

Learning From Experience: The Two International Group Relations Meetings in Belgirate

Experiential learning is central to the group relations approach to education about the dynamics of groups and organizations. Most often this refers to “here and now” events at group relations conferences, but there is another aspect of experiential learning that has less to do with immediate experience in the here and now than with making use of previous experience. This type of “learning from experience” may explain, for example, why it is so common for a person attending their *second* group relations conference to report a quantum increase in their learning.

The reasons for this are not hard to identify: anxiety associated with novel learning environments is often high and no matter how well managed or contained, this anxiety exacts a toll. By analogy with riding a bicycle for the first time, the energy—physical and psychological—devoted to the most basic aspects of the task is enormous, but once one has the hang of it that state usually does not return.¹ While one may learn additional skills and improve those acquired the first time, this is usually accomplished without the initial anxiety.

Representatives of the international group relations community (i.e., those who direct, serve as consulting staff or administer group relations conferences) met in Belgirate, Italy, in the fall of 2003 for the first time and again in 2006 to discuss and explore the theory and practice of group relations (as a model or approach to learning). (Brunner, *et al*, 2006) The two meetings both included a mix of keynote plenary talks, smaller individual or panel presentations and events that had a distinctly “experiential” feel to them (though neither meeting was a group relations conference in the usual sense).

In this chapter I will describe my experience attending both Belgirate meetings and reflect on how and why the second meeting was so different an experience. I hope to demonstrate how, in addition to the “learning from experience” that was connected with being there a second time, an analysis based on group relations principles (i.e., BART) can be used to understand the differences in experience.

The second Belgirate conference felt like a richer, more satisfying learning environment for me. Some of this was without question a function of having been to the first conference three years earlier. In 2003 I arrived in Italy on the morning the conference opened, saw no one I knew at the Milan airport and traveled to Belgirate by taxi, alone. In 2006 I arrived a day early and went to downtown Milan where I met up with a number of US group relations colleagues. Even though I met a host of new colleagues at both Belgirate meetings—including not a few from the US—the return of many of us from the first meeting made for multiple warm greetings during registration at the Villa Carlotta. By the time the conference opened, I was on familiar ground in more ways than one.

Belgirate-I was a peculiar combination of modes: there were both group relations and non-group relations formats in what was most distinctly not a group relations conference. I know I was not alone in feeling frustrated at that attempt to adapt group relations elements in the service of something very different. It was easy to be critical of this attempt, as if we the participants were any less responsible for the outcome than those who had proposed the structure we used. Actually, six of the eight of us from the US did try to move beyond the given structure for the experiential part, but found that we could not engage others to join us.

During Belgirate-II, not only was I less frustrated by a design that used some group relations elements, the management team also appeared to have made good use of the lessons from the previous meeting. Keynote talks were expanded from two to three and the Exploratory event was more free-form: instead of the pre-determined group themes used in 2003, this time we were given the opportunity to create groups with tasks of our own choosing. This was not only more like a typical institutional event or inter-group event opening, it gave the participants both the freedom and the responsibility to take this multi-session event where they wished.²

While the differences between the first and second Belgirate conference and my building on my first experience when I returned in 2006 were important factors in understanding why the second conference seemed so different, they are not sufficient. I believe crucial elements for me had to do with *task*, *role* and *authorization*.

In 2006, but not in 2003, the AK Rice Institute for the Study of Social Systems (AKRI) was a co-sponsor of the Belgirate conference. This appeared to have a dramatic effect on the proportion of conference members from the US, increasing from 15% (8 of 52) in 2003 to 30% (26 of 82) at Belgirate-II. Members from AKRI were the largest contingent from any country or group relations organization. Because of both AKRI President Bob Baxter's role as one of the three who planned and managed Belgirate-II (and AKRI Administrator Anne Marie Kirkpatrick's role and presence as the Belgirate-II co-administrator) and AKRI's co-sponsoring the conference, participants from the US had every reason to feel authorized institutionally.

For me this general institutional authorization went further. In the spring of 2005 I had been elected to a three-year term on the AKRI Board. As a Board member I was

aware of and received regular updates about the processes leading up to Belgirate II.

While my decision to return to Belgirate was individual—I received neither an official AKRI request to attend nor financial support from AKRI—I nevertheless was quite aware of being a representative of AKRI and its board.³ Adding to my sense of institutional authorization was the fact that in the spring of 2006 I had been selected to direct the AKRI national group relations conference (so-called to distinguish it from group relations conferences sponsored by AKRI affiliate centers). Initially I was appointed to fill a one-year gap, but by the summer before Belgirate-II I had sought and received a full three-year authorization.

So when Belgirate-II got underway, I had what I experienced as a fuller sense of authorization. Some of this, as I have just explained, came from a combination of AKRI's role at Belgirate-II and my role(s) in AKRI. However I came to the second Belgirate conference with a clearer sense of what I wanted to do this time; that is, I was clearer about my task(s). Some of these actually were not new, but were simply more fully conscious and more easily articulated. Meeting colleagues—both from the international group relations community and from the US—and seeking learning about new ways to approach and do group relations work both had been goals in 2003 when I attended Belgirate-I. My sense of pursuing these tasks more successfully the second time probably was a function of both the experience of Belgirate-I (knowing what to expect as well as literally knowing many of the other participants returning undoubtedly allowed me to feel less shy and tentative and to feel greater self-authorization⁴) as well as of understanding more fully how these seemingly general tasks had specific value for me.

