

Are Transactional Analysis Training Program Groups Sufficiently Disturbing?

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Abstract

The authors investigate questions concerning the learning climate in transactional analysis training programs. Their research evolved from their own experience as transactional analysis trainees beginning in the 1980s to their more recent experience as transactional analysis trainers. As trainees, they often experienced a warm, welcoming atmosphere in training groups. During their search to become competent trainers, they took part in training classes outside of transactional analysis, including several informed by a more psychoanalytic, didactic model. They found that the exploration of the more uncomfortable reality in groups adds an important dimension to the development of a transactional analysis professional. This inspired them to question and challenge the sometimes calming and nurturing learning climate in many transactional analysis training groups.

Keywords

education, training, radical, Barrow, Newton, relational, Sills, Hargaden, nurturing, Cornell, undertow, van Beekum, safety, boundaries, transference, group dynamics, the not known, Bollas

Transactional Analysis Training Programs

We assume that most transactional analysis training programs have three learning goals:

1. On completing a transactional analysis training program, trainees have extensive knowledge of the robust sociopsychological model of transactional analysis. They understand the development of people and groups and can classify them in terms of TA concepts, including ego states, transactions, strokes, script, games, discounting, symbiosis, and more.
2. Trainees can put into practice the many methods, techniques, and research frameworks that are characteristic of TA. Techniques and instruments that have been developed within TA (some inspired by gestalt therapy; Perls, 1973) include egograms, chair exercises, script questionnaires, (peer) supervision techniques, parent interviews, organizational analysis instruments, and more.
3. Last, but not least, TA students are encouraged to examine themselves in depth. They are often professionally active in one or more fields, including psychotherapy, coaching and counseling,

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parenting and education, and management and organizational development. Above all, they learn that the relationship they develop and maintain with their patients, clients, client systems, pupils, students, and/or colleagues is crucial to achieving the desired results. Looking at how to create the most beneficial relationship possible with their interlocutor (teacher, client, colleague, etc.) is also integral to every TA training program. It is adapted to convey this message: It is your job as a professional to ensure that you do not invite others to take up a role in your script; rather, it is your job to use all resources available to you, including the relationship, to nurture and develop their ability to think, feel, and act autonomously as a person within a group and as a group within a system.

In our view, transactional analysis training groups are groups whose members are learning TA, not therapy groups in disguise. However, it is not unheard of for in-depth personal and professional study to also have a therapeutic effect. In TA training groups, students are invited to examine their own internal process and its impact on their behavior. These are often deeply meaningful experiences and may have frustrating, complex, embarrassing, and sometimes even frightening dimensions. Karpman (2014) referred to these effects as the intimacy blocks of condescending, abrupt, secretive, and evasive behavior. In TA training groups, interpersonal and intrapersonal study occurs in parallel because work is regularly conducted with one or several people and often in larger groups or systems. We think examining one's thoughts, feelings, and behavior toward others within a task-oriented group comprises a structural element of all TA study. Newton (2003) emphasized this in her description of eight educational models, of which the *radical education model* is the most challenging. Its purpose is to enable empowerment and freedom for both teachers and learners, and it values both mutual learning in a specific context and personal and group autonomy.

This being said, we think there are important questions and issues to consider in order to broaden our perspectives on what alternatives exist to working within a calming and nurturing learning climate. We were inspired by Barrow (2009), who explored the implications of what he called the *learning script* in relation to transactional analysis training. He encouraged critical thinking among trainers and trainees about the learning relationships in which they are involved and finished with a question that ignited our interest in writing this article: "If the origins of transactional analysis lie in radical psychotherapy, how is this radicalism reflected in our model of training and certification?" (p. 303).

We also think it is time to incorporate ideas from relational transactional analysis (Hargaden & Sills, 2002; van Beekum, 2015) into our thinking about and practice of transactional analysis training. Hargaden and Sills wrote that "many of the existing models [of psychotherapy] in transactional analysis are concerned with the process of strengthening the individual's Adult ego state. . . . [This] is a largely cognitive behavioural process" (p. 1). Van Beekum (2015) invited "a willingness to expand from a cognitive, informational, and behavioral use of transactional analysis toward a transformational one by focusing on the undertow of organizational dynamics as they occur in the work between consultant and client" (p. 167).

