

TELLING THE TRUTH



Let's Tell the Truth

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Chris Robertson's article in the September issue of *S&S* highlighted the way that a dysfunctional training organisation is able to silence dissenters, leaving those dissenters to carry the split-off feelings, the shit, with them. In the piece that follows I want to highlight the abuse of power that I experienced on my two-year training course in facilitation. The title comes from a spontaneous remark from one of the course participants two thirds of the way through the course — 'Let's be degenerate. Let's tell the truth'. All names have been changed for the purposes of this article.

The Context

On our course the facilitators modelled a view that suggested the group was made up of a set of one-on-one relationships. The group process and dynamic were largely ignored, and the place of our group and the group members in the larger society was neglected. This emphasis encouraged abuse by neglecting to reframe the group reality within a wider context.

The accrediting institute (henceforth called AI) and the academic institution conferring the diploma (henceforth DI) fit the closed system characteristics that Chris Robertson describes:

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- 1 All of the trainers have been trained on the same course (the one I went on).
- 2 They accredit each other to run such courses.
- 3 They deal with complaints themselves.
- 4 There is no formal statement of ethics or complaints procedure.
- 5 The AI and DI membership overlap substantially.
- 6 The supervisor of the course is a member of AI.
- 7 Intellectual content is inherited from the founder of the AI and the DI; it is not eclectic.

I can summarise the dysfunction I saw in the course thus:

- 1 Abuse of the position of facilitator — 'unless you do . . . I will . . .'.
- 2 Physical abuse and humiliation by the facilitator.
- 3 A partial accrediting process (a continuation of 1 and 2) with no external appeal or assessment (two points laid down by the UK Standing Committee on Psychotherapy — ours wasn't a psychotherapy training course, but in terms of the controls needed can be treated as such).
- 4 Facilitators controlled information to the AI, thus creating disinformation.
- 5 Two participants were in therapy with Ronald (the male facilitator) before, and during the course.
- 6 One participant started therapy with Sinead (the female facilitator) during the course.
- 7 Collaboration of a professional nature between Sinead and a participant started during the course.
- 8 The criteria for choosing participants was not adhered to. This may have been done in an attempt to produce better gender balance. The main problem here

was a lack of understanding of process and internalised social norms which made it difficult to facilitate clearly.

9 An ignorance (or neglect) on the part of the facilitators of the importance of boundaries between the following roles:

- a selection function
- b teaching function
- c therapeutic function
- d accrediting function
- e participant role (the facilitators attempted to become participants as we moved into autonomous mode).

I was on the course with my partner, and the two facilitators (Ronald and Sinead) were a sexual partnership too. I mention this as it is relevant to later developments.

Early Rumblings

At the end of the first term I made the comment that the positive (supportive) feedback was way out of balance with the negative (confronting) feedback. This was placed firmly back with me as my projection, and started a group norm of being soft on each other that was never addressed.

Also in the first term, Ronald shouted at me for not expressing my anger. Very early in the course my relationship with Ronald became a repository where group members could place their 'here and now' anger, whilst raging at past demons was OK.

I raised the issue of contribution rates, competition and power several times during the course. At accreditation time Sinead labelled my views on power as 'extreme' and Ronald saw my unresolved issues with authority as a 'hurdle to my facilitating any group'.

In *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* Irvin Yalom points to the universal presence of competition in groups, and says that 'the most common way of responding to it is a tacit or an explicit pact of equality: the group denies any inter-member differences and often bands together against the outside world.' By denying sibling rivalry in our group we paradoxically allowed it more power — what is resisted persists.

Mid-Session Crises

At the end of the second term the relationship between Ronald and Sinead broke down. I believe that this played a large part in the facilitators' acting-out during the final year. Ronald progressively absented himself (in body and spirit), and Sinead's bursts of anger and acid comments became stronger and more common. Sinead emphasised that this was a learning group and not a therapy group; I knew this and felt it would have been helpful to know when we were in each mode. The emphasis on therapy as opposed to skills acquisition was marked and I feel that the course became an awareness group, which needs strict boundaries and careful leadership to be fully effective.

We did do good work on intervention analysis which was mainly focused on a one-to-one context. However, facilitation skills were underdone and the intellectual framework was woefully neglected. For example, the presentation of a book was carried out by only 5 or 6 participants out of 21.

Another dynamic that was emerging in the first year was the demonisation of both the AI and the DI by Ronald and Sinead. The facilitators who had run the

course the year before were belittled and our accommodation made a useful focus for 'bad' feelings. Our accommodation wasn't good (especially considering that our annual fees as a group totalled £40,000), although I wonder at the facilitators' moaning when Sinead had run two previous courses and Ronald one at the same location. All this helped the emergence of group narcissism.

