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through action learning
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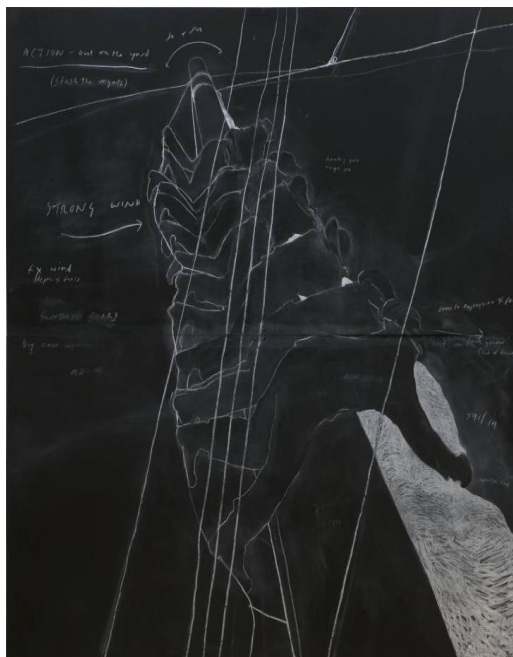
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Comrades in Adversity: Weathering the Storm of NHS Reform through action learning.

Kathryn Waddington & Sally Hardy: Comrades and co facilitators working together at City University London with NHS colleagues during an intense period of organisational and political upheaval.

The Roaring Forties: Seven Boards in Seven Days

© Tacita Dean



ABSTRACT

This paper is based on our experience of presenting at the CARN/IPDC conference. It considers shared learning arising from an action-learning group with NHS managers navigating their way through turbulent NHS transition processes and politically driven health care reform. We surface how the challenges and processes of collaboration emerged and changed during January to July 2012, at a time of unprecedented organisational redesign, driven by high winds of political reform and global fiscal austerity. Collaborative learning was deliberately engineered to provide a vessel within which ‘comrades’ could meet together to strategise and consider the implications of daily turmoil within and across a complex working context. The action learning, as a critical learning space aimed to also enable participants to ‘keep an eye on the horizon’. In other words refocusing on opportunities that challenge and change provides, explored through participant’s thinking and doing in their role as leaders who have potential to influence workplace culture, particularly during a time

of 'raging seas'. We aim to encapsulate some of the collaborative learning through use of a visual stimulus and navigation metaphor. We have used a British artist, Tacita Dean's work: *The Roaring Forties: Seven Boards in Seven Days*, which constructs a narrative of sailors pulling together, battling storms in an area of infamous strong winds and turbulent waters. The imagery evokes contextual details that specify atmospheric conditions and the co-construction of a narrative that can be used to promote creative reflective practice (Waddington, 2012). We draw also from psychoanalytic thinking and the neuroscience of emotion as conceptual frameworks and orientation tools, to yield deeper levels of analysis around processes for collaborating with and recognising the external and internal influences during times of adversity. Bion's (1961) battlefield metaphor is used to illustrate how human defence mechanisms, as natural psychological and physiological reactions, are a characteristic of symbolic conflict, and as violence. Human emotions provide a critical resource to further explore unconscious influences involved in collaborative learning and peer support processes utilized within the action learning group. Our experience suggests that combining perspectives from neuroscience and psychoanalytic thinking yields new synergies for sustainable and creative collaborative practice in stormy organisational environments. We present the paper as a co-joined critical reflection of the conference presentation and our personal learning as co-facilitators of a turbulent action learning group experience. You as the reader, we hope, will be provoked to continue the process of exploration and discovery that this paper attempts to share, and will spend time considering your own strategies for survival and sustainability within immense periods of change and transformation.

Kathryn's reflections: insights as a co-facilitator of experiential group learning

Part of my role as co-facilitator was to bring theoretical insights and frameworks from the domain of work and organisational psychology, and the use of metaphor is an important aspect of my own reflexive practice. In our conference abstract and presentation we drew from and described our experience of working within the NHS during a time of considerable change as being in the midst of a storm. Through using imagery, we gave out chalkboards to workshop participants to use during our presentation, this mirrored our own inspiration taken from the Tacita Dean image of the Roaring Forties – an area of ocean known for strong winds. The aim here was to enable conference participants to engage with both sides of their brains, both the imagination driven right side with the more logical left side (Hermann, 1988). We had experienced working with the action learning groups, as a mutually satisfying and yet emotively disturbing time. Being able to spend time in one to one peer supervision before, during and after this work was invaluable in maintaining a clear vision

for the work, and understanding the demands that were being openly and critically discussed in the group. I saw, and felt, real parallel process of chaos experienced inside and outside of the group. Effective facilitation of that chaos under adversity became an explicit goal for us as comrades working in our own organisation, with similar experiences occurring for us as the group facilitators outside of the group itself.