This leads us to a question: How can the emotional structure of a transactional analysis training group become a challenging area of exploration for both trainers and trainees with the aim of inspiring trainees' learning? To answer this question, we consider the six issues discussed in the following sections. All of them relate to the preferred learning climate, teaching style, and chosen content of TA training programs.

Nurturing and Calming

In his book *Explorations in Transactional Analysis: The Meech Lake Papers*, Cornell (2008) talked about the effect of physical contact on clients and about hands-on therapy:

When clients get that kind of comfort from their therapist, it reduces the need and capacity for self-exploration. It changes the treatment relationship from one that is challenging and exploring to one that is nurturing and calming—which may be healing in some ways, but it's not about learning. (p. 137)

We believe that Cornell's observation can also be investigated in terms of the relationship between TA trainers and students or trainees. Is the trainer effective in making the relationship sufficiently safe yet sufficiently disconcerting at the same time? It is common in TA training programs for trainers to greet students physically with a hug. But does doing so alter the training relationship from one that is challenging and exploring to one that is nurturing and calming?

We found surprising insights about this issue in studies on teaching and learning from a more psychoanalytic perspective (the source from which TA emerged). In a central statement about teaching and learning in groups, Armstrong (2008) came close to psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion's (1897-1979) way of thinking with his frequent comment that "learning is fundamentally a frightening experience." It requires nothing short of heroism to return to script decisions made in childhood and to develop in directions that may have been feared as catastrophic for a long time. In this way, students in training groups may cross boundaries that used to be clear and understandable. To say this in a clear and challenging way, we tell our students, "If your knees aren't knocking, if you don't toss and turn at night, if you don't find yourself sweating when you experiment with new behavior, then you should ask yourself if you're really learning something new."

In the October 2013 *Transactional Analysis Journal (TAJ)* theme issue on groups, there was an intense exchange between Richard Erskine and Bill Cornell. Erskine (2013) described how he makes contracts with regard to the learning climate in his (therapy) groups. He asks participants "to pledge to each other that there will be no shaming transactions" with the intention of increasing the feeling of safety in the group through "validation and affirmation by other group members" (p. 272). Cornell (2013) challenged this practice by suggesting that Erskine favors a style of group work that avoids confrontation and interpretation. Cornell asked, "Where is the room for hatred, envy, contempt, indifference, differentness?" (p. 281). He was suggesting that although these are not pleasant emotions and evaluations, they are part of being human. Recognizing and acknowledging these fundamental and often dysfunctional feelings creates the opportunity to investigate and also change old patterns of discounting. Should these patterns disappear below the surface, sooner or later they will play a part in the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of the person in question and his or her surroundings. Although Erskine and Cornell were writing about therapy groups, their reflections have inspired us to think further about what the working contract between trainers and trainees and between trainees themselves in a TA training group should involve so as to allow for the exploration of all the messy processes that can be at work below the surface.

Overvaluing Safety

It is often said that a safe environment is needed for learning, that individuals must be able to be vulnerable if they are going to learn and grow. But what does safe actually mean in the context of TA training? Our impression is that a safe learning climate often leads to a reassuring one in which students feel comfortable, and learning through (more uncomfortable) experiences is put on the back burner. Before you know it, reassuring has turned into smothering. A learning environment may emerge that is characterized by a negative Nurturing Parent and too many positive strokes. Strokes are essential, but which ones? Steiner's (1977) warm fuzzies or Cornell's (2013) (our words) cold pricklies? Erskine (2013) appears to favor learning environments in which people do not approach each other with strokes that express their unconscious projections. In such situations, students do not have the chance to examine, from their integrated Adult, dysfunctional interactions or to learn to deal with other people's (negative) projections. In TA training, learning to cope with embarrassing,

irrational strokes is as relevant as learning to cope with positive, warm strokes. We believe that safe learning means learning in the here and now in such a way that students discover, by using their Adult awareness, that their pain, or that of another, is not always from the here and now but often from the there and then. If a TA training group agrees on a contract in which all emerging and expressed thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can be examined, an open climate is created in which learning includes the rich dimensions of Newton's radical education.