There was another aspect, however, to the impact of the roles and tasks I brought with me to Belgirate-II. Because of my role as the next AKRI national conference director, I was very clear that more than anything what I wanted to do was to explore directing with other experienced conference directors. Being clear about this eliminated any indecision about which group to join during the Exploratory Event: especially since I didn't qualify for the group for women directors, the group focusing on directors and their dilemmas seemed tailored to my interests and needs. Indeed, I found it an excellent "fit". For example, Manny Sher, one of the members of this group, referred to a chapter he'd written about his first time directing the "Leicester" conference for the Tavistock some 6 ½ years earlier. (Sher, 2003) It turned out that I had brought a copy of the book containing his chapter and read it during the conference.

The sense of being at Belgirate-II with this clear purpose carried over to discussions at meals and on many of the breaks. Inevitably there were conference members with director experience who were not in my Exploratory Event group. I also began to realize that some of the Belgirate members were expressing an interest in me at least in part because of my upcoming role as director of AKRI's conference. This was true not only for new US acquaintances, but also for some of the Belgirate II members from other countries as well. The effect of all of this was to create a richer variety of roles and tasks for me. Put another way, I was more aware of subtle boundaries within and between the tasks I set for myself and the roles I took up within the conference.

Another example of how this affected my experience occurred in one of the parallel presentations. Two US colleagues, Mary McRae and Zachary Green, described their work over eight years putting on conferences dealing with race and identity.

Somehow I had never heard about what they had been doing with both the design and names of conference events. I came away from their presentation thinking, “Wow! I’d love to be part of what they are doing, but it sounds so different that I wouldn’t feel I would want to work on the staff until I had been as a member.”⁵ What I also found fascinating was how their conference design innovations connected to solving problems that emerged as they grappled with the challenge of building on several years’ experience with their conference themes. (This influenced my decision to stick with one broad theme—organizational transition—for all three of my AKRI conferences.)

Towards the end of the second Belgirate conference, during the Exploratory Event plenary, when all participants were gathered together in their respective groups to discuss the event and what had been learned, there were some comments that were striking to me, particularly in terms of “learning from experience.” The gist of the comments was that it was surprising and perhaps disconcerting that a number of the participants had experienced and enacted dynamic processes like those seen in group relations conferences, as if this was something that Belgirate conference members with their years of group relations experience should somehow be beyond. The implication seemed to be that in this instance “learning from experience” meant that the learning would somehow inoculate or immunize the learners against being subject to the processes which we teach about in regular group relations conferences.

This was not the first time I had encountered this implicit belief in relation to what is learned from experience at our conferences. And it is not altogether incorrect: we *do* learn from our experience in ways that allow us not to repeat some things (this is probably the most common understanding of what it means to learn from experience in

any context). But to believe, implicitly, that conference learning will keep us or any group from being subject to the forces that operate in groups, especially those processes outside conscious awareness, seems to me to be naïve. But more importantly, it reflects a misunderstanding of what group relations does offer by way of learning from experience (a “mislearning from experience”).⁶

To think that the dynamics we teach about in group relations conferences somehow won't happen to experienced and senior group relations consultants and directors is folly as demonstrated by the “experiential” portions of both Belgirate meetings. This belief may be folly, but its origins aren't hard to understand. Who wouldn't like to believe that we can get beyond basic assumptions and the projecting of our group anxieties outward? However when this all-too-understandable wish is treated like an expectation, it can do real mischief. In group relations conferences this may show up as the sense that *this* is what separates members from staff rather than task and role—and experience.⁷ However as the events at Belgirate-II illustrate, learning from experience is a never-ending task.

References

Brunner, LD, Nutkevitch, A, and Sher, M (eds) *Group Relations Conferences: Reviewing and Exploring Theory, Design, Role Taking and Application*, Karnac Books, London, 2006.

Sher, M., "From groups to group relations: Bion's contribution to the Tavistock 'Leicester' conferences," in Lipgar, RM and Pines, M (eds) *Building on Bion: Branches*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2003, pp. 109-144.

Endnotes

- 1 The exception to this generalization occurs when, again using the bicycle analogy, one must perform under changed or perilous circumstances such as riding in very narrow confines or on the shoulder of a road adjacent to fast-moving vehicle traffic.
- 2 The names of the resulting groups (Women Directors, Dilemmas Facing Directors, Chaos and Application, Absence, Cut Off and Inexperience) seem to me in retrospect to reflect both an attempt to engage the task creatively and an important tension in group relations between content and process.
- 3 I was not alone in this level of representation. Besides Bob Baxter and Anne Marie Kirkpatrick who *were* officially representing AKRI, President-elect Leigh Estabrook and fellow Board member Mary McRae also attended. Mary attended Belgirate-I, but neither Bob, Anne Marie nor Leigh had.
- 4 This may be two ways of saying the same thing.
- 5 In fact I *did* go to their next conference as a member (for the first time in 29 years!). I had been thinking for some time that I should renew my member experience, and doing so before I directed my first AKRI national conference seemed especially apt.
- 6 Or, as an audience member suggested when a version of this chapter was presented at the AKRI Symposium in Chicago in May 2008, this may illustrate “the defensive use of experience.”
- 7 This may occur despite considerable time and energy devoted by a conference staff to identifying parallel processes between member and staff groups.