongly influenced the early Tavistock group. The Tavistock approach, however, was influenced also by psychoanalysis.

In the late 1950s, experiential learning of the Bethel type was still a novelty in Britain, and psychoanalysts were somewhat suspect. Cosponsorship by a university, especially by a department in the educational field, was seen as important in adding credibility. Allaway had the courage to back the venture on behalf of Leicester University and secured the Vice-Chancellor's support.

The organizing committee successfully approached a wide range of organizations to nominate members for the first conference. Recruitment through an organizational rather than a personal channel was thought to provide a sociological barrier against members becoming covert patients. More than a third of the 45 who enrolled came from industry (many, but by no means all, in personnel and training roles). Others were drawn from universities and other educational institutions; the Home Office (attendance of a prison governor and a deputy governor being the beginning of a long association of the Prison Service with the Leicester Conferences); the probation service; local authorities; and voluntary organizations. Eric Trist, then Chairman of the Management Committee of TIHR, led the staff group of 14.

Twenty-six of the members attended a two day follow-up session six months later. Suffice to say that the evaluation justified mounting a second conference in 1959, followed fairly quickly by a third, fourth and fifth in 1960-61. Leicester University's co-sponsorship extended over the first seven conferences. It ended with the retirement of John Allaway and of his colleague, Professor J.W. Tibble, who had also become actively involved.

DEVELOPMENTS IN DESIGN

In the earliest conference the central event was the small Study Group, consisting of 9–12 members, a staff consultant and a staff observer. Its task was to study its own behavior, as a group, in the here-and-now. The other main events were lectures (social theory sessions) and Application Groups, which were intended between them to help members make sense of their Study Group experience and consider how it might be applied in their external roles. There were also plenary review sessions. This design was broadly similar to that at Bethel, though the equivalent Bethel T-group was larger—up to 20. Also the Leicester consultant's orientation was less person-centered: it addressed the dynamics of the group, and it concentrated on interpretation rather than facilitation. The 1959 Conference saw the experimental introduction of an Inter-Group Event, in which members were asked to divide into groups and negotiate an agreement on how to use vacant slots in the program. Consultants helped to interpret the inter-group dynamics (Higgin and Bridger, 1964).

In 1962, TIHR gave authority to Kenneth Rice to take over leadership of the group relations conferences. The conferences could no longer be subsidized from the Institute's research funds and Rice was willing to try to make them financially viable. He did indeed succeed in making the conferences self-financing, but only because he and other staff colleagues were committed enough to accept nominal remuneration. (And it is still the case, in 1988, that, in order to keep membership fees at a level acceptable to non-commercial organizations, payments to staff remain modest.)

However, Rice's major contribution to the conferences was not economic but technical and conceptual. The period of his direction saw at least four significant developments in design (Rice, 1965). The first was innovation of the Large Group. Its task was the same as for the small Study Group, but it included all the members (sometimes 70 or more) with 2–4 consultants. Secondly, the Inter-Group Event was re-defined as having a single task: the membership was to form itself into groups and to study their interrelatedness in the here-and-now. Thirdly, a second type of inter-group event (later developed into the Institutional Event) was introduced, in which the focus of study was the member/staff relationship within the conference institution as a whole. Finally, as a natural consequence of increasing the emphasis on experiential learning, the lectures were reduced and eventually dropped. Plenary sessions and Application Groups were retained, and there was increasing use of interim Review Groups, to give members opportunities to reflect on their experience.

The "single-task" model introduced by Rice, with its insistence on the study of the here-and-now, had some critics within TIHR. They believed the interpretive stance was too threatening to some members and could inhibit learning rather than encourage it. Accordingly, Harold Bridger, who was

centrally involved in the earlier Leicester Conferences and had introduced the inter-group experiment in 1959, developed an alternative conference model, based on a “two-task” design. In this, membership groups are given specific assignments *and* study the dynamics of the groups in tackling them. Bridger continues to organize these conferences through TIHR and in association with other institutions. That model, however, is outside the scope of this chapter. It may be added that externally, particularly in the United States, the term “Tavistock model” was applied indiscriminately to both, which was a source of confusion. More domestically, there was a period when the two models and their two protagonists, Rice and Bridger, were set up as rivals—a rivalry over legitimacy. In retrospect it is plain that they are complementary (see Bridger I, 2, “Courses and Working Conferences as Transitional Learning Institutions”).