Unavoidable and Unexpected

Students in TA training programs often find themselves, on day one, in a group of strangers. What does it mean to be part of a group in which the members have not selected each other? The experience of a working intimacy is not immediately obvious in such groups. Berne (1963) suggested that drawing and describing a group's imago can offer visual insight into what is going on. Usually group members initially form subgroups, explicitly, and more often implicitly, selecting fellow students with whom they would prefer to collaborate as well as those with whom they would prefer not to work. These choices are often unconscious and can be motivated by various forces, such as the need for equivalence. An unconscious desire to upgrade one's own status, for instance, may be revealed by aligning oneself with others with a presumed or known higher status. Or group members may consolidate their own status by selecting students with a presumed or known lower status. The underlying and often unconscious question may be where students place themselves hierarchically so that they can (or perhaps preferably cannot) be recognized as potential leaders within the group.

By helping students to formulate hypotheses about themselves in interaction with fellow students with regard to initial bonding processes within the group, the TA trainer creates a learning environment in which all transactions can be examined. Trainees learn to use the unavoidable and unexpected in every interaction as a source for their own transformation process. The trainer not only aims to facilitate this individual transformation but also challenges the transformation of the group as a whole.

What are the objects of possible transformation? We want to emphasize here the latent options for transforming emotional experiences. When projections and counterprojections fall into transference and countertransference, the transformational challenge is embedded by exploring the here and now. Exploring personal and interpersonal boundaries offers opportunities for transforming assumptions about how roles, tasks, and responsibilities in the context of the student's learning system can be more productively developed.

Students learn to form and dissolve (sub)groups in order to exploit new opportunities in new group formations. This allows them to experience the difference between personal relationships that are not connected to a context and/or task and relationships in role whereby they are connected to the other person through a common task. They learn the difference between personal intimacy and intimacy within the scope of activities based around a task, that is, professional intimacy. Understanding the difference between personal relations and relations that are related through a shared accepted and experienced task is theoretically easy to understand but emotionally complex to experience (Reed, 2000). Providing students with the opportunity to explore this difference and helping them to understand unconscious symbiotic processes enable their professional development in terms of working with groups. Collaboration, even within TA training program groups, is what we call a necessary inconvenience for which there is no alternative. It is our experience that exploring this inconvenience offers great learning opportunities.

Students' illusory way of thinking, recognizable by referring to each other as buddies or soul mates or brothers and sisters, reveals a mythical desire for a never-ending relationship that considerably exceeds the time constraints of the training group. On a positive note, it is fantastic when real friendships are formed within such groups. Bion (1961/2001) described the assumption that

group members harbor a deeply concealed hope for such alliances (bonds with others) so that they will be spared awkward confrontations. He was suggesting that group members hope unconsciously to create alliances so that they can avoid confronting each other on important or difficult issues. A delicate balance between closeness and distance can be more useful for creating safety in groups than the formation of solid coalitions that may foreclose learning about self, others, and the world. Widdowson (2010) described “the core tensions that exist within any relationship [and that] are apparently contradictory” (p. 59). He mentioned the tension between the need for privacy and the need for transparency, the need for novelty versus the need for predictability, and the need for autonomy versus the need for connectedness. This tension produces fascinating dynamics in groups. In our experience, when integration is a fact, differentiation becomes a need, and when differentiation is a fact, integration becomes a need. Facilitating a good-enough holding environment in which this tension can be felt and explored for the sake of development and growth might be a better strategy than creating a climate safe enough for learning.

All Sorts of Conflicts

We believe that the leadership experience of TA trainers can partially be understood as a form of dependence between trainers and students. The decades of experience that students (and trainers) have gained in many educational situations, which they then bring to their TA training, is frequently characterized by a tendency toward symbiotic behavior. The trainers see themselves as producers of learning, and the students see themselves as consumers of what is offered. This can be used in TA training programs to enable learning about the relationship between leaders and followers. It is the trainers’ job to establish learning boundaries in a way that the dimensions of power versus lack of power, trust versus mistrust, and other dynamic topics can be experienced and examined. Like the developmental stages Levin (1988) used to describe the challenges and pitfalls of child development, a TA training group must provide the opportunity to experience and investigate all boundary dimensions that professionals face in everyday life. Students need the chance to test and deepen their skills for managing conflict. There are plenty of opportunities for conflict, as every interaction is made up of transactions, and transactions represent exchanges over boundaries.

We see possible boundary exchanges/conflicts at the following levels:

1. Boundary conflicts that occur within the person (intrapersonal): What should I let out and what should I keep inside myself?
2. Boundary conflicts between individuals (interpersonal): Who should I and who should I not allow to have an impact on me?
3. Boundary conflicts between different subgroups: Who may join and who may not? With whom shall we work and not work?
4. Boundary conflicts between groups and leaders (or trainers): What power shall we give to the leader and what authority and form of competition is present in this relationship?
5. Boundary conflicts between groups and other groups that are virtually (in the mind) present. For example, when there are several TA training programs, what significance (friendly or unfriendly) do we assign to outside groups? Are we the best training program group or the best training program institute?

