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The beginning stages of a social action training event

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Abstract: This article describes in detail how social action trainers approach the beginning stages of the groupwork process, which is recognised as a crucial stage in the formation of any group. Examples of how group members are facilitated to get to know each other, agree the purposes of the group, their expectations and the ground rules which should operate are presented under the headings of 'introductions and warmups', 'identity', 'purpose' and 'methods', drawing particularly on the experience of social action groupwork with Russian social workers and American teachers. Certain exercises have been found to be particularly helpful in achieving group cohesion and purpose and these are described. The role of the facilitator and the advantages of co-working in these circumstances are discussed briefly.

Key words: groupwork, facilitation, training process

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Social action training

Groupwork is at the core of social action training. We rely heavily on the building of groups to enable peer education to take place and for learning to be sustained beyond the training event, through groups continuing to support, sustain and challenge each other.

We carry out social action training with a wide variety of people: community members in Southwark in London, young people in Nottingham, teachers across the United States, social workers in Russia and in Kyiv Ukraine, Youth Offending Teams in Birmingham, or health workers in Leicester. The training sessions can take place over one or two days or a series of training inputs over a period of years, with the opportunity to develop practice in-between times. The topics range from an introduction to social action as an approach and way of working, to specific aspects of professional development.

Much has been written about social action as a way of working with groups (see for example Harrison and Ward, 1999; Fleming and Luczynski, 1999; Fleming, 1999; Mullender and Ward, 1989 and 1991; Badham et al, 1989). The Centre's website www.dmu.ac.uk/dmucsa has information about the work and approach of social action. To summarise briefly, social action is a value-based approach to practice. It incorporates a set of principles and a problem solving approach, where social action workers provide the framework for the consideration of problems, issues or concerns and raise questions to encourage analysis and understanding, and consideration of appropriate actions. Participants provide the content, using their skills, knowledge and expertise. Group members create the knowledge and understanding, through active participation: describing, suggesting, analysing, deciding, experiencing and reflecting.

In this paper I am going to address a very specific aspect of social action groupwork: the beginning stages with a training group. The role of groupwork in learning and in the early stages of groups have been the topic of recent articles in Groupwork (Silverlock, 2000; Lizzio and Wilson, 2001). Groupwork is at the core of social action training. We find it possible to transfer much of what we know

about groupwork generally to training with groups. Social action is not about doing things for people, so social action training is not usually about pre-prepared handouts and lectures. It is about the group taking responsibility for their own learning and creating their own materials. A training event is far more likely to have handouts sent out after the training, when flipcharts created by the participants have been typed up, than created before a training event. Social action training is about encouraging people to reflect on what is, why it is like this and how it can be changed. Training is an on-going process of reflection, deep consideration and action planning. However short a training event may be, there is always consideration of action and some time for planning: social action is about change.

The experience of training teachers in America and social workers in Russia will be drawn on for examples. All participants on these particular training sessions would fit into Lizzio and Wilson's category of 'informed consent – I know what this is about and I choose to be here' (Lizzio and Wilson, 2001, p.16), although we are well used to working with other motivations or, indeed, the lack of them.

An inevitable consequence of focusing in this paper on the beginning stages of the groupwork process is that other things will be left out. For example, we will not consider the planning and preparation that happened, nor give attention to how people were selected to be in the groups concerned. It will not cover the process and progress of a group beyond the beginning. However see Peterson et al, (2000) for more details of the Centre's work with teachers in America and for discussion of Social Action as an educative process (Fleming, 2003). Douglas (2000, p.13) points out that 'few people when discussing groups start at the beginning' so this article hopes to go some way towards redressing this balance.

Beginnings of groups

Many writers about groupwork highlight the importance of the beginnings of a group. Preston Shoot (1987, p .98) says that the

right beginnings for a group are vital. The classic formulation of the stages of development of groups is Tuckman's forming, norming, performing and storming to which Brown (1992, p.103) adds the additional stage of ending. It is the forming stage that will be considered here. Manor (2000, p.103) writes that 'the strategies adopted while forming the group influence a great deal of what is to come'. How we start working with a group in a training session is very important as it sets the scene for what follows. It is through careful attention to the forming stage, that the possibility of performing satisfactorily is enhanced. Manor (2000, p.12) also points out that the 'stages in groups are very helpful signposts' as they alert the worker to potential areas of focus.