Despite some subsequent theoretical and technical developments, the Leicester Conference model of today was essentially established by the time Rice died in 1969. Then, as now, a typical day’s program in the first week would comprise four one-and-a-half-hour sessions, with a break in the afternoon or evening; Small Study Group (SSG) and Large Study Group (LSG) in the morning; and two sessions of Inter-Group (IG). In the second week, the Institutional Event (IE) would replace the IG, and towards the end there would be Application Group (AG) and Plenary (P) sessions. Some conferences also include the Very Small Study Group (VSSG), of 5–7 members (Gosling, 1981).

Thus the SSG has become only one of several settings for the here-and-now study of relatedness of individual, group and organization. The conference as a whole, comprising both members and staff, is designed as a temporary educational institution, which can be studied experientially as it forms, evolves and comes to an end.

It also became clear during the 1960s that “group relations” was too broad and vague a description of what was being studied. To be sure, it has always been characteristic of the Leicester model that the focus of interpretation has been on the dynamics of the group as a whole, and not on individuals. In the early days (and I speak from painful personal memories) a trainee consultant would feel grateful to identify any group-as-a-whole dynamic at all. With experience, however, although the consultant may still feel lost at times, often there is an evident choice of interpretations that might be made. Rice recognized that the definition of the *primary task* of the conference as a whole and of the events within it was therefore important. In the early 1960s he was defining the primary task of the conference as “to provide those who attend with opportunities to learn about leadership” (Rice, 1965:5). He then worded it more precisely in terms of studying the nature and exercise of authority. Recognition that there are choices in the definition of primary task and, therefore, in the focus of interpretation, enlarged the scope of conference

design. Thus the late 1970s saw the introduction of a series of Leicester Conferences with the title "Individual and Organization: the Politics of Relatedness." These alternated with more traditional conferences on the theme of "Authority, Leadership and Organization" which still continue. In these, the primary task is defined as:

to provide opportunities to study the exercise of authority in the context of inter-personal, inter-group and institutional relations within the Conference Institution.

The primary task of each event is defined in relation to that overall definition.

Nowadays alternate conferences make special provision for members with previous Leicester (or similar) experience: in some sessions they work separately from first-timers; in others, jointly. Other conferences include a Training Group, members of which have usually already taken part in at least two residential conferences. The first such group was introduced in 1963. Initially, this was designed to expand the pool of potential staff. It now has the broader aim of helping people to understand and practice the consultant role in group and organizational settings.

The Interplay of Theory and Method

In the first Leicester Conference in 1957, the Study Group was the only experiential event. Groups met for twelve one-and-a-half-hour periods over the two weeks. They were designed to enable members to explore group processes and their own involvement in them—processes that were held to be inherent in any human group but which were much more visible in the single-task Study Group setting.

Our central theoretical and practical interest was and remains what we later came to term "relatedness": the processes of mutual influence between individual and group, group and group, and group and organization, and, beyond that, the relatedness of organization and community to wider social systems, to society itself. In all these forms of relatedness there is a potential tension. As Bion (1961) had showed, the individual needs groups in order to establish his or her identity, to find meaning in existence, and to express different aspects of the self. Correspondingly, the group needs the individual member for its own collective purposes—both to contribute to the group's task and to participate in the processes through which the group acquires and maintains its own distinctive identity. But this process is one that often threatens individuality.

As with individuals, so with groups in relation to organizations and wider systems. "Group" and "organization," however, are not entities, with an

objective reality; they are ideas or constructs that we hold in our minds. A particular group is a construct substantially shared, explicitly or implicitly, by a number of individuals. But—except in the restricted biological sense—“individual” too can similarly be conceived as a construct, a reification. Thus the relatedness, and the associated tension, is more appropriately conceptualized as connecting not two entities, individual and group, but two processes—individuation and incorporation—moving towards, but never reaching, individual autonomy on the one hand and submergence in the group on the other. This theoretical perspective is central to the conceptualization of the Conference model; and obviously the Conferences themselves illuminate the theory.

However, the primary task of the conference is not to contribute to theory but to provide members with opportunities to learn about their own involvement in these dynamics, with a specific focus on learning about the nature of authority and the problems encountered in its exercise. More generally, the aim is to enable “the individual to develop greater maturity in understanding and managing the boundary between his own inner world and the realities of his external environment” (Miller, 1977:44; Miller and Rice, 1967:269)—in other words, to struggle to exercise one’s own authority, to manage oneself in role and to become less a captive of group and organizational processes (Lawrence and Miller, 1976; Lawrence, 1979).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

I have postulated elsewhere (Miller, 1976a) that in the field of human behavior no conceptual framework is complete without a statement of the role of the observer and his or her relation to the observed. There is an obvious link to subatomic physics, as illuminated by Heisenberg’s principle of uncertainty. If within a group I address myself to a person, I confirm that person’s identity as an individual; if I shift my focus to the level of the group, the notion of the bounded individual appears as a reification. Similarly, the conceptual framework that underpins Leicester Conferences rests on a definition of role and task in which the staff are not flies on the wall, but are trying to enable the conference members to understand and gain greater control over the situations they are in. We are integrally part of the process, not outside it.