Conflicts that occur in and around a training program group often reveal a parallel process that mirrors conflicts in the students’ private lives or work systems. That is, the system in the training program group reflects a dynamic that also occurs elsewhere. Outside experiences are projected onto the interaction in the training group. These projections are worth acknowledging and examining in an attempt to understand the real world in which students live and work. There is a well-known Latin

phrase adapted from the writings of Roman writer and philosopher Seneca (1925) that says, “*Non scholae, sed vitae discimus*” (“We do not learn for school, but for life”). By experiencing and investigating conflicts, a TA training program creates a multidimensional learning environment in which safety (protection) forms the basis of in-depth learning. It also provides the basis for an extensive and varied internal dynamic in which all boundaries may be crossed and explored (permission). In the end, this is about the challenge of teaching students how to cope with the daily reality of intra- and interpersonal conflicts in such a way that their internal script process has less influence on their actions in the here and now.

One could say that within the safe boundaries of the exploratory contract, students can have limitless experiences. This contract should include exploration of the tentative limits that are at work through ongoing ethical reflection. The question we raised in a previous article about ethics may be helpful in this regard: “Whatever I do, is it good for me/us, is it good for others, and is it good for the greater good?” (de Graaf & Levy, 2011, p. 147). Learning with an open mind has its place within a clear ethical framework.

Time, Task, Territory, and Technology

As a contractual method, transactional analysis and contracting (for change, growth, and development) go hand in hand. To put it bluntly and to paraphrase Berne, if there are no contracts, then there is no transactional analysis. Of all of the levels in contracting—procedural, professional, and psychological—it is the latter that requires the most attention from TA professionals, including trainers. Berne (1963) defined the psychological contract simply as “the personal needs of the professional and the client which they may or may not be aware of” (p. 149).

At the start of a learning course, a general working contract is often made between trainer(s) and the training group. Common psychological aspects are addressed, such as respect, trust, active participation, open interaction, providing open support, respect for individuals’ boundaries, and how a participant can leave. The trainer’s obligation to invest in the training program and the methods of communication with the training program institution are also discussed. Following this, subgroups may come to agreements concerning peer supervision in an intensive group or during specific training program submodules. Various activities and group meetings require that different participants take on different roles and therefore also require different contracts.

The agreements in a contract comprise four unavoidable boundary elements: time, task, territory, and technology (Miller, 1959). Those elements are the fundamental resources that allow for every role, both professional and private, to be taken up.

Time refers to the duration of the training program, module, or specific practical session. If trainers and/or students do not adhere to the time frame, students are likely to have to wait around longer and may start displaying passive behaviors. The classic phrase “saved by the bell” is a nice illustration of how people use and misuse clear time boundaries. Students who are not confronted with their procrastination may implicitly have their script beliefs reinforced.

Task refers to the training group’s main task as well as the primary task defined in a module or particular practical session. A task can also consist of examining an underlying group dynamic. If students and/or trainers do not focus on the (primary) task agreed on, learning can occur every which way without producing in-depth learning. Clarity regarding what students and/or trainers are going to do together (task) is a *conditio sine qua non* (necessary condition) for every group and most definitely for a TA training program group. Only when explored actively and explicitly can trainers and participants go through the process of searching, finding, making, and taking up their roles (Reed, 2000).

Territory refers to the space in which the work (the task) is carried out. If the group agrees on a work place and a group member leaves angrily, this movement over the boundary provides

information about the state of one or more group members and about the pressure that is being developed and experienced within the group. In the absence of a clear boundary, this is not acknowledged and cannot be investigated.

Finally, *technology* refers to the agreed on methodology. This concerns the how of the task (e.g., using video technology or role play to illustrate a presented theory).

In the early years of transactional analysis, Crossman (1966) wrote about the three P's: protection, permission, and potency. Hay (1992) later suggested changing the word "potency" into "power" because of the sexual connotation of the former. We assume that in transactional analysis work, protection is not aimed at making the experience as pleasant as possible for students or clients. The importance of protection is that it facilitates permission: permission to experiment, to put acquired learning experiences into practice, and to examine and rethink them.

