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## Learning and groups

Extracted from [Group and team coaching](#) by Christine Thornton, Routledge 2010, available from Amazon and all good booksellers.

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Groups are everywhere. We live in small groups, from family to friends to work group, with untold impact on the quality of our lives.

Groups are powerful. They have great positive potential, and yet 'bad' group experiences are (rightly) feared. To work effectively with groups, we must harness their power to achieve change, while minimizing destructive elements. At their best, groups offer a profound encounter with others which promotes collaboration, creative challenge, and adaptation.

Groups are fundamental. Being in and learning to cooperate effectively within groups is the root of all our achievements as a species. Even a genius builds on the discoveries of those who have gone before – in the words of Newton, on the shoulders of giants. As a species our collective genius is to adapt, and we do so by learning from one another. For humans, 'the relationship precedes the individual'<sup>1</sup>. The individual develops a sense of self through interaction with others, and all our learning, from the earliest moments of life, occurs in a relational context.

### The antiquity of groups

The processes through which groups promote individual learning and change are widely relied upon, but little comprehended. For many people, why and how groups help people to learn is something of a mystery.

'The relationship precedes the individual'<sup>2</sup>, and we can speculate that the power of group learning has its origin in *our* origin as creatures who survived by cooperating in a group. Many theoreticians provide evidence for the unavoidably social context of learning<sup>3</sup>. Groups were our original element, and being in a well-functioning group can give a profound feeling of security and well-being. Conversely, we greatly fear bad group experiences. Most of our responses in groups are automatic, below the conscious level most of the time. This is because we are well-adapted to understand non-conscious, non-verbal communication in groups.

Recent neuro-scientific discoveries suggest that our brains are constructed to respond to others, and join up with the work of Daniel Goleman, who has recently extended his concept of 'emotional intelligence' to 'social intelligence'<sup>4</sup>. Goleman argues that this ability to influence others' mood and experience is essential to outstanding leaders.

## **'Implicit knowing'**

Daniel Stern, whose work blends developmental psychology with psychoanalytic insights, speaks of 'implicit knowing' -- our 'non-symbolic, nonverbal, procedural awarenesses':

'we feel it in our body and sense it in our mind, together. You can also grasp what a group is experiencing. Our nervous systems are constructed to be captured by the nervous systems of others. . . we resonate with and participate in their experiences, and they in ours' .<sup>5</sup>

Groups are particularly good at bringing these un-noticed aspects of knowledge into the conscious realm, because the multiple perspectives of the individual members 'amplify' the communication and act as a reality check on each other.

## **Learning in groups**

For this reason, in the interpersonal arena, groups score heavily over every other kind of personal or professional development, because they offer people a far wider range of perceptions and responses for feedback. As an arena for interpersonal learning and developing interpersonal skills, properly run groups cannot be equalled.

The opportunities for learning in groups are multiplied by the number of different individuals<sup>6</sup>, since everyone brings different strengths and experience. Some of the factors which enhance learning in a group context are:

- The availability of role models
  - The amplification of learning responses in a group setting
  - The power of peer pressure
  - The pressure to engage with and understand realities, including unpalatable ones
  - The opportunity to identify with something larger than ourselves and feel part of a greater endeavour
  - The ability of people to challenge and support each other in a direct and natural way
  - The development of flexibility through direct and repeated contact with others' different views and approaches
  - Learning to live more comfortably with uncertainty and chaos, since group experience is never predictable.
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<sup>1</sup> Leal, M R M, 1982, Resistances and the group analytic process, *Group Analysis* 15 (2)

<sup>2</sup> Leal, M R M, 1982, Resistances and the group analytic process, *Group Analysis* 15 (2)

<sup>3</sup> Whitehead, C, 2001, Social mirrors and shared experiential worlds, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* Vol 8, 4, pp12-32: He comments 'theory of mind' and child development research strongly support the earlier views of Dilthey (1883-1911), Baldwin (1984, Cooley (1902), and Mead (1934) that reflective consciousness depends on a shared experiential world.' (p30-31)

<sup>4</sup> Goleman D, 2006, *Social Intelligence: the new science of human relationships*, US Random House

<sup>5</sup> Stern, D N., 2004, *The present moment in psychotherapy and everyday life*, p76

Stern's distinction between non-conscious (implicitly known but non-articulated) knowledge and unconscious (repressed) knowledge is also useful.

<sup>6</sup> up to a group-functional maximum number of people