

THE INTENSIVE GROUP EXPERIENCE
Experiential learning groups in practice - general
process description and guidelines

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The following descriptive guidelines are offered as a working orientation to the nature and processes of experiential learning groups, especially for prospective participants and those embarking on an intensive group experience. The statement may also be useful to other organisers and leaders of experiential groups, and of interest to general readers who are conscious of the "group phenomenon" and uncertain but cautious in regard to its qualitative nature. Broadly, the kind of situation and experience referred to is one intended to foster functional, relational and personal learning and resource development via an open-ended, low-structure, experience-based interactional process occurring in a small-group context. It is assumed also that each person in the group is present through some active personal choice or decision as against, for example, passive or reluctant acquiescence to someone else's direction.

Various names are used for groups of this kind such as T-groups, sensitivity groups, human relations (training) groups and encounter groups. (The same names are sometimes also used for groups that differ in level of structure and/or qualities of process from those represented by this statement.) In the nature of a relatively unstructured, discovery-oriented experiential learning group (by whatever name) the process cannot be standardised even where the same general principles and kinds of process and outcome are involved.

This outline falls in between the possible alternatives

- (a) of a description that presents the process in such broad and non-specific terms that it could encompass situations differing fundamentally in their actual characteristics and effects, and
- (b) of a very sharply focused, prescriptive definition implying little or no room for variation in process and goals.

The resulting guidelines are also an expression of the author's belief and concern that meaningful choice and initiative - in particular, a decision of whether or not to participate in an experiential learning group - requires some knowledge of what is being chosen, of the kind of experience presenting itself and the nature of its potentialities.

In the same sense that "traditional" educational procedures, in principle, imply value choices, the following guidelines partially reflect a choice among possible alternative relational and developmental goals in human living. Human preferences and values exist on many levels, and a major determinant of their force and effectiveness is evidently the extent to which they spring from (or are closely interwoven with) intensive, deeply involving first-hand experience. One major value principle implied in this outline is that the individual should have the opportunity to be a principal architect of his own being and becoming.

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The experiential group process, by design and evolution, strongly reflects and expresses this value.(1)

The guidelines that follow refer to process features and principles expressed in a way that it is hoped will be helpful to persons entering or in a group, as well as effective as a description for interested potential and non-participants.

1. Once a group begins, each person belongs because he is there. Each of us who is present has his individual history, including the aspects leading to his choice and beginning affiliation and experience, in this context, with the others present in the group. The group owes its existence and its identity to the prior circumstances and convergent choices that have brought all of us together. As in a family, in most circumstances, the right of each family member (or group member) to be part of that family (or this group) is not an issue. By mutually taking each other's membership as a given we also maximise our chances to learn to "make it together", with our differences. This has awesome relevance to the larger community and world in which we live.

A member's purposes and needs in participating in the group are clearly a different matter than his right to be there. In effect, responsively moving with the purposes and needs that we each have in the context of the group, is what the group is for. It can be highly relevant for any of us to express our initial and developing aims, concerns, and our blocked and wanted experiences in the group. Different too, from our right to belong, is an actual, deeply felt experience of inclusion and belongingness. This experience may develop and grow in the group (usually with significant ups and downs) but it has no "instant" variety.

2. A first purpose is to gain a sense of one another as inwardly active, feeling, thinking persons. It is a feeling for the other as a human-being like oneself, a sense of "the other person's living inside himself" (in Gendlin's phrase). (2) Words may or may not be necessary to gain this sense of contact. Simply looking openly toward the other, catching his eyes, seeing his expression, posture and movement may "bring him to life" for us, and ourselves for him. Then when we speak, or carry forward in our expression, we are speaking to someone, sharing perhaps quite tentatively but with immediate awareness that the other is hearing our words and responding (inwardly at least), and possibly understanding.
3. Each group member endeavours to be personal, direct and specific in his communication. This may be difficult for him generally, or at certain times, but he tries to avoid general and abstract statements if they blue, or only express in a round-about way, his immediate meaning, relational feeling, intuition, or concern.

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- (1) More concrete intentions and possibilities of the group experience are that participants break new ground in aspects of their self-awareness and relational resources and functioning; in their discrimination of the effects of different kinds of interpersonal communication and attitude; and in terms of clearer differentiation and more active, functional application of their own values in living. In becoming responsive to a wider range of experiential data, it is as though new channels open or some that are narrow or obstructed expand. A broader or more differentiated spectrum of consciousness and action develops, new hues and shandings become visible, some 'colours' become more vivid, and others of less importance than before, new combinations, patterns, and textures are perceived; and adjustments in balance, configuration and emphasis occur in each person's 'composition' as the new elements, qualities and possibilities come into view. Most importantly, perhaps, the individual experiences himself and other group members (at times, at least) as formative, creative, unbound and 'in-process'; as embarked on a voyage of discovery and development that could be part (or a more significant part than before) of his way of life rather than something that ends with his expedition in the group.

