

# Groupwork Training for social justice

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines and analyses experiential groupwork in delivering community and youth work training at Goldsmiths, University of London. The programme has, over its forty year history refined a model of education and training that combines large groupwork and experiential learning. The paper explores our experience of groupwork training. The model developed combines groupwork as a tool for learning and teaching. It is in this arena that students explore and critically reflect on their life and work experiences, and learn to process and articulate their feelings and understandings across a wide range of issues, including democratic social change, equality, identity, empowerment and leadership which all comes from learning how to inwardly reflect and change and develop an awareness of themselves. The paper in particular focuses on the development of students' identity from which they draw out their learning on equality and sets out that this is central to training for achieving equality and social change.*

**Keywords:** *large group; group work and social change; race; identity group stages; groupwork*

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## **Introduction**

This paper is an analysis and evaluation of experiential large groupwork from the perspective of the groupwork facilitators. It addresses this from multiple angles and is based on observations, reflections and interpretations of the group dynamics drawing on appropriate literature for this type of groupwork.

The paper starts with an over view of the philosophy and approach used in the training of community and youth work students which provides some context to the large group. It then discusses the nature of the large group, and identifies some of the theoretical frameworks and models central to our thinking. Finally, the paper goes on to analyse the different and significant phases and processes in the development of students' identity and this is further explored through the use of theory concerned with large groupwork and empowerment.

Community and youth work is concerned with social justice and empowerment. Social justice needs to direct itself to confronting exclusion and injustice in engaging and empowering those groups and individuals affected and those responsible for creating these circumstances. Exclusion, empowerment, leadership and conflict transformation feature as prominent themes in working with young people and communities. Developing a sense of identity, belonging and contribution amongst young people and communities and addressing professionals, organisations and structures that don't engage or limit this in some way are key in developing effective community and youth work. These themes at an intra-group level are central to discussion and debate in the experiential groupwork element of students' training.

The purpose of this paper is to share the impact of how experiential large groupwork provides the opportunity to develop and model a stronger sense of personal and social identity as well as critically evaluating its value as an effective tool for training and learning particularly within, but not confined to the context of community and youth work training. Finite definitions of what comprise a 'small' or 'large' group are elusive. While there is much in the literature on work with large groups, its focus is on how characteristics or dynamics might differ between the two, rather than numbers (see Turkie, 1995 and Seel, 2001). Our definition of 'Large Groupwork' is informed by Brown (1992) who suggests that the minimum size of a small group is between three

and twelve people, and Gilmore and Barnet (1992) who propose 15-20 members as a 'large group'. De Mare and colleagues (1991) introduced the 'median' sized group, with between 15 – 30 members, and identifies the large group as 30 plus. The skills and professional development learned in large experiential groupwork are transferable and applicable to a range of teaching practice and work with groups and individuals within the 'helping professions'.

## **Philosophy and approach**

The philosophy of the groupwork is based on a few simple principles; students learn to analyse their own practice and experience and use this analysis as a base from which to create their own 'working theories'. They also become self monitoring, enabling them to cope with and respond creatively and with confidence to the complexity and uncertainties inherent in the work. Learning through experience offers opportunities to fully engage with and reflect on situations before comparing, integrating, re -interpreting or rejecting a theoretical understanding of situations, thus enabling students to construct their own synthesis and understanding. They are encouraged to embrace new and challenging experiences and question traditional power relationships and oppression, in an effort to find effective and practical ways of responding to them. The starting points for this are their own experiences of oppression and power.

Through discussion and sharing of experience students are enabled to develop a conceptual understanding of their earlier life and work experiences and their meanings in terms of personal growth, learning and practice. We would argue that it is this process of discussion and interaction with each other and the sharing of experiences which lies at the heart of training reflective practitioners who can; connect and work successfully with groups and individuals from diverse backgrounds, work in ways that are anti oppressive; promote social justice, and empower themselves through their own personal and social development.

Training which seeks to address exclusion and empowerment on numerous levels, based on both individual action and collective action, needs to reflect this in the training approaches used.

