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## Experiential Learning in Groups II

### Recent Developments in Dissemination and Application\*

#### *Institutional Reproduction*

This is a process that began in 1963; and I take this heading from Rice (1965). During the 1960s and early 1970s, the national and international demand for the Leicester model of group relations training was such that there were pressures to devote more and more time to conference work. However, the staff of TIHR who have been involved in the Leicester Conferences over the years have never wanted to be exclusively or even mainly in the business of running training activities. Continuing experience as practitioners has been seen as a necessary condition for effectiveness in conference work. The TIHR response, therefore, was to encourage and help other institutions in Britain and abroad to acquire their own capabilities to sponsor and staff events based on the Leicester approach.

The earliest examples of the 1960s were, in England, the Grubb Institute (formerly Christian Teamwork) and, in the United States, the Washington School of Psychiatry (initially in association with the Yale University School of Medicine). In both cases, the TIHR co-sponsored a series of "Leicester-type" conferences, initially providing the conference director and most staff, until the institutions were equipped with a large enough pool of trained staff to run the events themselves. By this time the staff were by no means exclusively drawn from the Tavistock Institute and Clinic, or from the other initial sponsoring institution, the University of Leicester. Initiation of an Advanced Training Group from 1962 onwards made it possible to develop a broader pool of trained staff from education, industry, the prison and probation services, and so forth, some of whom were then deployed on the new conferences. Reciprocally, staff of the new institutions enlarged the pool that could be drawn upon for Leicester, in a process that still continues.

\*A new paper.

Subsequently, there has been similar collaboration in other countries, including France (with the International Foundation for Social Innovation), India (the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta) and more recently Israel. One interesting feature of the French development is that the conferences were established as bi-lingual from the beginning. Either language is used by members and staff indiscriminately. Although many members and some staff are essentially monolingual, with very limited comprehension of the other language, this does not appear to be a significant handicap to their understanding of the dynamics; and indeed (as I can confirm from my own experience on the staff of a Finnish conference) ignorance of the words may heighten one's attention to the "music." The French conferences attract an international membership.

Meanwhile the American conference institution, which, after Rice died in 1969, was separately incorporated in the following year as the A.K. Rice Institute (AKRI), has not only developed a set of regional affiliates, straddling the country, each of which runs conferences based on the Leicester model, but has itself engaged in a similar institution-building process in Sweden. There, the earlier conferences that used imported staff were in English; then, as the local institution, AGSLO, became self-sufficient, the conference language shifted to Swedish. Conferences have also been run in other countries without (so far) the subsequent development of a viable local institution. Examples include: TIHR and the Grubb Institute in Ireland; the Grubb Institute in Italy, and AKRI in Iceland. In yet other countries, local groups have taken the initiative to develop their own capability to run conferences. Finland and Germany are well established examples. The catchment area of the German institution (MundO) includes Austria and Switzerland. There are recently formed or incipient institutions in Norway, Denmark and Mexico.

All the above identify themselves both as implementing a version of the Leicester model and as drawing directly on the resources and advice either of the GRTP in TIHR or of one of the established sister institutions. In addition there are some institutions, such as the Australian Institute of Social Analysis, which are developing their own distinctive approaches to training, based partly on the Leicester model.

What has occurred in a partly unplanned way is a consensual process of accreditation, initially by TIHR alone and then increasingly through peer relationships among not only TIHR but other institutions. Interchanges of staff have been crucial to this process. There are nevertheless a few bodies, in the United States and elsewhere, which offer events described as using the "Tavistock model," but which in some cases use staff with minimum direct experience of the conferences and which remain outside this informal mechanism of reciprocal quality control.

To come back to the British scene, there have been collaborative relation-

ships with several institutions besides the Grubb Institute, but these have ended with the departure or death of key personnel. Examples include the Bristol University School of Education, Manchester Business School and the Chelmsford Cathedral Center for Research and Training.