- (2) Ibid. Gendlin, E.T. and Beebe, J., 1968.

Although it may feel risky and scary, generally he wishes to use language (or non-verbal expressions) to get in touch (to express himself in the immediacy of his experience with the other, and to receive the other in kind) rather than to maintain distance and separation (or keep from personally knowing and being known).

Quite often, in the group, one or more of us will feel or think something that he fears to say right then, or that he feels might be too hurtful, troubling or unfair to someone else. When this is happening we may share our felt uneasiness or fear of expressing our more specific (unstated) feeling or perception, and find that this sharing frees us in some way, or brings us more in touch again with others in the group. It is likely, too, that we will then have a clearer, more unified feeling of wanting, or not wanting, to go on to disclose what we feared to express initially.

4. Each of us listens to the other, not always with patience or sensitivity but generally with a concern to know what he is experiencing. Primarily, our listening is not to grasp the other's meaning simply as an idea, observation or point of view which we then proceed to examine logically and critically. Rather, we listen to hear and know him personally, and subjectively as a fellow human-being. The focus is on the level of personal meaning, observation and feeling rather than on the 'objective soundness' of his ideas, viewpoint and knowledge. We listen in a way that recognises differences and uniqueness, as well as commonalities - in a way which is empathic rather than critically analytic. Perhaps the deepest listening and understanding from this standpoint, occurs when the listener senses and knows empathically how it is to be the other; how it is for him either in this immediate moment or in some enduring aspect of his situation and experience in the world. When such sensitive resonance and empathy is clearly communicated to and received by the person who is being understood, its impact may be deeply moving and releasing to him. It may be as though something that had stopped inside him had begun to move and live again, that some part of his loneliness in a world of imperfect communication and knowing had dissolved, or that some vital connection he had been unable to bring into focus had become suddenly and vividly clear to him.(3)

 5. We tend to let our inner feelings or relatedness show as these feelings actually arise and develop in us. Actual feelings of warm concern, closeness, liking or appreciation of impatience, bafflement or frustration, of responsive sadness or excitement, of sharp anger, hurt or embarrassment, of being at loss, stuck or confused in relation to someone else, of mutual enjoyment, fun or pleasure - and many other feelings in relationship - can be expressed, shared and fully experienced in the group. There is no rule that anyone should feel any particular way but there is an understanding that it is all right, and generally helpful, to show the real feelings that arise toward and in response to others in the group.
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- (3) The author does not mean to imply, and does not believe, that the levels of experiencing and interpersonal process, and their effects, that characterise an experiential group, are the only important levels for significant learning, knowing and being-in-the-world. Rather, these levels are viewed as comprising one major or fundamental 'band' within a larger spectrum (that includes, for example, more detached and analytical observation, abstract thinking and discerning how things interrelate and work in our non-personal environment). However, the qualities of self-experiencing and relational process described here are frequently neglected or stopped in our culture, resulting in literal deprivation in the individual's experiencing, relationships and development. This deprivation is likely also to affect the person in other areas of the total spectrum of his life activity and development, because he is an individual being in whom different areas of modes of functioning and development are interconnected.

This general understanding or expectation is not, of course, immediately effective in leading everyone to actually feel comfortable or able to express their feelings openly.

Also, rational feelings that are experienced quite strongly may at the same time be mixed, confused or very unclear, especially at first. At times, also, it may be very hard to discriminate or sort out feelings about ourselves from feelings toward others, and the "same" experience may turn out to have both of these aspects. In such instances as these, it may become clear to us that our uncertainty, or experience of struggling but failing to grasp, is itself the focus of our immediate experience and feeling. Recognising this, when it is true, amounts to a "refocussing" on another level, of where we are and on how to proceed.

The development of an actual climate of trust and openness in the group, in the expression of relational feelings, starts from initially ventured expressions - whether tentative or firm, positive or negative - and the ways in which these are received and responded to. Relational experience and sharing, in the context of other described qualities in the group, grows on itself, deepening, with ups and downs, as the process and life of the group unfolds.