The beginning stages of a group are crucial to establishing the culture of the group (Brown, 1992, p.104). This is particularly important in training where participants might have very different expectations of the event. For example, in Russia, 'training' often means sitting passively and listening to lectures. This makes it even more crucial to pay very careful attention to the beginning stages of a training group, so the participants understand what will follow. As Hope and Timmel (1999, vol 1, p.11) point out, 'Dividing people into groups of three to share their ideas and then arranging a climate of genuine listening, when each has a chance to share with the whole group, affirms the wisdom of ordinary people in quite a different way .....' to lectures, but if we are to achieve this outcome we need to pay particular attention to the beginnings.

However, for a training group it is not just enough to be clear as trainers about the processes that are being given attention, it is also important to find a way of communicating them to the participants. Doel and Sawdon (1999) suggest that,

> learning from an experience is not automatic. If the learning is to have an impact on subsequent practice, it needs to be 'named' – made explicit and available for reflection and retrieval. (p.45).

This is as important for trainers as it is for participants. As social action trainers we have to reflect on what is happening and so understand for ourselves the processes involved before we can name them.

As with other aspects of social action work, the practice/action/theory praxis has played a crucial part in the development of the theory of social action groupwork in training. For some time we had ensured that the forming stage of a training session has covered introductions, discussions of why people have come together and what people would like to have learned by the end of the event. But it is only relatively recently, through reflection on our practice, that a colleague helpfully named these stages 'identity', 'purpose' and 'method'. Lizzio and Wilson (2002) suggest that the,

> overall task in facilitating the beginning of any process is to help people achieve a state where they are willing and able to invest in the job in hand. We achieve this by giving attention in our beginnings to design a range of formative activities. (p.11)

It is through the attention to identity, purpose and method that we do this.

The social action approach to group beginnings has evolved into the following framework:

- introductions and warm ups: a short section where purposeful warm up games and exercises are used
- identity: consideration of who is in the group and the nature of their similarities and differences
- purpose: exploration of what it is people want to learn and achieve in the group
- method: agreement on how this group of people are going to work together to achieve their agreed aims

Introductions and warm ups

From the practice we have developed we would agree with Lizzio and Wilson (2002, p.27) when they say 'we should consider our opening comments to a group as more than just a perfunctory social ritual'. In our experience it is not just the opening comments that need choosing with care, but the whole beginning stage. Most of our training sessions begin with 'warm-up' games. Warm up

exercises need to be as purposeful as any other training activity, so we carefully consider what we are trying to achieve before deciding what exercise to suggest to the group.

We have many tried and tested games that we use with all groups and in all situations. For example, asking people to tell each other their name and the story behind their name, or a more interactive and dynamic exercise is asking people to group themselves together with others. For example, firstly, to find those whose birthday is in the same month as yours (a fact); second, to find people who share your musical taste (opinion) and, finally, to find people who share your views about something, for example, the capacity of people to create change by themselves (belief). At the same time participants are all talking with each other and establishing what they have in common.

Identity

Following the initial exercises or warm ups, and almost as part of the same stage, we move on to finding out more about who is in the group, how they got to be interested in the training and what they have in common with each other. An exercise we use at this stage is one developed with young homeless people in Moscow, hence the name, the Metro Map.

This exercise is about encouraging people to share with each other their motivations and route into the training event. Each person has a different coloured pen and in turns they talk to the others about the three most significant events or critical incidents in their lives that led them to being at this training event. They draw these as the stations on the map to the event.

In Russia, social workers talked about such things as 'the passion in my heart', 'when I found out about the situation of children in care', 'a realisation of the vulnerability of families', 'a desire to find ways out of this situation', 'having experienced hardship myself as a child', 'empathy with children' or 'a sense of injustice' as being the key events that brought them to the training room. In contrast, items put on the metro maps in America included: 'being told I was stupid', 'becoming involved in community campaigning', 'realising

I was a radical at college', 'being frustrated by other teachers' practice', 'dismay at what was happening in my community'.

Another exercise we often use is The Group Name. Once again, we group people. Usually we do this by the well-known method of going around the room counting '1, 2, 3' for as many groups as we need, all the 1's going together and so on. It has the advantage of mixing up people who have probably come into the room and sat with people they know. Someone once wrote on an evaluation form of a Russian training event, that the most useful thing they had learnt on the training was this 'scientific' method of dividing people into groups! Once in their groups they are asked to talk about 'one thing it is important for people to know about you, one thing you believe'. Then they are asked to consider what they have in common, and from this decide on a suitable name for their group. This group is then known by that name for the rest of the training (for example a group might become the Daily Reflection group and so they meet together each day to prepare a reflection on the event so far). Names that the teachers in America have chosen for their groups have included The Negotiators, Passion, Free Radicals, Mavericks and the Lively Learners. In Russia they have also chosen Passion, Concern, Love and Compassion.