The intellectual inheritance from Lewin lies particularly in his insistence, from the late 1930s onwards, on the importance of studying the “gestalt” properties of groups as wholes.

Bion, in his concurrent development of an approach to group psychotherapy, adopted a similar focus, but brought to it a psychoanalytic orientation. Bion’s views are explained in Sutherland (Vol. I, “Bion Revisited”). He

postulates that at any given time the behavior of a group can be analyzed at two levels: it is a *sophisticated group* (or *work group*) met to perform an overt task; and it is at the same time a *basic group*, acting on one, and only one, of three covert *basic assumptions* (fight/flight, dependence and pairing), to which its individual members contribute anonymously and in ways of which they are not consciously aware. It is a function of the basic assumption operating at any one time to keep at bay emotions associated with the other two assumptions—primitive emotional states belonging to the “proto-mental system”—that may be inconsistent with the overt task.

Bion’s formulation is one element of the psychoanalytic components in the framework. A second is the formulation by Melanie Klein (who profoundly influenced Bion) of processes of infant development and their effects on adult life (Klein, 1959). She identified two developmental phases: the “paranoid-schizoid and the depressive positions” which to some extent persist through life. The manifestation of these processes in group and organizational life, particularly through the defenses of splitting, denial and projective identification, are discussed in Jaques (Vol. I, “On the Dynamics of Social Structure”) and Menzies Lyth (Vol. I, “Social Systems as a Defense Against Anxiety”).

Psychoanalysis, besides suggesting that explanations for human behavior in groups may be found in primitive and unconscious processes, has also provided a role-model for Tavistock staff working not with individual patients but with groups and organizations. Nearly all the Institute’s work in the 1950s and 1960s (and much of it still today) was a form of action research in which the research worker was also a consultant, taking a professional role in relation to the client system; and indeed consultancy was the method through which research data were generated.

Individuals and groups interact in order to find ways of giving meaning to their experience and also to develop mechanisms that can defend them against uncertainty and anxiety (Wilson, 1951; Jaques, 1953; 1955; Menzies, 1960); these defenses, often unrecognized and deeply rooted, are threatened by prospects of change; hence it is an important part of the consultant role to serve as a container during the working through of change. A still more specific derivation from the analyst’s role has been the stress laid on examining and using the transference and counter-transference within the professional relationship. That is to say, the way in which the consultant is used and experienced, and also the feelings evoked in him, may offer evidence of underlying and unstated issues and feelings in the client system: that which is repressed by the client may be expressed by the consultant. Again this was a cornerstone of Bion’s approach to groups.

Those features of the framework described so far were part of the conceptual input into the earliest Leicester Conferences. The distinctive additional contribution through Rice was the application of a much more fully developed

organizational model derived from open systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1950a, b).

A key connecting concept, derived from Lewin (1935; 1936) and developed in the open systems formulation, is that of *boundary*. The existence and survival of any human system depends upon continuous interchange with its environment, whether of materials, people, information, ideas, values or fantasies. The boundary across which these “commodities” flow in and out both separates any given system from, and links it to, its environment. It marks a discontinuity between the task of that particular system and the tasks of the related systems with which it transacts. Because these relations are never stable and static, and because the behavior and identity of the system are subject to continual renegotiation and redefinition, the system boundary is best conceived not as a line but as a region (Lewin, 1935; 1936). That region is the location of those roles and activities that are concerned with mediating relations between inside and outside. In organizations and groups this is the function of leadership; in individuals it is the ego function. The leadership exercised in this region can protect the internal sub-systems from the disruption of fluctuating and inconsistent demands from outside; but it also has to promote those internal changes that will enable the system to be adaptive, and indeed proactive, in relation to its environment. The health and ultimately the survival of a system therefore depends on an appropriate mix of insulation and permeability in the boundary region (Miller and Rice, 1967).

From the late 1950s onwards, Rice and some of his colleagues (myself included) were using the open system formulation in conjunction with the notion of *primary task* (Rice, 1958; 1963). It was postulated that a purposeful human system at any given time has a primary task, in the sense of the task that it must perform if it is to survive. Boundaries between sets of activities define *task systems*, around which organizational boundaries may potentially be drawn. Finally people—the human resources of the enterprise—carry *roles* through which they contribute the requisite activities to the task of the organization.