Experiential learning is learning from doing [practice] and learning from experience [being in it]. In truth some types of training and learning lend themselves more to this than others. Experiential learning is not a panacea for all types of training, but in training 'helping professionals' it is, we believe, essential in enabling students to make the transition from the inactivity of constant theorising and conceptualising to the facilitation of change in collaboration with others. We have found that presenting issues in ways which students can make sense of in terms of their own everyday experience, offers opportunities for high levels of engagement often absent from didactic methods.

The benefits of this method of teaching are many. Our evaluations show that students develop a much deeper sense of themselves, their place in the world and how they impact on it. However, developing a critical consciousness and empowered sense of oneself changes our understanding of the world and our place within it, but it does not necessarily change the structures and practices that create social injustice, which is why an emphasis and link is made between transforming oneself and practice that lead to engaging and empowering communities and individuals.

Recruitment is focussed on selecting and training people who are already active and useful in their own communities who share the life and experiences of local people, thereby reducing the risk of them seeing people as problems rather than as people with difficulties to surmount. The course attracts students and offers a professional qualification to those who whilst they might not have the traditional educational qualifications, have already shown themselves to be active people of good will, committed to improving the quality of life locally and cooperating with others to achieve these ends.

Students will experience entry into higher education very differently from those who take a more traditional and direct route. Many have blocks in relation to learning and experienced exclusion from school; they have a strong desire to succeed and are often the first in their families to enter university.

Their previous academic experience informs their expectations, which is that they will be filled with the knowledge of others. As they begin their professional training they are expected to do their own thinking, and are consulted in the large group on their learning and training needs which present challenges for many students. They

struggle with this, until they allow for the possibility that this could be a liberating experience. Students usually find taking responsibility for their learning, an empowering experience and the majority of the students become engaged with the process by the end of the second year.

The principles underpinning the course are that students are being trained for adversity and uncertainty, and that the wealth of valuable experience and knowledge already gained from their personal experience when combined with experiential training methods, effectively enables students to internalise their learning.

The 'groupwork training meeting' is the weekly manifestation of the model. It is consistent and occupies a central position in the course across the first two years of a three-year programme, and the content is significantly driven by the students. In terms of size the group varies year on year; each new student group could be as few as 24 or as many as 43 and participants may range in age from 18 to 65. The group is facilitated by two tutors, one male and one female and usually, one black and one white.

## **Large groupwork**

The experiential groupwork aims to give students the opportunity to appreciate and value the potential of large groupwork. The overall aim of the experiential group is to train students to become effective groupworkers, with a strong sense of their own convictions and the notion that power comes from within, rather than power over others. They develop the capacity to become articulate about their own views, have the ability to challenge others constructively and possess increased levels of self confidence and personal awareness.

Trevithick (2005, p. 86) in discussing a range of theories identifies that, 'Some groupwork approaches are eclectic and draw on a range of theories,' this aptly describes the various thinking and understanding we have of the groupwork we are involved in, and that as practitioners 'we are largely using our accumulated knowledge and experience' (p. 86) to facilitate the groupwork sessions which draw on a range of theories drawn from different academic disciplines. Facilitators are not part of the student group and do not attempt to become so. The facilitators work in ways which demonstrate – in a balanced way, that they are real

people. This exposure helps to diminish the inherent power relationship between facilitator and student.

Vernelle (1994) identifies numerous problems and difficulties with large groups. These included ineffective problem solving, baffling and frustrating tensions between the individual and the collective, a longing for structure, issues of power and its misuse, decisions made that do not serve the interests of the minority, the difficulty of getting agreement and the potential for disorder.

We would concur with these characteristics of large groups that replicate society as a whole and provide a valuable arena for developing, working with and understanding these dynamics. Because it is alienating, the differences and difficulties emerge with which we grapple in the wider society.

The social and economic position of the student group, reflects the complex and inter-related social inequalities present in the 'real' world. Many are Christian or Muslim, and some have been refugees; high proportions are angry and this is often connected to injustice they and their communities have experienced. Poor school experience, victimisation, discrimination, persecution and racism means that some students may have become accustomed to these forms of injustice and attempt to protect themselves by denying its existence within the group.