6. The group is a place for honesty and realism. Most of us have learned to be more or less on our guard in most situations. We "know" that certain kinds of things may be expressed, but there is no room for some of our actual feelings and perceptions. In a close, personal friendship our guard drops more than in other relationships. We feel freer, closer, more openly sharing of our feelings, interests, wants and ideas - in short, our actual inner selves. We are more 'transparent' with a close friend and he or she with us. Although, in ordinary life, such friendships usually take some time to form and blossom this is not always or inevitably the case. Sometimes, a genuine and lasting friendship springs into being very quickly.

In infancy and early childhood, human-beings normally are openly expressive, spontaneous, unguarded and transparent. Man evidently learns to be guarded and concealing. He usually maintains as well a desire or hunger to be himself in a fuller, freer, open way, at least in some relationships. Typically, this hunger is one of the main forces at work in an experiential learning group. Its strength, the forms in which it can be expressed, and the felt risks of disclosing sensitive, 'unfamiliar' or usually protected and guarded aspects of oneself (or of one's inner experiencing) will vary from one person to another in the group. But the presence of this hunger, the relatively clear and strong sanction that experiential groups (unlike most social situations) provide for its expression, the experience of being really listened to on an empathic level, and one's own experience of and response to the more open, immediate and self-expressive communications of other group members, are likely to become a powerfully releasing combination for all or most participants. Movement into deeply searching and sharing communication and relationships may occur much more rapidly than in (most) other life situations.

Being honest and real is something that progressively develops and happens for the sorts of reasons indicated. These, and perhaps other reasons are conditions which foster or facilitate such honesty; but it cannot be forced into being. In the writer's view, an intense, direct striving to be "ruthlessly honest" or "completely open" is likely to be ineffective and can directly lead into another kind of make-believe. In effect, such intense striving is self-defeating or even self-contradictory - like straining to be spontaneous.

7. Group members are not seeking to sit in judgement on each other. Judgemental feelings and perceptions may spontaneously arise, and may evoke counter-judgemental reactions (as happens so often in everyday life). Usually, in an experiential group, such a cycle is soon broken because in any particular case, other kinds of potent processes and communication are happening as well. The group leader and/or some other person or persons in the group desire and continue to listen for the inner experiencing of the "accuse" and "accused". As they are able to, they express what they hear - the anger, hurt, mistrust, fear and other more complex feelings and personal meanings of the persons judging and being judged.

Other persons (who are not in the immediate "firing line"), or the same persons at different moments, may find themselves with feelings similar to those they sense in a person who is responding judgementally. These feelings come out differently, expressed and owned as their own felt reactions and meanings rather than an accusing judgement of the other person's characteristics or impact.

Judgemental attitudes and messages by themselves inhibit rather than facilitate the kinds of relational learning and self-discovery or development for which the group experience can be a potent vehicle. In conjunction with the kinds of associated responses and process development indicated, spontaneous judgemental reactions can be integral steps or phases in a larger process experienced as deeply productive and helpful.

8. Each person in the group is responsible FOR himself and TO others. His participation in the group implies that he wishes to be, or to become, more fully "himself" or a fuller person, with others; that in some very significant sense he stands in need of others (and they of him). However, it does not imply a surrender of responsibility for himself. On the contrary, his presence expresses choice and action on his own behalf. If another group member feels or tries to take responsibility for him this implies that he is seen by the other, at the time, as incapable, helpless or not responsible. Even if he should feel this way himself, his experience of the other person perceiving and responding to him as being helpless or incapable would tend to confirm and reinforce his self-perception rather than fostering his sense of agency or desire to be more resourceful and self-dependent.

To relate to another with responsive concern for his well-being, as well as one's own, implies a caring readiness or availability to be his ally in his caring for himself; and a readiness to perceive the other as an ally when the going gets rough for oneself.

9. In our communications and relationships, in the group, we often provide each other with personal feedback. The term feedback, as used here, refers to direct messages from another person as to qualities and characteristics that he sees in us, and that relate to our sense or awareness of our own identity and potentialities. Helpful feedback may point to some valued aspect of ourselves, or a visibly developing potential within us, and be directly self-confirming in this way. Feedback messages may also serve to clarify or draw attention to (or even help us to discover) attributes that we want to change, or significantly develop, in ourselves.