Even if participants are reluctant to talk about themselves it is still possible for them to agree a name. Once when working with a group of young people who were not attending school, one group called me over and said that they did not want anyone to know anything about themselves and they did not want to talk about what they believed in. However they were prepared to acknowledge that this was what they had in common and call themselves 'The Unknowns' and, whilst they remained on the edge, they did continue to participate in the event.

We are always on the look out for new exercises we can use or adapt for our training; recently we have taken ideas from Participation: Spice it up (2002) and the Group Games (Fuchs, 2002) series. We have also learnt many superb games and exercises from our training participants. There is great pleasure in taking a 'pen dancing exercise' (an active exercise that builds cooperation and group cohesion) from Russian child care workers to introduce to American teachers, knowing they in turn will use it with their students.

Purpose

Once identity has been considered and people know more about each other and have had the opportunity to talk about things that are important to them in coming to the training, the next step is for the whole group to agree a common purpose for the time they are together. Mullender and Ward (1991, p.59) say that the need to create goals holds true for any group. This fits with Doel and Sawdon's (1999) concept of 'contracting in'. 'The notion of contracting in is designed to help the present collection of individuals begin to reach agreement about what their group might be.

There are three components to contracting in:

- The first is the groupworkers' responsibility to set out their own stall and to set the scene via an opening statement of purpose.
- The second is to introduce group members to each other and to enable them to share their own vision for the group and to agree the processes that will help the group work effectively.
- The third concerns agreement about goals and outcomes, whether these are held individually or commonly. (p.117).

It is this third stage of agreement about goals and outcomes that we call purpose.

Whilst all training events have previously agreed broad aims and objectives that have been negotiated with funders, managers or others (which have attracted people to come forward for the training), it is important that each group agrees their own specific vision and goals. Once two social action trainers ran four consecutive two-day training events for teachers, all with the same overall aims and objectives. However each group identified their own unique purpose within these.

The usual way that social action trainers approach enabling a group to agree purpose is by devising or creating a vision for the event. Initially people think alone, and then share in small groups of about four people the three things they most want to have achieved by the end of the training event. They discuss this in the small groups and then each small group shares with the

whole group. There then follows a negotiation process in which the whole group attempts to decide three things which everyone can agree that they want to have as part of their vision. We are usually quite strict about keeping to just three things and about the shared negotiation process. We point out that much work in groups is about negotiation, about getting as many people as possible to agree a common purpose and focus, and that some people may need to leave their own ideas behind. In the negotiation it is important that the trainer explains that all views should be equal, and works to ensure this is the case. The exercise should create involvement and ownership of the process and content of the training event.

Sometimes the negotiation results in some lengthy sentences! For example: 'to be able to experience, understand, articulate, apply, use and share social action' was once the first thing that people wanted to achieve. Visions often include words such as explore, uncover, gain, experience, understand, articulate, apply or share. When creating visions for training events it is important that group members realise that these set out the things people want to achieve in the training room and so should not include actions beyond the training course; although obviously they often include a desire to be able to apply what they have learnt in the training event when they get back to work.

A vision created by some social workers in Russia on a Training the Trainers course looked like this:

'Our vision is to learn:
- facilitation and social action methods of training
- how to use them in workshops and in other circumstances and with different groups
- how to work together and be as effective as possible (intersectorial working)'

A vision created by one of the teachers' groups in America went like this:

'By the end of the five days we aim
- to experience, understand, own, articulate, apply and use and

share social action
- leave here equipped with tools (strategies, stuff) and techniques to open dialogue to establish and build and sustain relationships amongst and within our students, and wider community to advance change through literacy
- establish the means to continue beyond the Institute, using social action within the project, and with each other.'

These 'visions' also form the basis of evaluation at the end of a training event, when the group 'revisit the vision' and consider how far they have achieved what they identified in the exercise.

Douglas (2000, p.38) says that group development is a collection of individuals forming into a coherent group with a common understanding and with collective aims. It is this stage of identifying purpose that social action trainers are trying to create within the groups they are working with.

