

# LLE and LfA: two powerful tools for TC workers

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *This is an appraisal of two workshop formats for people involved with, or interested in Therapeutic Communities (TCs). The paper aims to discuss this issue.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *The author had the good fortune of being a staff member of two differently organised workshops, both of which aimed to help staff working in TCs with the role of staff member. The origin and structure of the two workshops are described in “Living-Learning Experience” (LLE) and “Learning from Action” (LfA).*

**Findings** – *This is followed by some observations and reflections made possible by the privileged position of the author’s participation in both, within a fortnight of each other.*

**Originality/value** – *The two workshops could be considered a valuable complementary training tool.*

**Keywords** *Training, TC history, Personality disorder, Residential, Staff*

**Paper type** *Viewpoint*

## Origin of the workshops

In 1995 Rex Haigh and Jean Rees were working at Winterbourne Therapeutic Community for borderline personality disorders in Reading, Berkshire. As steering group members of the Association of Therapeutic Communities, they felt the need for a practical way of quickly training staff in the Therapeutic Community (TC) approach. To do this, they set up a residential workshop using TC principles, and the practical ideas (such as agendas) that they had developed at Winterbourne – for people wishing to learn what a TC is like, directly from the experience of being member. These workshops, called “Living Learning Experience” (LLE) were facilitated by group analysts and workers from Henderson Hospital, and other British TCs. The encouraging feedback from workshop participants justified continuation and growth, over the last 18 years, from twice to several times per year.

Enrico Pedriali, who sadly died in July 2009, was favourably impressed by my enthusiasm in reporting the Kent Living Learning Workshop I attended in 1998. He had been to a different type of workshop in Rome at the “Raymond Gledhill” TC when it opened in 1991 and could appreciate the idea of getting TC workers together in living-learning settings for mutual support, know-how exchange and learning from experience. In 1998 I began to organise LLE workshops in Erice, Spoleto, Florence, Verona, Rimini and Rome, mostly with Rex Haigh and Jean Rees as consultants. Veronica Dominguez, who was bilingual, worked at Raymond Gledhill, and had extensive experience at the Richmond Fellowship in the UK in its earlier days. Together with Giancarlo Decimo, who attended the 1998 LLE in Kent with me, the five of us set up teaching workshops with a similar LLE format in Sicily: Palermo, Caltanissetta, Erice and two LLEs in a converted fishing boat sailing along the Egadi Islands in Trapani, for induction of new British personality disorder teams. Although those workshops were well attended and received very positive evaluation feedback, they were never fully publicised or written up at the time. An

archival web site with details and photographs of previous workshops is in the process of being set up at [www.livinglearningexperience.com](http://www.livinglearningexperience.com)

In the early 2000s Enrico Pedriali asked Bob Hinshelwood to help him set up a similar kind of workshop to help TC staff grow in ability through improved awareness. Giancarlo Decimo took part of the first workshop as a member of what was called "Learning from Action" (LfA). As Bob Hinshelwood is experienced in well-established Group Relations Conference work (Miller, 1988), the workshop format he devised with Enrico Pedriali was designed to highlight and deal with anxiety-provoking situations arising from staff/resident or inter-group competition and intragroup dynamics. The format adopted is akin to Harold Bridger's workshop model for organisational consultants. It is structured to help develop basic awareness of personal challenges to cope with the anxieties of those working in residential or semi-residential communities.

### Workshops formats

LfA has a sandwich type of day structure with large groups at the beginning and the end of the day. The very first one is called *Plenary Group*; the others are called *Community Organisational Meeting* (in the morning) and *Community Reflection Meeting* (in the evening). Small groups for the three main "maintenance" activities of cooking, cleaning and leisure are set up in the *Plenary Group*, and are formed by residents putting their names down for each daily occupation. Alongside these activities, two other kinds of groups, *decision-making* and *peer group support* groups (named "group activities" and "application groups"), deal, respectively, with the topics of studying what happens when people try to make decisions in a group (particularly concerning leadership and authority issues) and how a peer group of professionals can recognise group dynamics and provide reciprocal help, especially following the appraisal of leadership-related issues in the former exposure to decision-making groups.

There is a hierarchy of six staff members: one director, four small group facilitators and a staff member who deals with practical and administrative needs (such as food supply, linen and blankets, attendance certificates). In the first and last Plenary Group, in order to stress their role of authority, staff sit together in a row with a Chairman in the role of Director. During the other large group meetings the staff sit at random – but all communications are expected to be addressed to the whole group and not to single members.

LLE also has a sandwich type of day structure with large groups at the beginning and end of the day called *Community Meetings* (CMs). Three *Small Groups* (SGs) are chosen spontaneously during the first, in order to form three small teams each facilitated by the same staff member throughout the workshop. Each group, in turn, will deal with cooking, tidying up and cleaning activities as agreed upon in the first Community Meeting.