It was this conceptual apparatus of open system and primary task that Rice brought to bear on the design of the Leicester Conference in the early 1960s (Rice, 1965). He was very insistent on identifying the primary tasks of the conference as a whole and of the constituent events. Boundary became a critical concept: time boundaries, territorial boundaries and especially role boundaries—between staff and member, between the different roles that might be taken by the same person at different times. Beyond that are the boundaries between person and role, between the inner world of the individual and the external environment.

This notion that the individual too can be conceptualized as an open system developed in the mid-1960s and perhaps took us one small step closer to the

ultimate goal of a unified theory of human behavior. Rice explicated this idea in a seminal paper reprinted elsewhere in this volume (Rice, 1969; Vol. I, "Individual, Group and Inter-Group Processes"; Miller, 1976b).

PRACTICE: THE ROLE OF STAFF

Those invited to join the staff at Leicester have been members of at least two residential conferences and probably also a Training Group. They may first have taken a staff role in a shorter conference, perhaps non-residential. Usually each staff group includes at least two—often more—staff from related institutions. These will have had considerable staff experience in other conferences, often including directorship.

In the early conferences it was considered mandatory that study group consultants should be analysts or at least have had an extended analysis. Analysts were the obvious candidates for an approach that involved interpreting the transference of the group as a whole onto the consultant; and they were likely to be more attuned to, and less dismayed by, unconscious processes. Moreover, the organizers were concerned about the possibilities of individual disturbance in the intensive group setting; it seemed prudent to have a clinician in the consultant role.

By the early 1960s, with increasing demand for conferences, it had become clear that insistence on this qualification would severely constrain growth and dissemination. Initial anxieties about the effects on individuals had turned out to be exaggerated, so that clinical experience was not needed. Indeed, it could sometimes draw the consultant's attention towards an individual and away from the group.

The capacity to be in touch with one's own shifting experience in relation to the group—of being pushed and pulled, attacked and ignored—and to reflect that back to the group, preferably with some explanation of why it might be happening, remained, of course, a central criterion: the group process is not something extraneous, merely to be observed and commented upon. But the fundamental qualification for consultancy seemed to be an ability to stick to the task and role. Accordingly, the early training groups included university teachers, managers from industry and prison governors among others.

Leicester Conference Directors have continued to be people with analytic experience, though not necessarily analysts; indeed, for the first twelve years there was a policy that the director role should *not* be taken by a psychiatrist. It was argued that under psychiatric leadership the membership would be more likely to produce "patients" and that the stance of the Conference might tilt away from the educational towards the therapeutic. By 1970, however, the model was firmly enough established to lessen that risk.

The conference director is appointed by the sponsoring institution(s). He or she is initially responsible for conference design and the appointment of staff. By accepting the invitation, staff members are individually confirming the director's authority; but the staff group as a whole, including both consulting and administrative staff, is conceived as collectively the "management." As such, staff have the shared responsibility for providing the boundary conditions—of task definition, territory and time—within which all participants, themselves included, can engage with the primary task of the conference. Hence the authority of the director has to be confirmed by the staff group at their pre-conference meeting, and that authorization has to be kept under review as the conference proceeds. Once the conference has begun, *the staff group has the authority to replace the director*. If there is irreconcilable disagreement between the director and one or more staff members, then one or the other has to resign. Although in practice this has never happened, it has nearly happened; and it is vital in a conference devoted to examining authority that the authority of the director should always remain to some extent problematic.

The director has to be available for the transference of the staff as well as of the membership. This offers evidence of the prevailing dynamic in the conference institution as a whole; and more generally it yields insight into the collusive processes through which, for example, organizational hierarchies are sustained. At the more overt level, the director has responsibility, on behalf of the staff group, for overall boundary management—the external boundary, especially in relation to the hall of residence in which the conference is held; and internally, the boundaries between staff and membership and between sub-sets of the staff. Management of practical matters on these boundaries is delegated to the conference administrator(s). The director leads the work of staff in public, for example in plenary sessions, and in its own separate meetings. The director also takes a consultant role, usually in the LSG.

Within the staff group there is a defined pattern of delegation to sub-sets of the staff—for example, one with responsibility for the Small Study Group system, consisting of several SSGs, and another for the LSG. The individual consultant is conceived as deriving authority from the sub-set and as being accountable to it. Examination of mutual projections between these sub-sets is an important, and often difficult, task of frequent full staff meetings.