Feedback happens whenever we directly share with another person our perception or view of some particular qualities, characteristics or tendencies that we see in him, together with our own attitude or feelings associated with these qualities in the other. In feedback communication, my observation and feeling is something in me (something that I am experiencing) that points more or less accurately and/or helpfully to something in the other person. If my message makes it clear that I "own" or share responsibility for what I see in him, and at the same time if this clearly or vividly conveys my "picture" of him (in the aspects I am referring to), and especially if I feel genuine concern or caring toward him, he is likely to experience my picture as relevant and meaningful. He will very possibly consider this as adding something to his own view of himself. In addition, it is likely that my message will also tell him something more about me, or about me-with-him, to which he can respond.

Besides these aspects of tuning in to each other's feelings, meanings and personal worlds, and expressing and moving with our own relational and other feelings in the group, we are conscious of one another as separate persons, each with an identity and life beyond our immediate relationships and self-awareness. Feedback messages relate to this consciousness of our separate and larger identity while drawing from, and complementing other kinds of exchange and sharing within the group. Our feedback communication reflects and takes advantage of the fact that we are highly attentive to one another in the group, that we see each other significantly involved and in action on a variety of levels.

We are engaged in ways that are often very expressive of who we are and how we function. We form pictures of each other (etched more clearly through differences and contrasts between us), based on substantial and salient "data", and our mutual communication of these pictures may significantly enhance our knowing of ourselves.

10. What we express from within ourselves may productively call forth varied meanings and different kinds of response from different others in the group. Fruitful learning and development happens in a group because we serve as catalysts and resources to one another in a variety of ways and on differing levels in our active and reactive, expressive/receptive and personal/relational searching.

The same experiential communication is received in a differing context of past experience and immediate process in each group member. As connection and trust develop in the group, the individually varying impact among other members of someone's deeply felt and evocative expression can be freely shared, and lead perhaps, to further variation as differing expressed reactions are in turn responded to. In this way, the threads of meaning and discovery multiply often, weaving an experiential/relational texture to great richness.

One person's self-expressive searching may, for example, open a doorway for another to some important quality or pattern in his experience. It may evoke in a third person a concern to check (and possibly help with) his personal understanding of the first. It may speak to a fourth of that which he also vividly recognises in himself but had not previously known in another (and which dissolves some part of his feeling of separateness). It may provide the capstone for a clear and illuminating feedback message from a fifth person; and give to a sixth a compelling example of a process which he can later try in his own self-expressive searching. Finally, it may communicate to a seventh person an attitude sharply in contrast with his own conscious meanings - now real and comprehensible to him in another human-being.

11. When decisions are made that commit the whole group, everyone in the group takes part in some way and shares in the decision. Once an experiential learning group begins, fresh decisions that commit the group as a whole are based on agreement by all members. They are not determined by majority vote or rule, or by the group leader (or any other member) acting on his own. Decisions which everyone in the group participates in, and agrees to, effectively begin before the first group meeting. Each person on the basis of the information available to him in advance, has chosen (or agreed, in some active sense) to be there. Any arrangement or plans that were not presented in this advance information fall within the scope of fresh decisions.

Genuine consensus is not compatible with some people agreeing as a result of pressure from others, or forcing themselves to go along with a decision because they don't want to be a nuisance, or because they fear rejection if they disclose their real preferences or needs. Nor does it imply that everyone has arrived at exactly the same point of view or attitude, or experiences the same level of enthusiasm, interest or support for the decision. It does imply that the relevant issues, as perceived and assessed by each person, balance out in the same direction for everyone.

When a matter for joint decisions is discussed in the group there is opportunity for every member to say what he thinks or feels, but there is not usually any requirement that he do so. If a person stays quiet it would usually be taken to mean that he felt he had nothing to add and that the outcome is all right with him.

If an emerging decision does go against the grain for anyone, he has a complete right - even an obligation - to say so. If someone else feels quite involved, but very unclear as to his position, the leader or other group members ordinarily would feel concerned to help him sort out and clarify where he stood. If a particular proposal is made, especially if it is something consequential that most members have not

been expecting or thinking about in advance - and more particularly if previous fresh decisions have not already been worked through to a point of clear agreement - it is important to provide lots of opportunity for discussion of what anyone finds difficult or does not like about the proposal. This might result in a working through process in which feelings and ideas change to a point where everyone supports the suggestion or is at least genuinely willing to see it acted on. Alternatively, there may be a clear decision in the opposite direction.