Still nearer home, the close collaboration in this work between the Tavistock Clinic and Institute has persisted, even though as institutions they have been separate for 40 years. Jock Sutherland, the first post-war Medical Director of the Clinic, made a major input into the early conferences, from 1957 onwards. (After he retired, he set up the Scottish Institute of Human Relations, which also organized conferences, some in association with TIHR.) His successor in the role (re-designated Chairman of the Professional Committee), Robert Gosling, was actively involved throughout the 1960s and 1970s, until he too retired. The Clinic's own annual non-residential conference, for students and staff, is based on the Leicester model, and this has swollen the numbers of Clinic professionals equipped for conference staff roles. The current Chairman, Anton Obholzer, continues the tradition. Recent Leicester Conferences have been co-sponsored by the Tavistock Clinic Foundation and he has directed two of them.

### *Adaptation*

Within the series of Leicester Conferences themselves various different designs have been developed. New events have been added to the repertoire. If the Very Small Group (VSG) represents the size of many working teams, the Median Group (MG) of 15–30 reflects the problems of many committees and councils in oscillating between the dynamics of the small and large groups. The Praxis Event (PE), introduced by Lawrence (Miller, 1980; Lawrence, 1985), removes a further layer of structure. During it, the administrator manages the outer boundary of the conference, while the director and all other staff relinquish their managerial and consultant roles, thus dissolving the internal member/staff boundary. Left with only a set of individuals and a negotiated primary task (which is basically to study what is happening while it happens), one is confronted with both creative opportunities and self-imposed constraints in using the freedoms.

The set of events used in any one conference may be programmed in different permutations. For example, although the Small Study Group (SSG) has always had an important place, in some designs the Large Study Group (LSG) has been given priority both as the first session every day and in the overall number of sessions. (This tends to produce some differences in the dynamics: typically, more sustained development of myth and metaphor in the LSG and more concern with individualism in the SSG.) However, the study of authority has remained the central focus and task.

Throughout these 30 years, the Leicester Conference has kept its two-week span and been fully residential; but besides this the Leicester model has been translated into various configurations. An extended non-residential course was introduced in the 1960s. It included all the events of the regular conferences but was held on one evening a week over six months. Rice's evaluation was equivocal; but a critical drawback was the impossibility of drawing a boundary around the membership and staff in such a way as to create the equivalent of the conference institution "with properties of its own that would provide opportunities for learning" (Rice, 1965:182). The full-fledged course was replaced by a simple series of, usually, 10 sessions of weekly study groups; these continue, though currently with a shift of focus away from intra-group processes as such on to the relatedness of these processes to outside society.

Collaboration with other institutions led to introduction of shorter forms of the model—usually 5–7 days, though week-end events offer a useful introduction. Even if non-residential these can be sufficiently intensive for the "conference as an institution" to be experienced. In the United States AKRI offered an annual two-week conference for 10 years or so, but recruitment of membership became difficult; so only Leicester has retained the fortnight.

The basic model nevertheless lends itself to exploration of other themes, which have been the focus of many shorter conferences, from a week-end to a week, residential and non-residential. Inter-group week-ends were an early example—though that implied little more than pulling out one event from the Leicester design. In the early 1970s, "men and women" became the theme for a number of conferences, first in the United States (Gould, 1979) and then in Britain. Other themes on which the Group Relations Training Programme (GRTP) has been running shorter conferences have included "creativity and destructiveness," "interdependence and conflict" and "autonomy and conformity." In these the main events have been the LSG and the PE.

In addition, of course, a great variety of training programs for managers and professionals have included experiential events, such as the SSG, along with more conventional teaching methods.