Exploring different theoretical perspectives really helped contain and manage the extent of raw personal experience being expressed in the group. It helped being able to introduce a deeper level of understanding. Through grounding our work in theory, as facilitators, we both were able to aid learning, centre discussion and provide parameters for the experiential element of the learning set. Two perspectives really stood out for me. Firstly, the group embodied aspects of organisational experience that were simultaneously volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA). The term 'VUCA', originally coined by the US Army War College, reflects current organisational environments of accelerated uncertainty and change, which is 'not going to blow over and settle down' (Hornby et al., 2010, p. 33). Working in stormy environments of perceived/real threat has physiological consequences. Levels of oxygen and glucose in the brain diminish, inhibiting people from perceiving subtle signals required for solving non-linear problems, and preventing insight or 'aha!' moments (Rock, 2008). Secondly therefore, David Rock's S.C.A.R.F (status, certainty, ambiguity, relatedness, fairness) model, which summarises social and organisational triggers that can generate both approach and avoid emotional responses was also helpful. In times of turbulence, the goal is to help minimize threat responses and maximize positive engaged states of mind to promote collaboration. Working within these frameworks helps with individual skill development, which in turn sustains people for future careers in these complex workplace settings. Action learning is a specific and sacrosanct time and space to offer people the chance to critically reflect within the chaos of workplace. In this reflection I want to outline my own learning, peppered with observations of what occurred in the group, and mirroring this with external influences.

The experience fascinated me, particularly in how we as co-facilitators, in a very positive collaborative and creative way, often came to the same point, despite starting at different points. How did that occur? We hadn't worked that much together previously, but were able to quickly come together and conjoin our thinking and facilitation styles. I know from previous experience of critical reflective practice with interprofessional groups that working with two facilitators is essential. Particularly when material being presented can be very difficult, as emotionally and personally challenging, whether in exposing personal insecurities, or sense of inadequacy, so from a

psychological safety approach it was imperative and an unspoken agreement that we were going to use and work in a synchronised way, as co-facilitators. Slotting into working with you felt contained, we had a shared understanding of psychological processes and group dynamics; the same values based approach, which I know is really important to you. Without even having those conversations we worked together in an essence of humanity. I see this as a caring for people, an element of effective organisations outlined by William Khan, in his book '*Holding fast: the struggle to create resilient caregiving organizations*' (Kahn, 2005). Kahn outlines an explicit understanding that the 'soft' qualities are required to achieve organisational effectiveness, which means working from shared values, thinking of people as human beings, not as commodities that need to be remodelled; lifted and shifted about like packages in a depot. The other thing I learnt from watching you as a mental health practitioner was how you held boundaries, worked with material brought into the group and reflected on it in order to give it back to the group in a slightly different way to enhance the learning and provide a mechanism for new insights to form and take shape.

Another key learning for me was in how some of our group comrades, when they started with us were literally all over the place. They were chaotic in their thinking and behaviours, distracted and often late. We had a group discussion about how to manage this chaos, and the way you appropriately contained raising anxiety by observing the group's reticence to verbalise and tackle the personal issues head on. You went back to the contracting process, the shared and agreed principles of engaging in a group to improve leadership styles and skills. It was almost magical when at the next group participants came to the next session prepared to present work achieved that week, having previously explored and discussed the issues with us in a safe, contained, confidential space. I was thinking of this as a case example, that was dealt with sensitively, effectively, and how you were able to visually transform the physical appearance, as well as the mental affect, which in one person then had a knock on impact leading to stabilise and energise them all. How you managed behaviour, but also acknowledged the pain and distress being shown, as a facilitator, helped me to become a more effective co facilitator with you. Together, we were able to contain toxic emotion, but also enable the group to reprocess the waste material within the group, so everyone could benefit from the open approach to reprocessing, as a joint experience and as personal learning tool (Frost, 2003).