Method

How things are done is very important in social action work. How one presents something is often as strong a value statement as the content. Social action is about self-direction, so it is important for a group to create their own guidance for their working together in a training session. Preston Shoot (1987, p.25) makes this point also when he writes: 'Group members have the ability to be self-directing and have responsibility for the direction of their learning and change efforts.' Lizzio and Wilson (2002) point out that group maintenance is not just the responsibility of the facilitators, but is shared with group members. They write of making group members partners in creating the group.

> Sharing a model of group or community building with group members may enable them to more systematically and consciously self manage the process of 'growing themselves' as an adaptive group. (p.54)

As always with social action groupwork it is important to start as we mean to go on, by actively involving participants in agreeing

how they wish to work together, this begins to create responsibility for group maintenance. We often introduce this stage by pointing out that we all now have information about who is in the group and what they want to do. Now they need to decide how they are to work together as a group to reach the vision they have created.

Once again we have a number of different ways of approaching the task of deciding how we want to work together. Sometimes we ask people in small groups to consider what their hopes and fears are for the training event. Once they have done this and told the rest of the group what they are, each group's hopes and fears are passed on to another group and they come up with actions that group members can take to ensure the fears are not realised but the hopes are. These actions are then discussed in the full group and written up on flipchart paper and left on the wall for the life of the group.

Another way of helping a group think about how they would like to work together is an exercise called Community Vocabulary. This is when we ask participants to suggest all the words they do not want to hear used and those they do want to hear in the

Community vocabulary from Russian social workers' group
Words we want to hear Yes co-operation success take your time this is new Can we help? opportunity fun sharing discovery Effective support increased professionalism please explain positive **Words we don't want to hear** Legislation can't pressure I am tired Fear failure no time 'I would like to, but . .' I know already irresponsible

Community vocabulary from American teachers
Words we want to hear empowerment inclusion collaborative probing access systematic dialogue partnership strategies voice specific tangible authentic flexible possibilities equity change community insight action **Words we do not want to hear** oppression isolation volunteer failure standardized accountability status quo can't limiting impossible

training session. This is not about censorship but to liberate people to speak their mind in the group. It is not a game, but becomes integral to how the group is going to work and be together over the period. We find there is often a lot of negotiation and review whilst the words are discussed and agreed. The community vocabulary should become part of the life of the group. Obviously, as trainers, we find that the words tell us a lot about the group. The words they want to hear tend to tell us about aspirations, where they are at the moment. The words people do not want to hear, give us information about their history and past experiences.

From this community vocabulary we sometimes ask people to create a list of Top Tips for participants, and often for facilitators too.

All the exercises are intended for participants to take and use in their own work. We have examples from the teachers in America using this exercise to good effect in the classroom. One teacher tells of how a child referred to the community vocabulary many weeks after it was created to challenge a homophobic comment, and that started discussion about the issue. Participants in Russia have used the exercises in many situations with young people, politicians and professionals.

Facilitation

It is not possible to write about social action work, without, albeit briefly, considering the role of the trainer. Hope and Timmel (1999, p.19) write in Training for Transformation that the 'animator provides a framework for thinking, creative, active participants to consider a common problem and find solutions. People are actively involved in the social construction of knowledge.' Social action has been much influenced by these manuals in its development and continues to look for ways to increase the involvement of people in their own learning and to develop this concept of the 'social construction of knowledge' further.

It is usual, though not always the case, that social action workers carry out training sessions in pairs. The advantages of co-working in groups are well documented. Preston-Shoot (1987,

Hopes	Fears
We will be honest We will share our experiences There will be opportunities to share We will build self esteem Discover exciting new ways of working It will be practical We will find ways to influence public opinion It will be fun and there will be games We will learn to be facilitators	We will not have enough confidence to participate It will be fun, but no results We won't have enough time Powerful people who are not here will not accept it We won't understand We won't be able to communicate Some people will think they know it all already Methods will be irrelevant

(From Russian training)

p 64) and Brown (1992, p.79) highlight a number of potential gains through co-working, for example, support and feedback, widening experience in the worker team, security and protection, increasing the range of options, techniques and styles available to the group, thereby ensuring that the group's needs will be understood and met.

Social action workers do not present the same experiences, style, or even personalities. Social action encourages reflection and discussion and so social action trainers are likely to possess a willingness to disagree with or, at least, question each other in the training group, which Brown (1992, p 86) says, 'can be an asset provided it is done in a facilitative and not undermining style.'