Clearly, any group of people comes together with a range of levels of political and psychological sophistication. Students begin their training with varying levels of awareness of the politics of 'race', gender and class, and varying degrees of understanding of how inequality impacts on people's sense of self. Some students may have deep-seated heterosexist attitudes or homophobic prejudices. Some have a clearer understanding of the causes of racism.

Turkie's work (1995) is one of the rare articles that discuss large groupwork and this contributes substantially to our understanding of the process. He discusses the relationship between the societal tensions and conflicts being mirrored within the group, for example, the desire for affectional ties is just as strong in the large group but is not provided by it and we therefore see the development of sub groupings and rivalry along similar lines that are taking place in society and communities. Sub groups may also develop as a result of group members seeking the familiar intimacy found in the family, as Josephine Klein, reminds us, it is in the family group that we first learn to value ourselves and

expectations of satisfaction from group membership derives to a large extent from this primacy of family in the individuals experience (Klein, 1961).

Many of the students are 'Black', and for most white students, this will be their first experience of a group in which they are not in the majority. For black students it may be the first time that they are. The learning agenda will be different for each student, depending on their individual experience, self-esteem, perspective and identity, the extent to which they are willing to engage with others, and open themselves to seeing the world differently. An awareness of, and the ability to articulate how this impacts on their interactions with others, will play a major role in the students' capacity to benefit from the experiential learning process.

Turkie (1995) also describes how the group can be led by a few, task motivation diminishes, how people can hide more easily and a more complex set of social relationships emerge, all crucial features of working with the large group. He poses the question 'if the large group is so alienating why create them for ourselves?', This is the key, for it is precisely these differences and difficulties which we face and struggle with in society that community and youth work students need to grasp through experience and reflection that enables them to begin effective practice.

Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984) on experiential learning which requires students to actively experiment within their practice as part of the cycle, provides a firm focus for the professional development of students, particularly in fieldwork placements and groupwork. This model links thinking to action in a single process and so can be applied in the moment as a form of reflection in action to which students begin and learn to demonstrate in the group's development. Students are encouraged from the very beginning, to determine the group's agenda – often made up of what might seem mundane issues such as Evaluations on lectures, room bookings and so on, and other aspects of the programme. However, it is this agenda that initially provides the material for the experiential learning group.

Habermas also focuses on critical reflection that emphasises the transformation of the ways that practitioners view the world and their place in it, summarised by Boyd and Fales

the process of creating and clarifying the meaning of experience in terms

of self in relation to both self and the world. The outcome of this process is changed conceptual perspectives. (1983, p.101)

We believe that the movement and change experienced in the experiential group is made possible when two factors are present; firstly a high level of desire and motivation and the emotional maturity of individual group members. Conscious understandings of one's feelings are obviously difficult without the latter, and may act to impede openness to change.

In our view, power and identity and how they operate within societal structures, as well as within personal relationships, are significant. 'Power inequalities are embedded in people's consciousness, as well as within societal structures' (Frosh, 1987, as quoted in Preston-Shoot and Braye, 1995). The highly contested nature of identity can often seem contradictory or strategic. 'It has to be acknowledged that no simple common denominator of a 'race', class and gender strategy exists' (Williams, 1989, p. xvi). We make observations that name and make explicit the social, cultural and religious differences, which are manifest in the student group and point to their relationship to social justice in the wider world. Practically, dialogue lies at the heart of this process as it places equal importance to the thinking, feeling and action located in the student and not just imposed by the facilitator. It involves the thinking of the group members exploring why each person thinks as he or she does and where this has come from, analysing whether it can enable the group and each individual to understand themselves and the world more critically.

In the experiential group the facilitators from the start of the group speak openly about racism, sexism, heterosexism, and differences in the group based on race, sexual orientation, gender and class. The exploration of deep personal feelings is not usually encouraged in university settings and for many students the mismatch between expectation and what actually happens may be very disconcerting.

