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The difference in focus: How to create “group-as-system” level learning in t-groups²

Abstract

It is through the cycle of action and reflection that t-group members learn about group processes. But this learning cannot be assumed to happen automatically in each t-group experience. The main aim of this article is to help trainers understand the importance of focusing t-group members on learning, and specifically of focusing them on learning on the group-as-system level, an approach which was comprehensively developed by the ÖGGO. After a brief introduction we explore three theoretical assumptions that form our basis: the group as a social system; learning as a shared social construct; and reflecting on how the actions of developing the group as a social system facilitate multiple-level learning. Using this last theoretical assumption about reflecting on the development of the group, we illuminate and look more closely at the three levels of learning—individual, interpersonal and sub-system, and group-as-system. At each level we provide examples of trainer interventions to focus the learning.

1. Introduction: The subtle difference in the learning focus

T-group dynamics is not just group dynamics; each t-group and group dynamics is unique. It is a myth that each group develops and learns in the same way and always finds its own learning process. A group can certainly find its process, but what and how participants learn is certainly not predictable or guaranteed, nor easily accomplished. A reflecting, experienced, mature trainer who is aware of the difference between horizontal and vertical learning³ can consciously support this learning by forcing the development of an awareness on the system-level, thus opening the group to differences. This means that the group can recognize the potential for its own unique learning (which every group carries within itself), and both the group-as-system and the individual can learn from this.⁴

The focus of our article is learning about socially constructed group systems, which we call “group-as-system”, within the “here and now”⁵ t-group process. We use the term “group-as-system” to convey in both real and symbolic ways the inextricable and complex connection

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³ We refer here to maturity levels 7 to 9 (strategist, alchemist and ironist) as understood by Rooke & Torbert (2006) and Firscher & Rooke & Torbert (2003), since learners at these levels are able to embrace differences in terms of different truths.

⁴ See further Schüller & Zvacek (2012), who go into the various tiers of awareness of learning on the group level.

⁵ A t-group is defined here as the “pure training group” in which the trainer and the group follow and create the process in the “here and now”. They are also called “group dynamic labs”.

between the two concepts. The term “here and now” means the current moment, not the past and not the future.

For most trainers using the ÖGGO⁶ approach to t-groups, the primary goal is to offer participants an opportunity to learn about the group as a social system through their own experience; the secondary goals are for individuals to learn about themselves and about their interpersonal roles as members of a group, which some trainers call a “by-product”. It cannot be assumed that mere participation in t-groups results in learning in general or learning specifically about group process. To learn on the social system level is the real challenge and distinguishes group dynamics from therapy groups. Therefore, a crucial responsibility of the t-group trainer using the ÖGGO approach is to ensure that learning about the group as a social system or “group-as-system” takes place.

2. Theoretical assumptions

2.1 The group as a social system

We base our article on the theoretical assumption from a systems-thinking perspective that the group is an independent living social system. The emergent group social system⁷ is born of the interactions of its members; however, the behavior of the system is more dependent on the arrangement, relatedness, and interconnectedness of the members than on just the members themselves. A social system perspective of a group, considering the whole group and acknowledging the group’s characteristics and patterns of behavior, may be very different than what an analysis of individual members might predict.

In other words, the individual participant creates and influences the social system and the social system influences the individual. In this way we can examine both the individual benefits and limitations of members’ behavior and the mutually constructed group-as-system communication. If we want to know how the group functions as a social system, we must learn to observe not only the individual participants but in addition the whole communication system that emerges through their individual communication actions.⁸

⁶ The ÖGGO (Association for Group Dynamics & Organization Consulting) group dynamic has its roots in Lewin’s developments (action research, subject and object learning, and researching for oneself as a group and through the process of the group as individuals). It is strongly oriented towards the currents of applied philosophy, including mastery of the avoidance of subject-object relationships in both research and practical realization of training groups. Thus in this association the culture which has been established is that of learning in the sense of self-scrutiny as a trainer and further development of knowledge in most staff members, with a background of theory and mutual development of theories. It is a concept of emancipation through action and reflection, a concept of being part of a process with others to create the group’s own conditions and opportunities. This means the ÖGGO’s approach involves an “internal perspective”. See further www.oeggo.at/ (download of 26 December 2011). The ÖGGO’s group dynamics sees its roots where group dynamics and action research have their roots and learning. See also the history and current developments of ÖGGO Group Dynamics in Lesjak, B. (2012).