The course supervisor visited midway through the fourth term for the first time. She asked where the nastiness was in the group, and who was challenging Ronald and Sinead. What a relief it felt that someone had expressed the palpable submission of the group. Two course members mentioned in tears how unkind the group was — a reference to the lack of group support? I do not want to deny the many deep experiences that I know happened for myself and others, although to my knowledge they increasingly happened in informal subgroupings. As the course wound to a close, more participants mentioned in the group that some things remained unsaid (and still didn't say them!).

Nearing the End

Towards the end of the fourth term Ronald wanted to present some material on group dynamics, which I was resisting. He shouted 'You think you know about group dynamics — let me show you something'. I felt humiliated and ridiculed. A few minutes later while I wasn't facing him he shouted into my ear. This caused me pain and I responded by using my open hand across his face to stop his attack. What ultimately hurt most about this was that no mistake was ever admit-

ted and there was no acknowledgement of abuse. Some course participants agreed that there had been abuse by Ronald, but they only said this in the absence of Ronald and Sinead.

This mirrors the two-stage process of child abuse. First the abuse itself, and then the denial that it ever happened or the myth that it was deserved. Child abuse as past trauma was a very big issue on our course.

Even after the course, at the first committee meeting of the AI, Ronald maintained that my action had stung for half an hour, and that he had remained frightened of me for the remaining seven months of the course. If what he said were true the situation needed urgent external review at the time, or at least he needed to own his feelings of fear. I maintain that in the much more equal relationship at the committee meeting (he was still amongst his peers) with the possibility of reframing what had happened, he was forced to lie — he was much less self-possessed once the means of coercion at his disposal were gone.

What were the means of coercion? I didn't have to wait long. Early in the fifth term, during a group share, Ronald said, 'Unless you deal with your issues concerning authority I will not be able to accredit you'. At this time we were unclear about the peer accreditation process and I did not realise that the facilitators would retain a veto over participants' accreditations.

Regardless of the reality of my issues concerning authority, this intervention provoked fear in the group. One participant said as much immediately afterwards. I would have found Ronald's point of view more believable if he had

raised it one-on-one and if similar issues (sexuality in particular) had been raised with other group members. I find it significant that the only issue which received this coercive treatment was one that caused considerable inconvenience to the facilitators. It is also significant that they chose not to intervene therapeutically in this case, but attempted to suppress me, thus abusing their power as leaders. Sinead made it clear that the approach had been pre-agreed. As Chris Robertson says, 'Resistance to group norms is labelled pathological'.

That evening I telephoned the course director, who advised me to work it through in the group. I also rang the course supervisor who reinforced this view. I now regret following this course of action, although I believe that both people acted with integrity.

The following week my partner asked how we could be sure that the facilitators' personal feelings would be kept separate from their accrediting assessment. I should have realised from the angry defence of their integrity that the process ahead was going to be bumpy.

I made my relationship with Ronald the subject of my last project. Ronald was due to assess my project so I requested that Sinead assess it. My request was refused, but the group saw the conflict and overruled the facilitators. The term finished with a sexuality weekend run by Ronald and Sinead which I thoroughly enjoyed, and I thought that a rapprochement might be possible.

However, during the Easter holidays I read Irvin Yalom, and realised that the issues I was raising were important to group life. He explains how an uncon-

scious fantasy develops as a group myth in reaction to denied reality. The fantasy might be 'we are a close, loving group' which disguises the repudiated theme 'we are about to break apart because of anger in the group'. Yalom points to the importance of settling dominance and submission issues. Due to Ronald's and Sinead's own issues over being challenged they were not able to manage this process. It remained implicit and unworked-through, which blocked progress.

I believed that the group's secrecy was the main problem. I sent a brief report to the supervisor for her to read out at a committee meeting early in the last term. There was resistance to this in the group and a protective dynamic quickly emerged (protecting the group from outsiders) — the content matched the process. A group member who works in the field of dysfunctional families commented on the similarities to our group behaviour. This committee meeting proposed extra supervision for the facilitators and asked that the visiting facilitator for our last weekend focus on the group process. Ronald did not attend the last weekend — and the suggested group process focus did not take place.

William's Story

William left the course at the end of the fifth term. I include his story as an example of cruelty paraded as help, and how information concerning his treatment was filtered on its way out of the group. I would like to know if any group members are able to concur now with the facilitators' view in the next paragraph.

In the final course report to the committee that forms part of the course

review, Ronald and Sinead wrote: 'Towards the end of the fifth term some evidence emerged of 'scapegoating' of one member, William, when we were absent or when outside facilitators were holding the group. Unfortunately, despite our own and group support for William, a serious heart condition prevented him from pursuing this in the group'.

One of the comments about history is that the people who have the power always get to write it. From the start of the course William had been increasingly attacked — this was not a fifth term phenomenon, it was clear in the first term. He was the most different from group norms and his inability to talk the humanistic language and to cathart (behaviour prized by the group) set him apart. The most venomous attacks came when Ronald and Sinead were not present and there was definitely a group belief that we needed to 'cure William's problem'. When four participants stormed out while William was talking, a visiting facilitator made it quite clear where the issue lay — with the stormers.