Another thing I noticed was that individuals I initially thought of as disengaged with the action learning process - for example by sitting slightly outside of the main circle of chairs – became more conscious of how they presented themselves. This was perhaps because of the constructive

feedback they received in a highly supportive, yet personally very challenging environment. The other thing that comes to mind is the way in which participants who initially appeared uncomfortable with action learning – for example by sitting very quiet and still at the start of the group - subsequently organised coffee and sharing on a regular basis with others outside the group, giving and receiving some real wisdom to the group as a whole. It was almost a complete opposite in that when they were present in the group as thoughtful and reflective, yet didn't say much but when they did share and open up, it was deeply insightful and captured the group mood with real precision. I too felt uncomfortable at times – for example when I observed what I perceived as 'showing off' by participants who had access to higher levels of organisational power. You again were insightful in how you contained this so well. I have also reflected upon my own 'showing off' as a co-facilitator and academic with access to the knowledge and power of work and organisational psychology.

What was important was your allowing the implicit and felt irritations to be verbalised/surfaced in order to be worked with as a group process. These needed to be considered in order to understand the contribution and significance of behaviours through to how there were consequences on others. The group really began to merge their skills and knowledge which showed itself in a quiet resilience, and characteristics of a determined and capable decision making group of people that could now harness this and use it to help them survive the storm. The group had a positive impact on everyone, in different ways. I saw and witnessed really healthy challenge. We had one participant challenge us in the use of the word 'comrades' in the title of the paper, suggesting a change to 'colleagues in adversity'. We didn't do that, however, as it meant moving away from the original use by Reg Revans (1972, p.36), the founder of action learning, who said: *'those best able to help in developing the self are those comrades in adversity who also struggle to understand themselves.'*

My overall learning centres on mindfulness and sensitivity to the use of language, imagery and metaphor. I was disturbed by the 'lift and shift' mentality to organisational reform that some participants shared with us. For me, this encapsulates two crucial - and paradoxical - issues. First is the real depersonalisation of the language of reform processes (move X to Y) and the defence mechanisms that they represent (Menziess-Lyth, 1959). Second is the metaphorical need to 'lift and shift' the powerful and potentially harmful and toxic emotions associated with reform and change. Post conference, the presenter who spoke of her PhD journey as sailing and linked this to participatory action research (PAR), has real linkage for us around shared imagery, and understanding the emotional and transformational potential of working with action research as a

group process and PAR as a deliberate research approach. This takes me back to our use of Tactita Dean's image of a line of sailors battling against high wind. I first used this in my book (Waddington, 2012) where I was exploring listening to the whisperings and gossip in organisations as a means to working amidst adverse conditions. Gossip enables us to work out whom we can pull together with, like the sailors, some with their heads down against the wind, one at the foreground 'looking yonder' to the horizon, out of sight. The severe weather fronts were evident where people are working and trying to survive. As Kahn so aptly says: *'when leaders hold fast to that task [of caregiving] in the way that sailors hold fast to the topmast in the midst of roiling seas, they create the possibilities for conversations, interpretations, conflicts and mutual engagements'* (2005, p. 231).

Sally's reflections: hailing in the sail

Taking the toxic emotion further, it simplicity that becomes important here because otherwise the weight of the cargo will sink the ship. People need to have the chance to 'dump' their toxicity they experience in the workplace, or have access to the tools to recycle it into something more useful and healthy. I think people can only achieve that through an increased level and attention paid to self-awareness, achieved through a facilitated process of consciousness raising, whether that's supervision, coaching, mentoring or action learning. For me it is the simplicity of enabling people to come together in the workplace, in a safe critical space, that enables the process of self awareness to surface. Seeing the action-learning group literally pull together, as they began to appreciate each other's contribution and strengths as co-conspirators in navigating the storm, as captured in the image, was the main outcome for me of the work we achieved. I am left with a feeling that the group became active co-conspirators, who continue seeking each other out, not just 'sitting it out', but deliberately seeking the time to discuss, explore and share stories of workplace chaos. This is something we left behind, which before the group started was not something the individuals in the action learning ever thought possible. One of our members said, *'I would keep my eyes down, looking at the computer, literally keeping my head down, out of harms way. Now I stop, deliberately stop what I am doing and take the time to look up, check out what is happening around. Particularly if I need to actively engage with people who can help me, or sometimes it works the other way round, they ask whether I can help them'*.