Students are encouraged to grapple with these difficult feelings, essential to the learning process. Students do become fearful of the internal conflicts, which begin to emerge not just within themselves but also within the group. They may fear their potential for self-destruction or their capacity to be destructive to others and facilitators risk the possibility of not necessarily coping with the rising temperature of the group (Rosen, 1993).



There are inherent dangers in this approach. High levels of distrust mean that facilitators could be seen as pushing students into seeing them as trying to mould them (the students) into something they are not. Impatience on the part of the facilitator may mean that he or she speaks for the student, rather than waiting for students to set their own pace. A few students may find the experience too overwhelming to complete the programme. This is largely mitigated by the admissions and interview process, the one to one tutorials and additional college based counselling services should they be required.

However, the opportunities that this forthright approach affords are considerable. By unlocking deep seated feelings about their sense of self and their relationship to other students, they can become more able to learn and achieve in the more traditional academic aspects of the programme.

The opportunity in the large group is to develop the scope of awareness and capacity to be able to intervene and connect with communities and wider society. The developed abilities include greater personal liberation, responding to and engaging with conflict to create value for all those involved and a new threshold of resilience to difficulties and problems. The student's capacity to function and effectively respond to entrenched and new problems is strengthened. Turkie (1995) identifies the difference between small groups and large groups as small groups socialise individual members whilst the large group experience serves to humanise society. He identifies that the large group tends to focus on the impact on the individual of mass or impersonal forces such as war, victimisation or racial persecution.

Reflection and exploration of self with a view to identity development and personal awareness clearly takes place within the large group setting. This emerges in making sense of what we do and how we are behaving and acting rather than exclusively who we are, ultimately for a focus on practice. The groupwork allows for exploration, reflecting with each other as the dialogue progresses, with each individual sharing their perceptions, thoughts and feedback on what might have happened within the group from their perspective. This reflection becomes powerful. The student within the group and in the one to one relationship with the facilitator will explore not only the thoughts and reflections that underpin their judgments, behaviour and decisions, but also the ways by which they arrive at the reflection. This relates to

their own changing understanding about themselves and their identity and they begin to connect their own identity development with how they act and react. Schon (1983, p. 280) described this as 'reflection in action' 'a continual interweaving of thinking and doing'. This practice does not separate thinking from doing. It is this unconscious doing that is examined with each other in the group and supported by one to one sessions with the group facilitators.

Freire's (1972) 'problem posing education' offers the possibilities of a 'critical consciousness

where people see their lives in the context of social reality and become capable of acting to change. 'Within the process of dialogical radical education, knowledge becomes so well integrated and assimilated that it becomes located within our subjectivities ... as a type of lived compassion and commitment'. (Allman, 2001, p. 201)

The large group offers the possibility of developing this critical consciousness.

## **The groupwork process**

We are involved as Shulman (2005) says in a 'dynamic system' in which the movement of each member is affected by the movements of others and because the group always has a life of two years, *both we* and the students are able to recognise the group in terms of distinct stages or phases. As long ago as 1996 Anastacio and Turkie identified five distinct phases, which they observed year after year. As they broadly still apply they are adapted here in relation to development of identity.

### **Identity, personal and social**

*I grew up in a small Italian village and lived in Jamaica and thought I was not racist – I realised I had inherent stereotypes and prejudices and never acknowledged it, it was a horrible realisation when I became aware of my whiteness...I understood that I had impact and can be perceived and influence other people's experiences.*

At the beginning of the group, anxiety is typically what characterises this phase for many students. These anxieties, often associated with

being within a university setting, accompany more deeply rooted issues connected to recognition; belonging and finding one's place in the group. Our explicit emphasis on personal and social identity is often new to students. The private considerations about identity and our relationship to others are brought into the public arena, and are made fully conscious in group discussion. Initially students may find this threatening as external social attitudes and power dimensions between students becomes recognised. The groupwork becomes understood as a microcosm of society in which power and oppression are at play and can be examined through dialogue which reflects critically on inherent power relationships within the group and the ways in which individuals impact on each other within it. The phenomenon of the past being constantly revived in the present, with the tendency to repeat past patterns of relating to others (often as a result of past experiences) will result in stereotyping. As Freud noted no experience is ever lost, it remains stored and ready to be awakened in any situation that resembles the past in some way. So interaction with tutors and other group members is likely to revive in the student emotions that they experienced in their past related to their upbringing and the way they feel society has treated them (Freud, 2005).