At the end of the fifth term Sinead screamed at William that she felt manipulated — this to a man who felt isolated and in need of support. In the last two terms Ronald and Sinead became members of the group, as this was their idea of autonomous mode. It was never clear when they moved between facilitator and participant mode; I contend that to be participants having been facilitators is impossible as the transference never switches off, especially when (as on our course) there has been no attempt to process it. I think that they would have been far more useful working as group consultants holding the

group boundary and safety, and giving advice when asked.

At the beginning of the sixth term there was a process to deal with William's departure. I found it a revolting washing of hands. After he had left, in a phone call, William himself expressed his irritation that his heart condition had been used as the reason for his departure from the group. It was contributory, but not central.

My Accreditation

During the five-day residential, three weeks from the end of the course, we set about the accreditation process. On the second day we were informed that the accreditation document needed to be signed by our support person, our confronting person, both facilitators and six other participants.

On the fourth day, when I had my interview with Ronald and Sinead, I took an advocate with me. I was told by Ronald that I was not ready for facilitation of any kind at the moment due to my authority issues. Sinead informed me that I had not taken opportunities to work on my issues during the final workshop just before the residential.

When the group reconvened Ronald was challenged. What criteria was he using, and could we make comparisons between participants? He replied that such comparisons were not possible and offered no criteria for how they were working. As Chris Robertson suggests, 'arbitrary judgements mean students cannot self-assess and lose confidence in their own experience'.

Why had I not received feedback after those sessions I facilitated that supported

the facilitators' view? I contend that at the residential and until the end of the course I was being victimised for my refusal to conform.

A participant (to whom I am very grateful) suggested that I choose a team of six to produce an accreditation that was acceptable to Ronald and Sinead. In a re-write session over the next 24 hours we put together an accreditation the team was happy to sign. This itself was an exciting process that every participant would have benefited from. However, Ronald and Sinead did not sign my accreditation until 14:30 on the final day. John, a participant who had great difficulty receiving six participant signatures, had been signed earlier and easily by the facilitators.

What I am angry at is not the toughness of the process, but its partiality, and the reasons for that partiality. Objections by another participant (not my partner) to my treatment and the lenient treatment of John were dismissed out of hand.

Lodging a Complaint with the Accrediting Institute

The final course report to the committee was written by the facilitators (I don't know what happened to the participants' comments). Here are some extracts:

'1 We feel that we have probably been too seamlessly effective too often and that there has perhaps not been enough public disagreement.' Perhaps?

'2 Sinead's work with the dissenting member of the group . . .' I was the only publicly dissenting member of the group — the invective at social gatherings and in the corridors was very different from the gushing feedback Ronald and Sinead

received on the final day.

'3 What would we do differently? We would have everyone on the course agree accreditation instead of half the group or so and we would have a continuous sequence of tutorials so that we would be in close touch with individuals' development and needs.' Both suggestions are welcome, although they don't go far enough. Reading the UKCP and BAC training guidelines indicates the overhaul this course needs to exercise proper boundaries and stop conflict of interests. But why did it take the facilitators so long to realise the good sense of these moves, especially when it had been pointed out that the maintenance of the facilitator veto seemed to fly in the face of the principle of autonomy?

My partner and I put together a document for the following committee meeting containing about twenty points that we felt needed attention. I presented this as part of the course report agenda and was pleasantly surprised at the time given to hearing me. After this I asked for an agenda slot so that I could formally lodge my complaint of abuse from Ronald. This was refused, and I received a letter two months later which ended, 'The Committee, having discussed this fully on these two occasions, considers the matter closed'. I have not been allowed to attend the discussion (the first meeting I attended was general discussion about the course as part of the course report), and I have not been informed either of what was said,

or of what safeguards have been set in place for the future. I feel that for the matter to be resolved both parties need to agree that the matter is closed — that is what resolution means. After all, members of the AI run courses on conflict resolution and abuse in learning groups.

At no point was my complaint registered. The AI have no formal complaints procedure, no principle of good practice, and despite my request have not indicated whether they are affiliated to any other body who may have such procedures. The facilitators are not accredited by any other body besides the AI, and so do not hold themselves accountable in any procedural sense. In researching ethics and principles of other bodies I have received procedures from UKCP, AHPP and BAC which are excellent if put into practice.

Reservations were expressed by the AI when they accredited Ronald and Sinead to facilitate our course (I found this out too late), and despite the comments I have made Ronald has been accredited to run another long-term course.

I'll finish with a piece from the BAC section on competence: 'Trainers have a responsibility to themselves and to their trainees to maintain their own effectiveness, resilience, and ability to help trainees, and to know when their personal resources are so depleted as to make it necessary for them to seek help and/or withdraw from training whether temporarily or permanently.' I wonder how many trainers have taken this advice to heart.