Even at the first meeting of the group, I found it hard work having to explain and role model the process of high support and high challenge. I recognised though that this was important initial work to co-create a contract of learning and expressed ways of working together. It was in stark contrast to what was being seen and experienced in the workplace where no negotiation takes place, just

dictates and demands. I knew I had to make it crystal clear what the foundations were needed to enable the group to work as a safe place for experiential learning to occur. I was aiming to clarify what I was doing and explain why. This requires high level of disclosure such as Huffington, Armstrong et al's (2004) *Working below the surface, exposing the emotional life of contemporary organisations*; working with the emotional undertones of working life, which may not, at first glance, be noticeably present but can in itself drag people down, into the rip curl. In the context of toxic emotions, it's often about learning from the toxic trenches (Gallos, 2008). One of the phrases used at the moment is that you can't necessarily get rid of toxicity but have to learn to surf the waves. Yet we do need to dive deeper, in order to really embed and understand healthy change. The Public Inquiry into severe failings occurring in health care institutions (Francis, 2013) used the word organisational culture most frequently as a major cause of Mid Staffs failings, yet I think we need to understand what's happening on the ground, the workplace culture, and only then when these two elements meet, will real sustainable change be allowed to occur (Manley et al, 2011).

In between sessions I felt enormous empathy for the hurt and paralysis that high anxiety in the workplace brings. I was going through parallel process of being under constant fear of being scrutinised about my performance in order to keep my job during major organisational redesign. Will I have a job at the end of this year? was a common battle cry for the group. As a co-facilitator, I was working hard at remaining objective, to be able to identify, enable the analytical and cognitive processing required to critically reflect issues raised by the group. Experiencing and having gone through a parallel process made it feel raw, but enabled a strong bond, as a collegial element that was felt keenly. You said to me once or twice, you could see glistening in my eyes as the hot tears came and went in waves of grief, anger and sympathy. Keeping a safety net of working with a co-facilitator was important, allowing space to take turns in stepping back, knowing the other facilitator would step in, with a theoretical perspective, or observation on the process, when the emotional content became overpowering, in the eye of the (all too) imaginable storm. I introduced the group to Bion's (1961) work, looking to understand the group as a microcosm of how we react and respond to everyday life experience, and how this is an intensive and essentially traumatic experience. His understanding of thought generation, arising from experiences, as the embodiment of knowledge creation, the group started to learn to consider and embrace the 'here and now', as emergent evidence and information that we could use and work with as a group. This helped us gain strength in our collective ability of working, pulling the sail in against the mast, against external high winds.

The attempt to get across all of this subterranean work achieved at the conference was perhaps inevitably disappointing, having achieved so much with the action-learning group that resonated

with us all. The conference session was far too short a space of time for what we wanted to capture, and include, particularly inviting people to engage with the imagery, accessing the emotional burden of the workplace. We could have just focussed on one element and I should have paid more attention to the pedagogy. Perhaps being part of the conference organising committee, I wanted the experience to be memorable. Perhaps my personal desire to impress led to an over sophisticated approach to what we could achieve within the confines of the one session. A resounding thought afterwards was that conversations following the presentation took us within an analytical commentary. At the end of all this, I have the over-riding theme of working to try and understand more about the notion of toxic emotion in building resilience in organisations. Why is it that health care organisations are so toxic, and why are institutions that teach health cared professionals so toxic? Menzies-Lyth (1959) would say it's all part of the anxiety defence mechanisms, against disease, as a process of dis-ease. So if working with disease is leading to dis-ease building up in toxic organisations, how then do we continue to work with rebuilding and sustaining a resilient workforce?

At end of the film of the book, 'the perfect storm', George Clooney, who plays the captain, looks out to sea and the dawn is breaking on the horizon. He says, 'guys we are going home'. Then an enormous wave comes from behind, pulling the boat down. For me this whole experience is a reminder of the need to work in collaboration to survive and surface organisational reform, and using principles of action learning to enhance and sustain each other throughout the destabilisation process of transformation, despite at times feeling as though we are being pulled under the water.

Conclusion

The process of engaging with fellow comrades in adversity, as outlined here, raises many deep-rooted emotional responses. Being able to acknowledge these responses as part of the process of surfacing thoughts, as a fundamental and powerful mechanism for improved understanding, alongside associated altered behaviours, has been explored and presented as personal reflections on the highs and lows of engaging in experiential learning. The metaphor of navigating a storm has enabled us to hold together what might be a disparate collection of reflections. It is perhaps far harder to work with this level of emotional distress, than trying to work with and understand the actual process and outcomes of the transformation itself. Through utilising psychoanalytical theory, alongside surfacing neuroscience contribution to knowledge of human behaviour, we have presented our personal experiences of co-facilitating an action learning set, presenting this at a conference, and then reflecting back on the whole experience in terms of supporting and sustaining

a healthy workforce. We hope that you are adequately stimulated to spend time considering your own situation and how best to promote resilience in unstable workplace environments.

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