Sometimes it is better to put off a decision because one or more persons remain concerned but uncertain, or because the discussion leads to other personal concerns or relational developments that become the immediate, actual focus of attention and concern in the group. On occasion, further information is needed that cannot be obtained while the group is in session. Also, when a group decision is called for, it may seem very unclear at first how, or on what basis, a decision can or should be made. Members may have the distinct impression that they are now confronting an administrative or organisational matter that seems to call for a quite different kind of procedure for its resolution (involving a different level of engagement with their experience and each other) than those which "normally" apply in the group. At such times, it can be helpful for members to ask themselves anew why they are in the group, what their purposes are - individually and together. Their answers are likely to involve a common theme, which clarifies the basis for decision and which may run somewhat as follows: This group exists for us. We want to be guided in what we do by what we actually want, need, value and know or expect to be helpful.

12. The group leader is a member of the group, with purposes and needs and "uniquenesses" like everyone else. Some of the leader's resources and responsibilities typically differ in degree, but not in kind, from those of other group members. He may have some particular objective(s) additional to those of other members, such as drawing - if group members consent - on data from the group for teaching or research. The leader usually has more experience in groups of the kind he is leading than other members do. He tends to see himself and be seen by others as having more than average responsibility within the group toward other members as individuals, and in regard to realising the special potentialities of the group experience and process. There is relatively more of a service emphasis in his position and role in the group, although he does not have basically different rules for himself than for other persons in the group.(4)

Usually the group leader takes it upon himself, to a greater degree than other members, to be attentive to all members of the group and to try to ensure that no one gets neglected or "lost" - especially when feelings are intense or overt attention is strongly focused on one or a few persons. However, the leader sometimes will miss noticing or sensing something very important building up in a silent group member. In this case, no one else should wait for him to notice before expressing his own recognition and concern for the feeling or struggle of the silent member. The leader's responsibility and attention in this way is not in the least exclusive; it is simply more intentional and consistent.

A familiar and delightful characteristic of young children is the way that they transparently and expressively assume and try out the roles, behaviours, attitudes and imagined qualities of people, creatures and important inanimate objects in their

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- (4) The fact that the designated leader is often paid, directly or indirectly, for his participation in the group, while other members may pay a fee to participate, probably tends to accentuate initial differences in expectations and roles between the leader and other members. Whatever these differences are when the group begins, they typically recede in extent and perceived importance as relationships, processes and attitudes develop through the course of an experiential learning group.

in their world. This partly imitational but also self-expressive experimentation and learning continues, in lesser degree and more subtle forms, in adulthood. Where there is purpose and opportunity for personal/interpersonal exploration and learning and, particularly, in a situation that is novel and ambiguous in its specific demands and possibilities, there is a heightened tendency for individuals to take their cues rather directly from each other (rather than relying as much on the well-practiced and ready-made repertoire each person brings with him). This is true in an experiential learning group, especially in its early stages. Because the leader is usually known to be experienced in such situations and because each of us is used to persons in a leadership position setting or offering the pattern for others, the leader's functioning is usually more strongly suggestive and evocative as an example and source of guidelines than is the behaviour of other group members. The differential influence of the leader as a model (and the "modelling" phenomenon altogether) desirably and usually diminishes over the course of the group's lifetime.

As relationships develop and the process unfolds, in an experiential group, the leader typically becomes increasingly "assimilated" as a group member and partner in common enterprise. At the same time, the uniqueness, as well as commonalities, of each person's characteristics and his contribution for others in the group, come to be more fully accepted, actively welcomed, and at times cherished.

During the writing of this paper the author was participating and serving as the designated leader in two different experiential learning groups. The currency and freshness of this experience has certainly influenced the details and style of this presentation. Undoubtedly, there would have been some differences in scope or living, growing development, both for the author and in a larger social sense. The intensive group experience itself, its variations, the ways it can be described and the levels on which it may be understood, are continually evolving.

One level of understanding the extensive and expanding involvement of people from many walks of life, in experiential groups, has to do with the social conditions and matrix of our time, particularly in industrially advanced (or rapidly 'advancing') societies. Such societies comprise a civilisation marked by an unprecedented, continually accelerating pace and complexity of technological and social change. Many of us are left with more leisure (less required "work"), more physical comfort and security (at least in the short run) and more information (more knowledge at some levels) than ever before. Often we are also left very lonely, 'displaced persons' relationally if not geographically. In many cases we feel like foreigners unfulfilled, without deep purpose or clear meaning in our lives.

We may wish to take charge of our own lives and development, but encounter great difficulty in knowing how, or in finding the resources to do so. Many of us are concerned for our fellows but unable to freely express and give of ourselves, to enrich their lives as well as our own. These are among the reasons why many seek and deeply value exploring, encountering and growing with others, in intensive experiential learning groups.