Butler and Wintram (1991) mention a further benefit of co-working pointing out that it encourages creativity and innovation:

> The co-worker increases workers' courage in trying out new and more risky exercises because she knows she has someone to help her deal with the reactions to such an approach. (p.40)

These points, combined together, summarise the benefits of co-working for social action. Co-working in a training group can promote review and deeper reflection on the groupwork and learning processes. There are alternative perspectives from which events can be seen. It ensures there is someone else who

knows as much about the group as you do, with whom you can discuss what has been happening. Reflection is a vital stage of the social action process and there is no doubt that co-working has enhanced reflection on our training practice and so contributed to its development.

Evaluation by participants

What the participants think of the training is very important for our learning and the development of our work. All our training courses are evaluated, both in terms of content and the process undertaken. We have never evaluated just the first stages of a training event, so the comments below were given at the end of the whole training course.

In the main, people in both Russia and America have come to appreciate the approach, though for many it is a new experience and takes some getting used to. They feel they have developed their skills in communication and also learnt effective methods and techniques and shared knowledge and experience. Most people comment on the relaxed style. The following quotations from evaluation forms will be left to speak for themselves:

> They used a very good approach: encouraged the participants to think and to speak. [Russian Participant]

> Terrific! I want first to thank you for meeting the challenge of working with our large group and for taking us through the process in a way that allowed us to discover and uncover the meaning and purposes of this work. I appreciated the organisation, the progression of the Institute, how it built and led from one concept or strategy into another. I know from my own experience with social change work the balancing act between the conceptual and the concrete, and there were many opportunities to explore both. [American Participant]

> The greatest strength was the way in which we experienced the process of social action through particular strategies. We came to an understanding of SA in an authentic, process-based way. [American

Participant]

The facilitators were very patient when the group became impatient about the process and they walked us through everything. [Russian Participant]

Facilitators did a superb job building community to participants. It provided a safe environment for participants to express their sincerest ideas and opinions. [Russian Participant]

Conclusions

It is only after we have worked with a group on these elements of forming, identity, purpose and method, that social action trainers plan the rest of the training in detail, because until this point we do not have enough information to be able to do so. Now that we have some knowledge about and from the people we are working with, we are able to tailor the training to their experiences and needs. Of course, we will have a broad outline plan but we will not complete it until this stage. It is not until these early stages have been completed that we know what the group feels passionate about, what they disagree about, what their aspirations for the event are. Once we have begun to gain this knowledge we can try to ensure the training will be appropriate to them. As Doel and Sawdon comment (1999)

> In first and early sessions, as the group is forming, the tension between process and outcome is immediately evident. On the one hand it is important to negotiate agreement around the processes of becoming a group and how the group will conduct itself; on the other is the need to negotiate what the group wants to achieve. (pp.125/6).

This is particularly true with a social action training event, as people sometimes feel it is very slow to get to the 'real work'. It is important to point out that the 'real work' starts the minute people come into the room, but it is sometimes not until the end of the training event that people fully understand this.

How a group is set up has considerable influence on how they will approach and deal with any issues and problems that may arise later on. However, Lizzio and Wilson (2002, p 53) point out 'The aim is not to facilitate the complete resolution of each area of concern, but rather sufficient resolution to enable subsequent work'. It is not possible to avoid all difficulties in the future; indeed disagreement and mild conflict can be a real stimulation to learning. However, by giving careful attention to the beginning stages it is possible to enable the group to equip itself with solid foundations to be able to deal in the most constructive manner, with whatever arises.

Mullender and Ward (1991) write

> it is not uncommon for workers to expect to swing into action clad in nothing more than anti-authoritarian zeal and a loose commitment to tackling oppression. (p.23).

In social action training we feel we are more adequately dressed than this! We enter a training room with a set of principles and a process that underpins all that we do. We recognise the centrality of values to inform our practice. Social action trainers facilitate and do not lead, because we recognise that people are experts in their own lives, and that by acting collectively they can be powerful. Social action trainers work to create a learning environment where people are listened to, asked to contribute their ideas and encouraged to act on their suggestions, in the hope of enabling reflective groups and developing reflective practice. The early stages of working with a group are the first steps to achieving this and are fundamental in creating the environment in which learning can take place. Combined with this clear and overt value position, social action trainers also have a wide range of tried and tested exercises and techniques which can be used or adapted to most situations. However, we constantly learn from our experiences in training and seek to improve our practice. Dialogue with participants is key to this. We learn much from the groups with whom we work.

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