## *Application*

### ORGANIZATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

Over the years TIHR has run conferences on the Leicester model for client bodies. One technical difficulty is the strength of the shared organizational boundary around the membership, which becomes a defense against formation of a boundary around the conference institution. The difficulty is somewhat reduced in, for example, a large multi-national company where many members

will not know one another, and the purpose of the conference is clearly educational. Much more problematic are requests to run a Leicester-model conference for a set of people who work together—perhaps for all the staff of a clinic or for the managerial or supervisory staff of a department of a company. Implicitly, if not explicitly, the prospective client system is hoping that this will unlock relationship difficulties and catalyze change. In my judgment a conference as an isolated event can be more damaging than constructive; conferences should be undertaken only as part of a longer-term intervention within which the consultant(s) can take continuing professional responsibility to help the client work through the outcomes.

One such Tavistock intervention was with the US Dependents Schools (European Area), which provide education for children of American servicemen posted overseas. In this case senior staff members from all the schools were brought together initially for an intensive five-day experiential event, which included some training on mutual consultation. This was followed by a six-month application phase during which regional groups met regularly to support each other in using the conference experience to analyze and tackle problems in their own schools. Conference consultants were available for some of these sessions. The intervention concluded with another three-day residential conference, which combined some additional experiential sessions with more practical review and forward planning.

Although it was generally seen as a productive experience, this type of in-house intervention carries an inherent tension: who is the client? In the regular Leicester Conference, the client is assumed to be the individual member. Even though the fee may be paid by an employing organization, it is the member who applies, presumptively on his or her own authority, and correspondingly it is for the member, not for the conference sponsors, to manage accountability to the employer.

How to report back is a common issue in Application Groups towards the end of the Conference. In organizational interventions of the kind just described there are two clients: the organization *and* the individual participant. The tension arises from the fact that the Leicester Conference approach is inherently subversive, in that it encourages members to question the nature of authority, and hence the ways in which they manage their role relationships to superiors, colleagues and subordinates in their own organizations. But in an organizational application the organization, through its management, is also a client. Even though we may demand that membership be voluntary, in reality individuals may feel under pressure to attend. Managers wanting to be “equal” to subordinates as participants within the conference will be under pressure to mobilize their external managerial roles. To the extent that they feel that the conference experience is a threat to their external authority, they are liable to be set up by the rest of the membership to lead an attack on the conference staff;

and so the boundary between membership roles and external roles becomes blurred. In such settings, it is a continuing technical problem for consulting staff to work at this inherent ambiguity and tension of the dual clients.

Another example was a seriously under-performing manufacturing company with just under 1,000 employees, which was part of a large international group (Miller, 1977; Khaleelee and Miller, 1985). It operated on two sites: one, near London, included the main factory and the head office; the other, 100 miles away in the Midlands, contained a much smaller plant. This set up was the result of amalgamating two businesses, which had previously been competitors. As so often happens in such mergers, the accountants expected the combined output and market share to equal the sum of the parts—an expectation seldom fulfilled. In this case, what was now the main factory had belonged to a company that the group had purchased, while the Midlands factory was the residue of the group's own former subsidiary that made a similar product. The sales force had been removed from the acquired company. And there had been other disruptive changes.

The intervention began with a diagnostic survey of all employees. It revealed acute splits cutting across each other: between management and workers; between employees from the two previous enterprises; and between departments. Identification with the organization as a whole was notably absent. Boundaries had been fractured and partly disintegrated; employees had fallen back onto their individual boundaries in a culture of survival.

The consultant team—two internal consultants with one from TIHR—postulated that the fragmented boundaries needed to be reconstructed, and designed what came to be called the “People Programme.” Its main feature was an extended version of a Leicester Conference for 120 managers, supervisors and specialists, with weekly small study groups, week-end inter-group events and finally weekly large groups—all of which exactly matched the need to work at the boundaries at three levels: the individual in role relationships; the department and other groupings in their inter-group relations; and the organization as a whole in relation to its environment. Meanwhile, consultancy was being provided to the top management group—which in this case was the primary client. A formal system of employee consultation was also set up.

Within a year, significant changes had occurred: the People Programme, instead of being run by the consultants, had been taken over by the participants; the training was being extended to other employees; the large group was still meeting weekly (and continued for three years); task groups arose spontaneously to tackle pressing problems; inter-departmental co-ordination improved; the organization gained a new sense of identity; and manufacturing performance and profits went up dramatically.