This creates a challenging and dynamic process of development in the group and will affect change in students and tutors alike. This dialogical process empowers the student through this recognition. Integral to the groupwork process are reflections of student personal beliefs, assumptions and knowledge. The aim is for students to share their 'espoused theories' relating to specific events or interactions so that they can discover, with the support of others in the group, how they are responding to a given situation and also how these then have impact on their professional practice. This enables the students to begin to identify their own personal and situational knowledge and theory understandings so that they can question, respond to and develop their experiential knowledge and theory. This then provides for the possibility of reflection of how this might be applied in practice and further reflection from testing it out. Students make particular use of the Johari window model, (Luft and Ingham, 1955) in developing their understanding of moving towards that which is hidden to themselves and others.

Some may be ready to be combative; while many tend to want a

homogenised group which denies difference, so a form of ‘pseudo socialisation’ (Agazarian and Peters, 1981) takes place. Cries of ‘I don’t see myself as different’, or ‘isn’t it racist to keep talking about black and white?’ or ‘why are you creating problems which aren’t there?’ are often heard during this phase. Group facilitators bring to the students’ attention their observations about how these differences may manifest and reinforce themselves in the group’s behaviour, such as where people sit, use of language, and friendship sub groups within the larger group and so on. Most importantly, we name these differences. Anxiety is moderated to a certain degree by the open acknowledgement that this is what is taking place.

### **Denial and resistance**

*Being able to relate to this with my inner self instead of just my other self – that hasn’t happened to me before.*

*These meetings told me that I have an impact and that I have baggage.*

It is not surprising therefore that defences emerge. Strong defences against hurt and anger often mean that students are resistant to declaring their true feelings. This resistance is informed by a variety of possible factors. One is a continuing denial that differences exist within the group, even in the face of evidence to the contrary. The group members remain cautious of exposure and conflict and denial is an intense emotional defence against the acknowledgement of pain, distress, and fear. It is natural to want to resist reliving painful experiences, particularly in a culturally diverse group. For some the group may be experienced as a hostile place. The group is large and, it could be argued, more suited to socio-cultural discourse than to a more intimate interpersonal engagement (de Mare, 1975; Turkie, 1995). It is exactly this characteristic of the large group which provides a ‘*bridge between ourselves and our socio-cultural environment*’ (de Mare et al, 1991, p. 10). Because intimacy is not possible in larger groups, not only do sub groups form, but also the tendency to line up and divide in cultural or sub cultural ways become the currency for the group. Muslim students, Black students or male/female gay sub groupings within the larger group are not at this stage seen negatively, but rather as a means

to future dialogue later in the group's life cycle. Identity development often begins with these alliances despite differences in age and life experiences, which later emerge and bring these students together.

## **Entrenchment as conflict**

*I felt that the whole world was represented in that group; your identity gets constructed, in the group. I put myself in the middle of the group and got spat out.*

*It has made me more aware of my sexuality which is all part of knowing myself.*

The group is not immune to the conflicts and prejudices that exist in the wider society. Sometimes students find the power relationships between students difficult to grasp. For example, white women and black men may, depending on the context, find themselves in the position of being dominant or being dominated by the group. Elsewhere within the programme there are many discussions concerned with community and youth work practice, race, gender, class, sexual orientation and disability. These discussions reinforce a sense of it 'being OK' to line up along these lines, and as we suggest, sub groupings, fairly well established by this time means for example that the women in the group develop a stronger sense of power. The following email from a female student to the female groupwork tutor provides an illustration of this,

*Just wanted to make you aware that some of the female members of the group will be staging a visual demonstration in tomorrow's class. We will all be wearing clothes that we own, and feel sexy and comfortable in. In order to challenge the idea that women encourage negative attention and male sexual advances because of the way they dress. We wondered if you would be interested in taking part, but more importantly we wanted to give you a heads up.*

Sub groups, rather than being created from outside are created within, mirroring societal tensions and conflicts.