Each small group and its facilitator meet four times for 90 minutes in the same room for spontaneous communication without a set agenda, and only once in the kitchen, also for 90 minutes, to prepare a meal. The workshop provides three spaces called *Community Time* for people to decide which issue or activity is of particular interest or relevance for the majority of participants. Topics most often voted for are artistic production, meaningful music, exploring the farm or nearby countryside, games illustrating dynamic processes, staff evaluation of leadership style, psychodrama and other activities participants wish to provide to the community. There is also space for formal and structured teaching, in order to make sense of the theory and practice of the TC approach. The staff team is composed of three group facilitators with group analytic or equivalent background, and (depending on total delegate numbers) up to three other co-facilitators, usually in administrative and trainee staff roles. No one is designated as director, and staff engage in peer group supervision during 15-minute staff meetings held before and after all Community Meetings and small groups. This is useful for staff members as it builds clear shared understanding of what is happening in the community, and helps to deal with their own emotional responses.

### Participants' response

During the last 16 years' experience of LLE workshops I have always been favourably struck by the enthusiasm this type of workshop evokes in participants, who usually declare how important

this kind of learning is for them both as professionals and persons (see [www.livinglearningexperience.com](http://www.livinglearningexperience.com)). The same response came from participants at the end of the LfA workshop. This is not a surprise, as new ways of experiencing oneself in roles different from the usual is enriching and adds to personal awareness of one's own humanity. Pierre Turquet (1974) illustrated how group pressure influences people's membership, and consequently a sense of identity. Cultural values are responsible for the way one experiences oneself, since shared rules show members *how* to perceive, think, feel and behave in a shared environment (Applebaum, 1973).

### Personal appraisal

I have no direct experience of being a member of a LfA workshop in the position of a student, as I was invited to take part as a staff member. I can recall, though, how my first participation as a member of a LLE in 1998 profoundly influenced the way I subsequently delivered the sociotherapy components of the Raymond Gledhill TC programme. At that time I was not fully aware that the main essence of group work, in any learning organisation, is to help recognise the importance of role definition, boundary protection and the quality of emotional communication as the main characteristics of its culture. At the beginning, coming from an individual psychoanalytic background, I could grasp very little of the importance of large groups, or the function of the Community Meetings. Before the LLE the community I was directing had one median group per day with all patients, followed by several activities such as journal clubs, music therapy, bioenergetics and art groups. The longstanding TC principles of democratisation, permissiveness, reality confrontation and communalism were concepts I could only understand intellectually; I did not grasp their emotional importance and real meaning in those days. To be a "patient" of a temporary TC made me discover the importance of seeing staff members in different roles and in various circumstances. I discovered how the group, as Foulkes (1965) says, really "is" the actual therapist. I was also happily surprised to appreciate that the staff's holding function, in the here and now (both in the groups and in various other settings), did not interfere at all with the more natural way of being oneself: for example, while sharing cooking or chores or other tasks in daily living with other small group members.

I remember arriving late for the LLE workshop. This was because my two Italian psychiatrists decided to linger at Charing Cross and see Trafalgar Square on the way to the event, before catching the train to Sevenoaks. On arrival, and throughout the LLE, I was strongly confronted with the relevance of boundary issues. One thing is to set boundaries to promote psychoanalytic work; another is to protect boundaries in order to safeguard the function and identity of the whole place of work.

Identity, in its personal intimate aspect, as well as in its social presentation of self in various roles, is what a structured workshop deals with either overtly or covertly. Our peculiar work of recovery-promotion can become clearer in a workshop experiment. This is partly because one is compelled to bargain priorities between being profoundly humane and at the same time acting in the roles expected by the whole organisation.

I believe that the main difficulty for staff, as well as for us all in any organisation, concerns the expression of our humanity without letting some of the dehumanising effects of institutions interfere with this. In order to satisfy emotional needs, as well as those of one's individual role, one must develop good awareness of both personal needs and predicaments relating to one's role, and learn to match the two together harmoniously.

### LLE and LfA: similarities and differences

In my opinion, both LLE and LfA aim at developing awareness of ways to be conscious of anxieties derived from conflicts between, as Harold Bridger (1990) put it, "person and person in a role". A community can be regarded as an organisation which produces and promotes shared human values; an institution puts together several individuals in different roles in order to achieve the final goal of the organisation. If we ask what the final output of the TC organisation is, the answer is: *change of its participants!* This is a process that we can only accompany by being

involved. It forces *us* to change as well, making it mandatory to become aware of our defences when confronted with impossible tasks – like, for example, correcting dysfunctional people.