The consultants, who had already been providing consultancy on request to various internal groups, including a joint trade union body, then negotiated a

new contract. This established them as a quasi-independent Consulting Resource Group (CRG) with its own budget, and made it explicit that the organization as a whole—not management—was the client system. In addition to servicing internal groups, the CRG took on a new task—to try to elucidate the overall dynamics of the organization. This involved experimenting to see whether the methodology of, say, the Large Study Group, could be extended to a group of nearly 1,000, only a tiny proportion of whom could be present with the consultants at any one time. The common link was use of the transference. The CRG, like the group consultant in a Conference, was both outside the organizational boundary and also part of a wider client-consultant system, and hence available for projections from the organization. The technique used was a weekly session—which anyone, manager or worker, was free to attend—in which the CRG members reviewed their experience during the week in consulting to parts of the organization as a basis for formulating working hypotheses about the system as a whole. Evidence included their experience of being pulled in or pushed out, idealized or denigrated, homogenized or split, and so on, as well as observations of the pattern of projections among different groupings within the client system. Members of the organization present at the meetings worked on these hypotheses and added their own preoccupations; and beyond that the consultants used the interpretations directly and indirectly in their work with various groups in the ensuing week. In these ways the voice of CRG was “heard” by a significant proportion of the organization and seemed to have some influence. “The most overt evidence was in the growing number of individuals able to perceive organizational processes in which they were implicated and able also to act on their understanding by taking greater personal authority in their . . . roles” (Khaleelee and Miller, 1985:363–64).

“The operation was a success, but the patient died.” What should have been foreseen was that the culture developing in this subsidiary company was increasingly divergent from that of the rest of the group. Exercise of “authority based on competence is always a threat to an organization that defines authority as based on position . . . if it is exercised by a subordinate it is treated by the supervisor as insubordination” (Miller, 1986a:265). At group headquarters gratification over improved performance was submerged by anxiety about subversiveness; key managers were replaced; and the consultants were shown the door.

#### AN APPLICATION AT THE SOCIETAL LEVEL

This experiment encouraged a London-based group, in OPUS (an Organization for Promoting Understanding in Society), to try to extend and adapt the

methodology to the study of societal dynamics (OPUS, 1980–88; Khaleelee and Miller, 1985; Miller, 1986a).

As long ago as 1950 Bion—himself influenced by Freud’s much earlier speculations—had been eager to do this and offered some provocative ideas. These included his well-known proposition that society hives off specialized work-groups to deal on its behalf with basic assumption emotions that would otherwise interfere with the functioning of society as a “work group.” His examples were church (dependency), army (fight/flight) and, perhaps less convincingly, aristocracy (pairing) (Bion, 1961). He had identified these phenomena in small groups. The Leicester Conference and other observations have amply confirmed that, although certain kinds of dynamics are characteristic of groups of different sizes (Turquet, 1974), the larger group is always potentially present in the smaller, and at times the larger group phenomena break through. This, as we also found in the manufacturing company, can be used constructively. For example, the Leicester methodology has proved to be a useful tool in identifying organizational cultures: a small set of people from one organization will display often unrecognized dimensions of their shared culture, in particular by mobilizing them as a defense against the primary task of here-and-now study.

Moreover, as Rioch (1979) has noted, conferences based on the Leicester model often mirror current societal phenomena. For example, she noted that the incidence of violent revolt—including, for instance, invasion of staff territory and kidnapping of individual staff—reached its peak in the American conferences in 1968–69; after that, it subsided, and attempts in the memberships to mobilize collective leadership were less successful. Parallel changes had been seen at Leicester. “The myth that the group is a creative matrix [was] progressively submerged by the countervailing myth that groups and institutions are dangerous and destructive.” Correspondingly we saw “a withdrawal of commitment to groups, an increasing reluctance (noted also by Rioch) to use the conference setting for experiment and play (in the Winnicott [1971] sense), and a tendency for the individual to put up protective boundaries against group influences or seek security as an isolate or a pair” (Khaleelee and Miller, 1985:368).