A consultant's interpretation is essentially a working hypothesis about this set of systematic relations, drawing on observations and internal feelings. For example, when in an SSG a silent member is being picked on by others, the consultant may feel and say that the attack is really on him or herself for not contributing what the members want; and further that the attack is displaced because there is anxiety that if it were directed specifically it would be so violent as to destroy the consultant and throw the group into anarchy; and beyond that

again, that the small group has to be kept safe because the wider system—the conference at large—is felt to be evil and indiscriminately destructive. Ideally, therefore, the working hypothesis contains a “because clause”—a possible explanation of why this dynamic is occurring. The consultant is not always able to offer such a because clause immediately: two or three intervening observations may be necessary first. Always, however, the consultant is trying to use the experience of being pushed into this role or that in order to work at the task of the group—the study of its own behavior, as a group, in the here-and-now. Comments on individual behavior and dynamics are avoided. “Personality variables,” in the words of a typical brochure, “are for private consideration by the individual member.” The consultant will, however, appropriately draw attention to processes in which the group is casting an individual member in a role—as fight-leader, clown or non-speaker, for example—to serve its collective needs.

In taking up this interpretive role, the consultant is operating at the boundary of the system, trying to understand what is happening between the parts and the whole, and between the whole and its environment. One hopes that at times members will learn to take up this boundary perspective themselves. It is partly for this reason that the role of observer to the small study groups has been abandoned: it offers the members an alternative and inappropriate role-model, one through which to escape from the work rather than engage with it. Moreover, it distorts, deflects or dilutes the transference onto the consultant, to whom some processes then become less accessible. These factors outweigh the possible advantages of giving the consultant another perspective in post-session discussions and also of providing a niche for a trainee. Analogous to the training of psychoanalysts, it now seems more appropriate to provide the novice SSG consultant with supervision after the session. Peer discussions within the sub-set of consultants are a further learning opportunity.

Two other points may be made about consultant behavior in experiential groups which sometimes causes puzzlement. First, the consultant enters and leaves the group territory strictly according to the timetable. This predictability offers a form of security; it defines the time available and leaves the members with their authority to decide how to use it; and it enables the consultant to interpret the way they use it. Second, the contributions of the consultant are always directed as far as possible to the task: thus conventional social rituals, such as “good mornings,” which are not task-related, are eschewed.

In the Review and Application Groups, which have a different task, the role of the consultant is correspondingly different: it tends to be less interpretive and more facilitative, and is occasionally even didactic in that the consultant may offer conceptual frameworks to help members understand processes they have experienced. Recognition that change of role is accompanied by change in behavior is itself an enlightenment to some members.

THEORY AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Conference members commonly have the fantasy that they are guinea-pigs being experimented upon by a staff whose primary interest is in research and the advancement of knowledge. Such a fantasy is understandable. There is an abundant social science literature based on therapy and training groups whose members have knowingly or unknowingly been the objects of observation and experimentation, and some of these studies have indeed been illuminating. Moreover, the Tavistock Institute is known to be in the research business. Beyond that, in the conference itself, staff members are aspiring to use a version of the scientific method in the here-and-now: they are putting forward working hypotheses with evidence from their observations and internal feelings, and are inviting members to use their own evidence to verify or falsify the hypotheses. If, as they often do, members find their experiential learning difficult and painful, it is not surprising that they should take the paranoid view that they are victims of staff's experiments.

The fact is that there has been a rigorous adherence to the primary task of "providing opportunities to learn" and an avoidance of muddying this by pursuing a research agenda. During the 1960s, Pierre Turquet, with the participants' permission, recorded study group sessions in two or three advanced training groups. With that exception, he and others who have worked to distill something from their groups have had to rely on making notes between sessions.

Within the conferences, the place of theory is properly problematic. Until the mid-1960s, lecture sessions were an integral part of the conference design. With some early exceptions, the lecturers were staff members who also had consulting roles in the experiential events. Their subjects included theories of individual, group and organization and also the application of theories to practical problems in the lecturers' own experience. According to Rice (1965:35), the lectures were "designed to give intellectual content to the learning taking place in other events of the conference," and "to provide a framework for articulation of the experience of the conference." He went on to say: "The lecture series has, however, an important secondary task: to provide a traditional form of teaching within a learning situation that is using unfamiliar methods."

By the mid-1960s, that secondary task was becoming redundant. A serious consideration was a sense that the theories and concepts were being used defensively. Such formulations as Bion's basic assumptions of dependency, fight/flight and pairing, or Tuckman's stages of group development (forming, storming, norming, performing) (Tuckman, 1965) were tending to be used as labels for an experience—"Ah! Yes! This is 'basic assumption fight'"—as if that were the end of the matter. Labelling is defensive in that it inhibits