⁷ O’Conner & McDermott (1997).

⁸ See further Baecker, D. (2007, 9) and Krainz, E. (1990).

However, for the group as a cohesive living system to be an object of mutual examination and learning requires an effort of abstraction: we call this the “observation perspective”. This allows us to conceive of communication between people⁹ as an independent phenomenon and makes the relationship and interactions of the members of the group the focus for the observation perspective. The group’s complexly interwoven system of communication becomes its own object of observation; that is, participants need to learn to “observe” their individual communication and the collective system of communication while concurrently “acting” to create the system being observed.

Communication is understood to be that which unites the members of the group into a social system. Thus trainers need to keep track of the entire complex communication system as it emerges in the relationships of the individual members to each other.¹⁰ It follows that studying communication on the group level is not about evaluating individual members’ actions, e.g., “he or she communicates well”; rather it is about understanding communication on the group-as-system level, e.g., “communication between members is very good—honest, clear and direct”. If trainers emphasize the mutually constructed view of the socially constructed group system, it creates a point of reference for the group’s development and thus for the group’s learning.

2.2 Learning as a shared social construct

We, as t-group trainers, make another theoretical assumption: that learning and knowledge are socially constructed by the participants. A socially constructive approach suggests that participants collectively construct their group and group process while concurrently co-constructing their reality and knowledge about the same. Constructivism¹¹ posits that individuals construct their learning through active experience, discovery, and critical reflection. Constructivist theorists¹² suggest that individuals make sense of the world by forming common understandings through their experiences, and that their understandings exist separate from the analysis that produced them. This means that trainers need to be purposeful about supporting the participants as they become aware of and make sense of their group as a socially constructed system.

While the group examines and studies itself through its actions, it simultaneously creates itself as a system. The object of self-study and learning of the group itself in the “here and now”¹³ is the essence of a t-group. In this “here and now” members share their concepts,

⁹ And further, between systems like teams, organizations and societies.

¹⁰ This change of perspective was set forth as a theory by Descartes (1596-1650) and Kant (1724-1804). Through their scientific insights, the world was divided into the spiritual and the material, and the basis was laid for the circular foundation of the self and reality. The human being was thus born as a “citizen of two worlds” who on the one hand is a creature of nature and of arbitrariness and on the other hand is a free and moral being. Both subject theory and system theory were formed by these guidelines. See further the detailed explanations by Spindler, M. & Steger, M. 2008, 239ff.

¹¹ Constructivism is rooted in the philosophies of William James’ (2000) pragmatism and John Dewey’s (1933) experience-based learning.

¹² See Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Gergen, 1985 and Weick, 1995.

¹³ See further Krainz 2008, 15 ff.

ideas, concerns, assumptions, and feelings to create within themselves their social system—their group.

How do we, as trainers, create this group-as-system learning focus? In the next section we will first look at the multiple levels of learning before offering several practical answers to this question for trainers to consider.

3. Reflecting on the actions of developing the group as a social system facilitates multiple-level learning

In this section we consider two components of a theoretical assumption upon which we build the main point of this article: 1) focused reflection illuminates processes and encourages insights that can lead to learning; 2) learning can occur on at least three levels in t-groups. Reflection creates opportunities for members to test their assumptions about self, others, and group and form a common understanding of their experience. It is within the cycle of action and reflection that members learn, change, and improve. Reflection in this sense can be seen as a “springboard for learning”.¹⁴

We would like to take a closer look at three levels of learning and offer interventions to help trainers focus members’ learning. We will create an artificial separation of the three levels in order to make the trainer’s focus on learning, specifically at the group-as-system level, more visible and less confusing:

- Individual learning (an individual member’s thoughts, behaviors, and feelings)
- Interpersonal and sub-system learning (member to member, member to sub-system, sub-system to sub-system - interactions and relationships)
- Group-as-system learning (collectively created group as “one social body” with norms, rules, communication patterns and borders)

These three levels cannot be seen as separate learning levels: Monday the individual, Tuesday the interpersonal, Wednesday the group system level; rather they are interlinked by the process of developing and learning as a group. It is important to keep in mind that the primary objective of t-groups is for participants to learn about a group as a social system and that the secondary or by-product objectives are learning about themselves as individuals and their interpersonal roles as group members.

To facilitate learning on the group level, trainers need to be specific, intentional, and explicit. If the focus is on the individual, the participants will learn about individuals; if the focus is on the group, the participants will learn about groups. When trainers intervene at a group-as-system level, participants’ reflections serve a critical function of challenging assumptions about their perspectives, and informing and influencing subsequent actions.