Deriving from this experience, OPUS explicitly set out to use the microcosm to reflect the macrocosm of society, and, indeed, to explore whether society could be classed as an intelligible field of study in its own right, distinct from the large group. Turquet had described the dual role of the consultant in the Conference large groups—the consultant and the person—and hence the struggle to hold a boundary position. But in society there is no outside; hence no boundary role is available. OPUS has attempted to supply an institutional boundary within which its own members and others can examine their experience as citizens of society, and the capacity of this boundary to contain the

chaotic and violent feelings evoked has been tested almost to destruction. The “observing ego” has been precarious. However, it is confirmed that significant underlying themes can emerge in quite small groups that are given the task of examining their experience in their role as members of society. Larger groups, of 30–40, may unconsciously enact, in vivid and painful ways, important societal processes. A recent example was an OPUS conference on Society and the Inner City, which belatedly realized that it had reproduced, by creating an isolated sub-group, the very phenomena that it was discussing (Miller, 1986b).

### *Reflections*

Why has the Leicester Conference survived for 30 years—a period of considerable cultural change, nationally and internationally? Why has the Leicester model successfully taken root in so many other countries and cultures? China and Japan have not yet been penetrated, but there is evidence from India of effective use of the model with people drawn from poor rural communities. It has been regularly used by SAKTI, a Bangalore-based organization promoting increased roles for women in development. It is not just a preserve of professionals and managers who share a westernized cosmopolitan culture. Obversely, why has the model failed to diffuse more widely and more rapidly? Why are there not many more institutions running many more conferences every year? What has inhibited growth? Such questions are to be puzzled over. Here I offer only a few observations.

First, the model has proved effective in addressing an inherent feature of the human condition—the tension between individuation and incorporation—which, in most 20th-century cultures at least, is a lifelong tension, never fully resolved. The model confronts us with that dilemma and with the precariousness of a notion of individuality and autonomy that we may have taken for granted. It does so, however, within a structure designed to be relatively containing and within a conference culture whose values promote the idea—perhaps the hope—that through seeing how we get involved in unconscious group processes we can become less vulnerable to them and more effectively self-managing. Such discoveries are nearly always painful, in that they upset past assumptions and defenses. The possibility of becoming more self-managing than you actually were is tainted by recognition that you were really much less self-managing than you thought you were. Nonetheless, most people seem to find that the outcome is, on balance, positive.

Second, there is the issue of what they do with the experience and the learning. Part of it, almost inevitably, is personal and private, relating to one’s inner world. For some members it may remain so. But that is not the purpose of the conference: the design is intended to promote the application of experience in their roles in that temporary institution to their roles in institutions outside.

Here I may make two comments. First, if it is effective, such application is inherently subversive. It involves calling into question the embedded assumptions and myths that support the status quo and exercising the authority of one's own competence in an organizational culture where formal authority commonly derives from hierarchy and status. If the member is returning to a position at or near the apex of the hierarchy, this is less a problem, though one hopes such a person will have learned enough to prepare for the likely resistances. The less privileged ex-member may have to scale down his or her initial aspirations or risk being extruded. In any case, however, the fact that only the most enlightened organization actively welcomes employees who question the status quo and exercise their own authority is certainly one limitation on expansion of the conferences.

A second comment relates to inappropriate and superficial application, most commonly in the spirit of "do unto others what has just been done unto me." Despite verbal discouragements and repeated assertions that the Conference is designed for a specific educational task and that other tasks require other forms of organization, we cannot prevent members from identifying with the role-models offered by staff and thus seeking to replicate them. This is one of Roy Menninger's reservations in his largely positive account of the experience of encouraging a critical mass of the staff of the Menninger Foundation to attend conferences (Menninger, 1985). I quote extracts from his paper (pp.296-97):

Potentially damaging to the therapeutic process was a tendency, during the immediate post-GRC [group relations conference] period to equate "group process" with treatment. The powerful effects of expressing primitive feelings and the instructive experience of group-induced regression led to a natural but mistaken view that such experiences were the essence of therapy . . . , displacing the primary tasks of learning and understanding.