The three days structure is similar, as is the idea of large and small group meetings. Cooking and leisure time as well as decision making and democratic choices are important issues in both experiences. What is different is the number of groups taking place, and their composition. In the LLE people spontaneously choose a group facilitator at the beginning, and are with that facilitator throughout the five small groups encounters; LfA allows for spontaneous aggregation according to the required tasks of cooking, cleaning and leisure activity groups. The level of anxiety connected with the same tasks is reduced in the predetermined structure of the LLE, and this allows more sense of containment and stability. The LfA spontaneous decision to belong to ever-changing group composition allows for the experience of exercising one's own leadership skills and seeing how one performs in different roles with different tasks and different team members. The LfA format provides opportunities to learn how to survive uncertainty and dependency on authority; the LLE format promotes intimacy, creativity, introspection and deep empathic interpersonal understanding, which help one cope better with personal uncertainties. LfA stimulates activity out of shared anxiety and pressure while becoming aware of personal and interpersonal skills: it addresses more what tends to divide people under stress at work. LLE offers opportunity to meet others beyond their formal roles and discover what makes people feel connected and close to one another, even at work.

### Practical proposals

I would consider that each workshop has generic positive effect on participants. Acquiring a new membership in a democratic setting frees the self from the straitjacket of previous social identities (dictated by the usual working task), allowing for new parts of the personality to meet the new environment and learn from it. The new situation can evoke anxieties which structured environments and clear rules can contain. It also gives space for introspection about one's own intimate self, when confronted with group equality.

There are non-specific effects on becoming a member of a large group when people join a workshop. If I were to propose a new model I would merge some of the two workshop characteristics.

Meanwhile, I would expect that the LfA could improve its efficacy if more communalism between staff and residents is introduced, for example by eating together, or being able to speak to one another in large group settings like Community Meetings. This would allow more communication, more sense of empowerment and cohesion and in the end more sense of belonging. I would also leave some space between group activities in order to provide opportunity to reflect on what has just been experienced. This space would also be of benefit for staff, who can unwind and get empathic support (if needed) from their peers. As it is, Plenary Meetings at the beginning and end of the workshop are deliberately set with staff sitting close to one another in one corner, as if to highlight a different status of authority figures. While this kind of setting is more suitable for studying staff dynamics in non-TC organisations, it seems rather remote from the aim of "LLA" what the very TC principles of democratisation, permissiveness, reality confrontation and communalism really feel like.

On the other hand, the LLE workshop format could become a more powerful teaching tool of the above mentioned TC principles if it was enriched by specific formal teaching, peer support groups and clinical supervision. However, the founder of the workshop, Rex Haigh (2013), argues that this detracts from its unique "pure experiential" format.

### Conclusions

The effect large and small groups have on people when their usual professional (or even parental and partner) roles are suspended for a three-day residential workshop is remarkable. In a nutshell, one could say that in the LLE model one replies to the question "Who am I when I experience togetherness beyond my usual daily working and living roles?"; in the LfA the question would be "Who am I when I am expected to share tasks and activities with others under

stress?”. Intimacy, caring and cooperation tend to prevail among members in the LLE because of its minimal structure and freedom of choice; both free communication in large groups and safety in small introspective groups promote cohesion. In the LfA format competition, cooperation and contained excitement are more pronounced as one has to come to terms with one’s own limitations and learn how to cope with pressure and frustration in relation to authority. The LLE structure seems more concerned with the creation of a cohesive matrix, while the LfA elicits rather primitive anxieties and primitive coping reactions. One would be tempted to view the former more akin to a Foulkesian style, and the latter more Bionian. In fact, for example, in LLE large groups staff move between positions of being “in the group” as equal members, supporting group members to help one another, and making group level interventions (Foulkesian) linked to some area of conflict of a single participant; in the LfA large groups, staff members speak “to” the group and not to single members directly (Bionian). Furthermore, in LfA, leadership issues and basic assumptions (frequently fight/flight) happening in small group activities have to be contained and dealt with to keep the group on track and accomplish its primary task (i.e. moving from a “basic assumption group” to a “work group” and finally to a “group task”); in LLE small group activities, cohesion is promoted by the attempt to baste a matrix of empathy and mutual support. In this recount, I deliberately resist the temptation to match the two theoretical approaches more deeply or to examine their impact on the nature of the two training courses, as this could be the subject of another paper.

In the present work I have simply tried to describe my unique experience of being in two different yet similar workshops within a fortnight of each other. In the end, both allow for a sense of belonging and gratitude for offering participants magnifying glasses and mirrors to see better what goes on, now in the heart, now in the brain and now in the gut of participants exposed to large group living. Both can be strengthened by reciprocal inputs of know-how, expertise and activities developed through years of practice. I would recommend the procedure of TC practitioners going through both experiences as part of their necessary professional training.

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