Openly identifying with each other may facilitate a greater preparedness by them to challenge sexist behaviour which they experience from men in the group. In the UK context 'black' group members are likely to experience various forms of racism. Having established a level of power and strength in the whole group they are

more likely to give free expression to deeply felt lifelong experiences of hurt and anger that they previously resisted in the earlier life of the group. Sometimes stronger alliances may form based on religion, national identity, or sexual orientation and these subgroups can in our experience become very entrenched. Centrally important to informing the programme and groupwork are Paulo Freire's discussions on dialogue, problem posing education and empowerment (1970 and 1996). In particular the understanding of internalised individual oppression, shaped by social, economic and political processes and the ability of students based on this to influence developments in their own lives and professional practice. Freire (1970) regards empowerment as a consequence of liberatory learning; power is not given but created within the emerging praxis in which co-learners are engaged. Freire refers to empowerment as education involving an emphasis on groups rather than individuals and cultural transformation rather than social adaption.

His work encourages the establishment of a diverse learning community, which would strive to develop a shared meaning of the world. This focuses on collaboration in learning and in which the focus is concerned with the dialectic of reflection and action towards informed action, or praxis for social change (Heaney and Horton, 1990). Empowerment is a social process of recognition, promoting and enhancing people's abilities to meet their own needs solve their own problems and mobilise the necessary resources to feel in control of their own lives. Developing this sense of responsibility and empowerment for themselves is central to developing effective community and youth workers.

Over two academic years this conflict and sub group development may be established after four-six months and dominate the experiential experience for the next year or so.

### **Conflict and a greater level of understanding**

*I was very narrow minded and very certain about things and I wanted others to have the same view – I challenged myself in the group and Johari's window showed me how important taking other's views into consideration was – this has helped me enormously with my family and relationships.*

*I made it difficult for people to challenge me in the group – but I was challenging myself.*

The group will begin to mature and make real progress only when its members can acknowledge and articulate the negative and prejudicial feelings they hold. Lesbian or gay members of the group, for example, will know from their experience in the wider world that many people are heterosexist or have homophobic feelings. The benefit of this stage is that to openly engage in discussion with others about our feelings, behaviours and actions is to begin to come to terms with the hurt to ourselves and others. The same applies to other negative feelings we hold for whole groups or communities of people. A form of warfare – undeniably painful – will ensue on various fronts throughout this phase of the group's life. Invariably and perhaps paradoxically, a greater level of contact, respect, and understanding becomes evident between the various warring sub-groups. Of course this will only happen because students show a willingness to question the negative, stereotypical views they hold and be open to personal movement and change. Community and youth work can only be effective if they are able to show equal respect for those they work with and for.

We draw on Karpman's (1968) theory of the 'drama triangle'. This suggests three interrelated roles; rescuer, victim and persecutor. In the triangle the rescuer who seems to be helping others actually starts to dominate and reinforce the dynamic between the victim and persecutor, whilst the victim blames the group for their difficulties and the persecutor becomes increasingly critical and judgmental and soon becomes a victim in the group. The group is often a valuable place to transform relationships as often it involves on one level the failure of two people or more to listen to one another. The facilitator's contribution becomes important when responding to issues of racism and sexism or disagreements between faiths and homophobia.