This perspective seemed to assume that the GRC was a *model of treatment* rather than a *method of education*. Group process is compelling and deeply involving, but it is not psychotherapy nor is it a substitute for a dynamic understanding of the patient . . .

Coupled with this pattern was a tendency to use group process to "manage" a patient's deviant or pathological behaviour . . . [and] diminished attention to the dynamic roots of the symptom . . .

An additional question that Menninger might have raised is whether the focus on treatment was in part a displacement from confronting more painful or intractable issues in the organization: were patients being mobilized to voice primitive feelings that staff were repressing?

It also has to be said that there is at least one recorded instance of the success in a psychiatric hospital of using a carefully thought out version of the con-

ference model for the reconstitution of newly admitted grossly psychotic patients (Lofgren, 1976). But overall, Menninger's strictures are soundly based. The reality is that the conference itself is an application—an application of a conceptual framework to an educational task. Many of the more significant applications to understanding of organizations, though informed by experience of conferences, essentially draw on that framework. Studies of a school by Richardson (1973) and of a mental health center by Lewinson and Astrachan (1976) are two examples that come to mind. But all too often, as at the Menninger Foundation, members have come back from conferences with the fantasy that to run a group—or, indeed, to run an internal conference—will solve the organization's problems. Misapplications of this kind have obviously made some organizations less than enthusiastic about the model and have been another factor in limiting its diffusion. Some organizations nevertheless become regular customers.

So we have the paradox that Leicester Conferences which are in their aims essentially subversive of the Establishment have themselves become an established institution, and with it run the attendant risk of losing their task.

A major problem is a shift in the motivation of members. An increasing proportion enroll less with the intention of learning than in order to gain a form of accreditation. Some have connections with the institutions that run conferences based on the Leicester model and have already taken part in one or more of these. Leicester experience may be necessary or at least helpful to progression to staff roles in these institutions. Also, there are various professional circles, especially in mental health, where attending (and surviving) a Leicester Conference has almost become a *rite de passage*, or carries some cachet. Beyond these two categories there are others who have been primed by previous members and have an idea in advance of what to expect. The proportion of "naive members," lacking in such external connections and in prior knowledge, has diminished. The cognoscenti, who outnumber them, tend to bring, in addition to their (at best) mixed motivations, some prefabricated defenses: for example, adopting an observing, interpretive role—a pseudo-staff role—as a way of avoiding involvement; using psychological jargon to outface the naive members; trying to set up situations that will defend them against the uncertainties of the member role by demonstrating their competence in their external professional roles. ("Casualties" perform a useful function for mental health professionals.) In practice, after a day or two, as a consequence of the dynamics of the total institution (with the help of interpretation from staff) the overwhelming majority of members find that they become involved—they "join"—almost in spite of themselves. Other difficulties remain. Inexperienced members, feeling excluded by an in-group that has a psychological jargon of its own, may come to believe that what is to be learned from the Conference is a language.

However, the problems of institutionalization are more insidious than that. The model is in constant danger of becoming a movement. A movement is fed by and feeds ritual. There are quite subtle pressures on staff to become priests of the ritual. The director and those staff who have taken part in several successive Leicester conferences find difficulty in putting boundaries around *this* conference. Newer staff, like inexperienced members, may feel pushed into an out-group, with all the uncertainties and anxieties of the rest of staff projected onto them. A new director or associate director will be the object of envious attack—which may be not at all subtle. Institutionalization makes it even more difficult to hold onto the reality that so far as *this* conference is concerned we are all inexperienced and that what we think we know from the past may be more of a hindrance than a help in understanding what is in the present.

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