Transference and Countertransference

Transference and countertransference often play a significant role in the relationship between trainers and students. As we said earlier, we believe it is time to include concepts from relational transactional analysis in developing TA training programs. The Dutch therapist and author Riekje Boswijk (1997) provided an insightful description about how to work with such dynamics.

Phase 1: Positive Transference

The ideal parents are projected onto the trainers. Students feel safe and secure; they have finally found what they have been looking for and put their heart and soul into the TA training program. This is beneficial for the growth and learning process. Students demonstrate dependent, and also extraordinarily sensitive, behavior.

Phase 2: Negative Transference

The real (bad) parents are projected onto the trainers. Negative transference arises from a number of apparently banal events within the learning process. The students' emotional storage (a stamp book from their childhood; Berne, 1966) then appears. The inner Child sees his or her own parents before him or her once again and feels demeaned, abandoned, or ignored. Sometimes students no longer want anything to do with the trainer(s). The task (art) is to offer a space in which to discuss these difficulties, to create a relationship, and in that context, to examine the students' obstructive emotional storage (stamp books).

Phase 3: Transference Ruptures

The students disassociate themselves from the trainers. The image of the trainer as a normal person slowly emerges from the trainee's projections, and the illusion disappears. For some students this involves a sense of disillusionment: They would have preferred to experience an ideal father/mother or a guru or master. Sometimes the disillusionment is so embarrassing that students resent their trainer when he or she is his or her normal self. They may even denounce their trainer and look for another. In such cases, the students are not ready to give up their illusion (positive transference), that is, to become adult and autonomous. These students have not yet achieved an equal relationship.

Phase 4: The Transference Disappears

Students and trainers treat each other as adults. The students' inner Child has been integrated (in the Adult). Over the course of the training program, the dependent students have developed into people

who can function autonomously and who can genuinely distinguish themselves from their trainers. They are able, together with their trainers, to reflect critically on the content and process of the training program.

It is important for the creation of a healthy learning climate that trainers continue to sufficiently examine their own countertransference so that they can remain as close as desired and as distant as necessary. They thus create an environment in which students can learn the lessons that they need and want to learn. Just as parents are there for their children when they are growing up and not the other way around, trainers are there for their students and not vice versa.

How Are Transactional Analysis Trainers Taught?

We are puzzled about why there does not seem to be sufficient training programs for transactional analysis trainers. The growth and development of TA trainers occurs predominantly in working with students, work that they supervise. Trainers often revisit their own educational experiences, which leads to replicating other educators' and trainers' behaviors from their own schooling and later educational experiences. We believe we should aim to expose TA trainers to the aforementioned learning dimensions in the context of their own training program group. They can then become familiar with, and skilled in, examining group processes and dynamics within training program groups. TA trainers need to have sufficient knowledge and skills to work with and in various systems. We believe that the ability to endure a good deal of displeasure and discomfort (containment) in and for the training program group can only be developed in the context of a dynamic training program group. Bollas (1987) wrote about exploring thought that is known to the individual but about which he or she is unable to think; exploring the not known reinforces the necessary spirit of inquiry. Consequently, the integrating Adult is constantly in exploration mode to come up with more hypotheses based on experiences distilled from the processes taking place. This attitude must be practiced over and over again.

Conclusions

As trainers ourselves, we are determined to continue learning. It was a helpful learning experience to write this article. To encourage and inspire further learning, we end with the following questions:

- What makes a training program a TA training program? What is the difference between it and other comparable training programs? Remember the question Barrow (2009) raised about TA and radicalism.
- How do TA trainers create a *potential space* in which there is room for both individual and group learning? How can TA training groups be places in which the often pleasant but also difficult reality of collaboration can be examined? Think about Widdowson's (2010) core tension in any (group) relationship.
- How can an effective contract be developed with students that gives them permission to also express negative strokes? Do students learn to contain and work with uncomfortable experiences? Does a TA training program offer the possibility of research into, in the words of French (2001), negative capabilities such as hate, envy, contempt, indifference, and differentness?
- How can the exploration of transference and countertransference phenomena between students and trainers be included in the curriculum of a TA training program? How can the work of Hargaden and Sills (2002) and others on relational transactional analysis bring a more relational perspective to TA training?

In our work as TA trainers, we feel the constant challenge to develop and maintain a learning climate in our training groups that is as safe as it can be and as disturbing as it should be.

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