In practice terms it is very difficult for practitioners to be aware of their own cultural assumptions and values, which they unconsciously bring to their practice and impose on the people they are working with. Freire (1972) termed this 'cultural invasion'. This process occurs alongside the reality that many people in marginalised communities have been silenced as a result of their own experiences, compounded by existing tendencies to rely on experts to make decisions. It is therefore

all the more important that practitioners are able to recognise their own taken for granted assumptions and address this sense of powerlessness in themselves, in order to be able to engage others in their own power and the community's capability to change. One white student shared her evolving understanding of her own white identity:

*The groupwork forced me to confront my fears being a white person; I became the minority in a class group for the first time in my life. My fears clearly played out in my behaviour as many individuals felt they couldn't connect with me. I had no sense of a strong self and my avoidance strategy was clearly not effective. As this mirror was held up to me I saw very clearly the part I had played in perpetuating racism. I saw very clearly my racism - how my avoidance strategy was racism, how holding back through fear was racism, and how assuming that all black people hated me because they saw my racism was also racism, and how beneath everything perhaps I wanted black and Asian people to disappear because I didn't want to be reminded of my whiteness and my privileges and my misuse of power - with this realisation my fears quickly turned to guilt, and then to more fears as I thought others would see my guilt, and then to more guilt etc.... I experience the privileges gained through such negative and discriminatory functions of the past and present day. As one who benefits from this then I am in no way inseparable - in fact by passively receiving all this then I am benefitting from the misuse of power and benefitting from inequality - it is only my arrogance that makes me feel like I, as a white person who was not directly involved or at the forefront of misusing power in such a way and who avoids any discussion about the colour of my skin and other people's, that I am in no way responsible. I was challenged, and by realising that the effects of racism are as much to do with me and my inaction as it was to do with white people who are explicit in their racism, I was finally equipped with the tools that would allow me to lift my head out of the swamp and view things from a different perspective. I learnt that it started with me, that I had a choice to take responsibility or not, that I could be a leader or not, take on the struggle to transform things or not, basically that I didn't have to continue in this pattern and that I had the power to change it if I chose.*

### **Acknowledgement of difference and transformation**

*I feel I have had great opportunities to practise leadership skills and respond in particular to conflict, accepting it as a valuable process that can bring about valuable change.*



*I realised that I brought a certain dynamic to a room, and that my behaviour either reinforces or prejudices or dispels it. You need to think about your impact if you are going to be effective.*

The deep and challenging level of interaction experienced during this phase characterised by conflict bears directly on this ending phase in which a degree of transformation can frequently be expected. Importantly group members will know from experience that the group can contain difficult feelings and that it can survive the hostility. Open conflict based on attitudes and values can lead, as we suggest, to greater levels of understanding and respect for others. This is particularly true when the accepted cultural norms in the community and youth work profession are to challenge social injustice. Few argue with the enormous value of challenging social injustice based on race, gender, sexual orientation and economic power. To not discriminate against people for all the usual reasons, disability, religious affiliations or national identity, may be viewed as a superficial manifestation of political correctness. This is not a view that we support. Students are therefore motivated towards personal movement and change, and should by this stage in their training have reached a level of emotional maturity which enables them to hold and accept differences with integrity.

The large group offers opportunities to collaborate with others. Often these 'others' may have been previously avoided, for fear of conflict or because of other real or imagined fears and anxieties. This collaboration with its resultant dialogue and debate, even when frustrating, moves us towards a re-examination of our personal selves and identity. Students enter the process with their familiar and socially created notions of what makes us different. A development of identity takes place as students struggle to find answers to difficult questions, often posed from within the group itself. Students are encouraged to work through the discomfort that arises when issues of race, sexuality or gender are discussed. Focusing on these uncomfortable feelings and encouraging students to explore them often leads to a reexamination of their experiences and the development of their identities. It enables students to become familiar with asking themselves the same questions and thereby becoming at ease with themselves in new ways.

The process enables group members to become more conscious of

themselves and their beliefs not less, moving from 'regardless of culture and identity' to regardful of culture and identity.

The process of establishing stronger identities then allows for a willingness to let go of these identities, which presents possibilities and incentives to explore past conditioning and enable new aspects of identities to emerge. As students learn, appreciate and value more about themselves this enables them to learn, appreciate and value more about others. As the process continues barriers are significantly reduced. Differences based on culture, ethnicity, race and gender, whilst real and acknowledged, begin to be defined by individual connections and friendships are based on acceptance of differences.

