

Eric J. Miller

Experiential Learning in Groups I

The Development of the Leicester Model*

Introduction

The Tavistock/Leicester Conference—or, as it is now more often called, the Leicester Conference—is an intensive two-week residential event devoted to experiential learning about group and organizational behavior, with a particular emphasis on the nature of authority and leadership. Its purpose is educational. The conference brings together an international membership of, usually, 50–70 people drawn from a wide range of occupations and professions, in industry and commerce, education, medical and social services, the voluntary sector, etc. The staff group of ten or so is similarly diverse. The conference has been held once and sometimes twice a year since 1957—over 40 altogether. All have been sponsored by what is now the Group Relations Training Programme (GRTP) of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR), sometimes in co-sponsorship with other organizations.

The first seven conferences were jointly sponsored by Leicester University, and almost all have been held at Leicester in one of the University's halls of residence.

The essentials of the approach, including its theoretical underpinnings, were largely established by the mid-1960s. Since then, the “Leicester model” has provided the basis for numerous other conferences, some run by the GRTP and very many more by other institutions, in Britain and a dozen different countries around the world. In most cases these were developed with the active support of the Tavistock Institute. Around the conference work and its applications there has emerged a substantial literature. For a decade or more, the A.K. Rice Institute (AKRI), the principal exponent of the Leicester model in the United States, has been organizing a biennial scientific meeting focussed on the conferences and their ramifications; the First International Symposium, jointly sponsored by GRTP and AKRI, was held at Oxford (July, 1988) on the theme of “applications to social and political issues.”

*A requested overview.

History

ORIGINS

The first Leicester Conference was explicitly an experiment and it was meticulously planned and documented. It was reported in *Exploration in Group Relations*: a residential conference held in September 1957 by the University of Leicester and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (Trist and Sofer, 1959). The late Professor John Allaway, then Head of the Department of Adult Education in the University of Leicester, was Chairman of the Executive Committee that planned and ran the Conference; Eric Trist was program director.

As Allaway noted in his introduction to the monograph, this was "the first full-scale experiment in Britain with the laboratory method of training in group relations." This was a direct reference to the laboratory method that had developed at Bethel, Maine, since 1947 by the National Training Laboratories (NTL). Based on the T-Group, it was a model of intensive experiential learning that had sprung directly from the work of Kurt Lewin, whose group theories had strongly influenced the early Tavistock group. The Tavistock approach, however, was influenced also by psychoanalysis.

In the late 1950s, experiential learning of the Bethel type was still a novelty in Britain, and psychoanalysts were somewhat suspect. Cosponsorship by a university, especially by a department in the educational field, was seen as important in adding credibility. Allaway had the courage to back the venture on behalf of Leicester University and secured the Vice-Chancellor's support.

The organizing committee successfully approached a wide range of organizations to nominate members for the first conference. Recruitment through an organizational rather than a personal channel was thought to provide a sociological barrier against members becoming covert patients. More than a third of the 45 who enrolled came from industry (many, but by no means all, in personnel and training roles). Others were drawn from universities and other educational institutions; the Home Office (attendance of a prison governor and a deputy governor being the beginning of a long association of the Prison Service with the Leicester Conferences); the probation service; local authorities; and voluntary organizations. Eric Trist, then Chairman of the Management Committee of TIHR, led the staff group of 14.

Twenty-six of the members attended a two day follow-up session six months later. Suffice to say that the evaluation justified mounting a second conference in 1959, followed fairly quickly by a third, fourth and fifth in 1960-61. Leicester University's co-sponsorship extended over the first seven conferences. It ended with the retirement of John Allaway and of his colleague, Professor J.W. Tibble, who had also become actively involved.

DEVELOPMENTS IN DESIGN

In the earliest conference the central event was the small Study Group, consisting of 9–12 members, a staff consultant and a staff observer. Its task was to study its own behavior, as a group, in the here-and-now. The other main events were lectures (social theory sessions) and Application Groups, which were intended between them to help members make sense of their Study Group experience and consider how it might be applied in their external roles. There were also plenary review sessions. This design was broadly similar to that at Bethel, though the equivalent Bethel T-group was larger—up to 20. Also the Leicester consultant's orientation was less person-centered: it addressed the dynamics of the group, and it concentrated on interpretation rather than facilitation. The 1959 Conference saw the experimental introduction of an Inter-Group Event, in which members were asked to divide into groups and negotiate an agreement on how to use vacant slots in the program. Consultants helped to interpret the inter-group dynamics (Higgin and Bridger, 1964).

In 1962, TIHR gave authority to Kenneth Rice to take over leadership of the group relations conferences. The conferences could no longer be subsidized from the Institute's research funds and Rice was willing to try to make them financially viable. He did indeed succeed in making the conferences self-financing, but only because he and other staff colleagues were committed enough to accept nominal remuneration. (And it is still the case, in 1988, that, in order to keep membership fees at a level acceptable to non-commercial organizations, payments to staff remain modest.)

However, Rice's major contribution to the conferences was not economic but technical and conceptual. The period of his direction saw at least four significant developments in design (Rice, 1965). The first was innovation of the Large Group. Its task was the same as for the small Study Group, but it included all the members (sometimes 70 or more) with 2–4 consultants. Secondly, the Inter-Group Event was re-defined as having a single task: the membership was to form itself into groups and to study their interrelatedness in the here-and-now. Thirdly, a second type of inter-group event (later developed into the Institutional Event) was introduced, in which the focus of study was the member/staff relationship within the conference institution as a whole. Finally, as a natural consequence of increasing the emphasis on experiential learning, the lectures were reduced and eventually dropped. Plenary sessions and Application Groups were retained, and there was increasing use of interim Review Groups, to give members opportunities to reflect on their experience.

The "single-task" model introduced by Rice, with its insistence on the study of the here-and-now, had some critics within TIHR. They believed the interpretive stance was too threatening to some members and could inhibit learning rather than encourage it. Accordingly, Harold Bridger, who was