¹⁴ This image is described by Königswieser 2008.

When connecting and focusing the learning the trainer refers to the following levels:



Individual level: The subject at the individual level is one's personal emotions, thoughts, mind-sets, beliefs, values, observational patterns, and expressed behaviors in the t-group. Group dynamics does not deny this subconscious and emotional subject, but does not focus on it as a task in itself. While group dynamics sees the individual and their social expressions as important components of the group as a system, the focus is on the group, not the individual.

As trainers we accept each member as a whole and complete person and as a critical "part" of the group. We recognize that individuals express their thoughts and feelings through communication and that individual communication is vital to the creation of the group. However, if we simply focused on the individual level without using looking at the group level in the "here and now", we would be moving away from a t-group focus toward a therapy group approach.



Focusing on this level would mean:

- *"What behavior does the action ... trigger in you?"*
- *"How do you feel? What do you think?"*
- *"What are your experiences with such ... situations?"*
- *"I observe / can feel / think that you are aggressive, ... helpful, ... nice, ... a good person ..."*

In group dynamics we as trainers avoid this level of communication, and if it is used by participants we help them "reframe" and look at the bigger picture in the "here and now" of the group as a system. Although it is a slight contrast to our prevailing view, it often happens at the end of the program that the group decides to share individual feedback with members, but it is important to note that this decision is made at the group level.



Examples of "reframing" an individual perspective to a group perspective could be:

- *"What function does the behavior of X have for the group? What are the connections of their actions with the current situation of the group?"*
- *"Individual feelings can be seen as an expression of the group process. What could your feelings express for the group?"*
- *"The current picture of the group situation actors-audience arose through certain actions ... I can see the following What is your interpretation of this for the group?"*

- “This action ... can be interpreted as aggression. Could it be connected to the initial situation where the trainer didn't follow the norm of the introduction round initiated by X? Are there further perspectives of how this connects to the group as a system?”

In this connection, Santer speaks of groups as an “intermediary space”¹⁵ in which the individual perception creates a shared reality. This shared, constructed reality helps to answer questions regarding the sense of the gathering of the individuals in this group. Thus the group as a system reaches a state where the individuals are integrated holistically within the group as a complex social system.

The more simplistic individual level is the perspective most participants try to cling to. They are used to this individual level of interpretation of social situations. The statement that “I want feedback from this group to learn about myself” is often a sign that the individual cannot see the interaction between the individual and the group system as a learning space.

The main challenge for the trainer and group is to cultivate this gap for learning about the group as a social system. In referring to the system level from the beginning through appropriate interventions, knowing that the participants (or most of them) are not aware of this level, the trainer begins to sow the seeds of learning. The interventions (seeds) need time to seep into the system (germinate) in order to create a shared awareness and opportunity for learning (growth).



Interpersonal and sub-system level: The focus at this level is the interaction between members and sub-systems, typically, as a way to form relationships, share information, and make sense of what is happening. We recognize that pairing and sub-group building is a natural and important step in relating and connecting with others to aid in the development of the group and to learn. However, since our stated primary learning objective is to help members learn about the group as a social system with its sub-systems, we appreciate the social, interpersonal and sub-system interaction as being vital to the group, but we also open the perspective to a more complex “group system” of communication. We facilitate members as they move from interpersonal interactions to a synergistic group level of communication that is more than the aggregate of its individual parts. In this way, group-level communication evolves from the interaction between individuals but is separate from and different to the sum of those interactions; the sum often has emergent properties different to what the parts might suggest.



Examples of communication focused between individuals at the interpersonal and sub-system level would be:

¹⁵ Santer 2008.

- *“The two of you act like you are in love. It is obvious; you are flirting and doing things together.”*
- *“These three younger women (A, B and C) form an alliance when it comes to attacking the trainer in his role as trainer. Which of you has what role in these actions?”*
- *“Why are the three younger men (A, B and C) rather quiet? They seem to talk only about topics from the informal communication outside the group sessions.”*
- *“The trainer has a conflict with A. They are stuck. What could be a way out?”*

Groups which are stuck at the individual and/or interpersonal level are concerned about mutual feedback and therefore not able to learn about the group as a social system.