The facilitators are active in assisting the group to pay continual attention to these differences and perceived factors that might maintain separateness from others and that mask aspects of identity and being oneself. This however does not preclude the need for autonomy and space for specific groups. This is positively encouraged as part of the exploration and appreciation of differences particularly by those not part of these groups. One Muslim student expresses the importance of her community and sub group:

*Nowhere I can be my self and discuss it-except with others like me'-I have a base of cultural identity back at home which I subscribe to emotionally and this gives me the resources to play my part in supporting change in UK -this is Islam.*

## **Conclusion**

Identity in Post Modern writing relevantly emphasises its shifting and changing nature in individuals and communities. This, we suggest, needs to emerge and occur in ways that retain the integrity and heritage of communities – this has significant meaning for effective equality work. We would argue it is important that individuals understand significant aspects of their own identity and sense of self. They develop this from their interactions with others based on their own life experiences, particularly in relation to racism and sexism. Without these starting points it becomes problematic to engage with changes in one's own constantly emerging identity, both in a way that is critical in developing meaningful relationships that acknowledge the reality

of racism and sexism and in serving young people and communities in tackling issues so central to their life experience and struggle. In other words and for example, those who are able to connect to their own experiences of racism –both black and white- and who have been able to process that experience in the group, are able to work with both black and white communities and individuals effectively in establishing transformative approaches.

This paper suggests that the focus on experiential large groupwork provides a strong platform for the development of student learning and the strengthening of their own personal identities. This approach to training also enables them to develop and employ effective intervention strategies that achieve equality. We see this as centrally important if real social transformation in this area is to be realised.

Freire (1972) placed great emphasis on the need to forge a critical consciousness so that the oppressive or inhibiting social realities confronting people can be effectively challenged and changed. Emancipatory education is the key tool in Freire's work for developing critical awareness and empowering people to change reality itself.

To appreciate, understand and engage valuably and meaningfully in developing equality, fighting injustice and addressing exclusion requires, as Ikeda states, 'A struggle that issues from the inner effort to master our own contradiction and conflicts-should be seen as a difficult yet unavoidable trial that we must undergo in the effort to create a greater and deeper sense of connection' (Ikeda, 2005, p. 21). This 'inner effort to master our own contradictions and conflicts' appropriately describes the journey individuals take in large groupwork. Achieving equality and social change without the ability to master oneself creates often-meaningless approaches to equality.

The context within which community and youth work takes place is constantly shifting. Changes in Government policy and declining resources means that those who work in the social change arena need to have leadership skills, a developed awareness of themselves and the ability to work in ways that are collaborative, creative and inclusive. Working for social change necessitates a more sophisticated analysis of inequality and injustice. We would argue that it is through the experiential group that students learn to analyse the quality of their relationships with others and the impact they have on others in the group and in professional contexts. McDermott (2002) discusses the

value of groupwork in increasing social capital, commenting that, 'working in groups and with groups can be a significant means of strengthening individuals as well as building social capital' (2002, p.14). The quality of the social capital developed has strength and depth in relation to tackling inequalities.

Overall, this paper champions the value of groupwork that enables students to embrace new and challenging experiences. For us, the large group aims to create what de Mare et al (1991, p. 10) call a 'socio-cultural environment' '...in a way that the small group cannot do'. It provides a space and a freedom for students to explore without the tyranny of structure or the limits and constraints of organisations, to examine race and gender dynamics, opening students up to their own thinking, personal positions, beliefs and engages them in challenging conditioned understandings. These understandings are embedded in our psyche; the large group can be seen as a process of deconstructing these deeply held beliefs and of becoming more aware of themselves—in terms of thinking, the nature of change and who they are.

The group is a fluid structure that encourages democratic leadership where everyone has a contribution to make. It enables students to gain deeper insights, to change, so that we can see each other differently. In our view, the greatest strength of the experiential large group is its ability to challenge internal resistance that is exposed as a result of oppositional positions, in other words the struggle to engage with our own deeper reflection rather than the easy externalisation of the problem.

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