Group-as-system level: The target at this level is the collective social system that emerges from the individual and interpersonal communication actions. We acknowledge that each member is part of the construction process of the group-as-system; each can participate and contribute to creating the group’s conditions for communication, development, and learning. Further, each level of learning emerges through their communication actions.¹⁶ The group’s collective system of communication becomes the focus for learning, and participants need to learn to observe beyond the individual and interpersonal communication to see the larger group-as-system patterns they create. As trainers it is our responsibility to move participants away from the more familiar and comfortable individual communication behaviors action to this group system level which is harder to observe, understand and operate. A focus on the group-as-system level opens up specific learning opportunities, such as learning how the emergent norms, rules, and procedures help or hinder group development.

In the intervention the trainer focuses on the group-as-system:

- *“This is the second introductory round. The first was about names and professional backgrounds; this second is about expectations for the week. What does the group need the introductory rounds for?”*
- *“The group seems to have a pattern of getting acquainted by questioning one member of the group at a time.”*
- *“What does the topic of ‘drinking tea’ mean for this t-group in the here and now?”*
- *“The action within the group can be described as four people on stage, one person as theatre director and six people as the audience. What can the observing members of the group - the audience - observe at the moment? What is happening?”*

Examples of reframing from the individual or interpersonal level to the primary group-as-system learning level could be the following:

¹⁶ See further Baecker, D. (2007, p.9) and Krainz, E. (1990)

- *“Two members of the group appear to be in love; they are flirting. What is the connection of this to the current topic in the group?”*
- *“What is the function of the three younger women in the group? They attack the trainer. What does the group need those actions for? How does this relate to the action or non-action of other group members?”*
- *Who has other observations about the group as a system? “The three younger men (A, B and C) are rather quiet and talk only about informal, outside topics. What is their role or function in the group? How could this be connected to the actions of the three younger women or the flirting couple? How is this outside communication influencing the group?”*
- *“The trainer seems to be in conflict with A. Who has other interpretations of this behavior? Why are the trainer and A the center of focus? What does this conflict have to do with the group?”*

4. Theoretical and practical implications for trainers

We suggest the following ideas for trainers and participants of t-groups focusing the learning on the group-as-system:

- Recognize the group is an independent living system and understand that it will grow and contract in response to the environmental stimuli of its members and trainers.
- Pay attention to the construction of the communication system, particularly as a “third” system that is a product of, yet separate from, individual and interpersonal/sub-system communication.
- Learn to recognize patterns in individual members, interpersonal interactions/sub-systems, and group-as-system developments, and then use that insight to inform your interventions.
- Be willing to challenge and question your perceptions and assumptions about group-as-system in developing your skills as a trainer (even when you are an experienced trainer).
- Do not be afraid to deal with dilemmas. The role and function of the trainer by its very nurture implies a dilemma as both a member and trainer of the group. On the one hand, the trainer is a role model for observation and intervention; on the other hand, the trainer is a provider of learning space and enabler of others. This means the observation and intervention can never be seen as the truth, but only as a tentative test for the group to inspect and decide how to proceed. It should not be a time for trainers to show off their knowledge of groups or observational powers.
- Learn to balance the three levels of learning. While we artificially divided them in this article to help isolate and illuminate, in practice it is much more difficult. So make sure to acknowledge and interweave the individual, interpersonal/sub-system and group-as-system levels, but focus the learning at the group-as-system level. While

they may be hard to avoid at the very end of the program, try to avoid “feedback sessions” during the program. Participants’ telling each other what they like/dislike about each other’s behavior moves the focus back to the individual level and hinders learning about the group as a social system.

- Be willing to examine together with the participants the ambiguity, differences and complexity, particularly in order to construct the group as social system.
- Continue to develop and improve your own self-awareness and skills as a t-group trainer by seeking different perspectives and feedback from other trainers to explore your blind spots.

5. Summary

It cannot be assumed that mere participation in a t-group provides learning for members about groups. The success of t-group members’ learning about group systems and their processes is highly dependent on experienced trainers focusing the learning. The members take the trainer’s perspective as impulse for explanation and learning. For this learning to occur, it is essential that trainers understand that groups and learning are socially constructed phenomena, and that there are multiple levels of learning—individual, interpersonal and sub-systems, and group-as-system. Trainers need to help the group and its members, through the cycle of action and reflection, to move from the more familiar individual and interpersonal levels to the more complex and abstract group-as-system level. We offer examples for trainers to intervene and to reframe the learning to target the group-as-system level. In addition we suggest theoretical and practical implications to help trainers in developing their system-awareness and skill.

6. Literature

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