Lifting Up Diversity and Inclusion in the Design of a Human Interaction Lab: Walking the Talk in the NTL Laboratory Learning Environment

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Background

While the last few decades have found many organization development practitioners working increasingly in corporate and/or government settings to improve overall productivity, the history of organization development is replete with stories of its technologies being used to improve broader social systems. (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005; Cummings & Worley, 2001; Kleiner, 1996.) The authors of this article now seek to shine new light on the potential of one such technology – laboratory training – in the pursuit of diversity and inclusion goals, and as a means for supporting aspirational initiatives for change, at both the organization and societal levels of system.

Using our experience as members of a four-person training team during an NTL Human Interaction (HI) Lab in March 2011, we share here an HI Lab design in which theories of difference and inclusion were woven throughout the community "skill" sessions of the Lab. Our proposition was that by intentionally surfacing issues of difference earlier than usual in the Lab, and making them more visible in the Community Sessions, these issues might become more approachable in T-Group life. Acknowledging that we are not the first to experiment with this type of format, the training team for the March 2011 HI Lab set out to design each of the five, two-hour Community Sessions using a diversity and inclusion framework. The training design highlighted in this article differs from the more frequently used approach in that it does not designate one community session as the diversity skills session. Instead, we share a design that blends aspects of difference and inclusion throughout the five-day HI Lab, in the hope that we might prime the learning pump for a different level of group life and social dynamics during the T-Group Sessions. For those not familiar with the NTL HI Lab experience, it is organized into 'Community Sessions' in which all participants are involved, and parallel T-Group sessions that participants attend in sub-groups, depending on the size of the overall Lab. The size of a singular T-Group can range between 7 and 12 participants.

Laboratory Training – NTL Style

It is widely acknowledged that Kurt Lewin is the father of T-Group technology, having helped surface what he referred to as a new "principle" of mutual inquiry during a two-week workshop that he, Ken Benne, Leland Bradford and Ron Lippitt were conducting in Connecticut in 1946. (Kleiner,1996, p.35.) What is less well known is the purpose of that seminal workshop. Lewin and his colleagues had been called in by the director of the Connecticut State Interracial Commission to provide training directly related to helping the community of Bridgeport learn how to deal more effectively with conflict between Blacks and Jews. (Burke, 2002. Kleiner,1996.)

The focus of the Connecticut Workshop was on social dynamics and its impact has been far-reaching. In 1950, the National Training Laboratories for Group Dynamics was created as the organizational home of the T-Group technology. Throughout the fifties and sixties, participants flocked to Bethel, Maine from all over the US to participate in laboratory sessions designed to change attitudes and behaviors. Appley and Winder (1973), attribute the fundamental purpose of today's T-Group to the Connecticut Workshop, crediting it with being "quite clearly a reeducation and social action project" (p.19)

Over the years, the NTL HI Lab has been reduced in duration from what was once a three-week research and personal learning experience in Bethel, to the current 5-day format that is offered in sites all over the world. It continues to be NTL's premiere training product.

In their review of the birth of T-Group technology and its evolution, Appley and Winder allude to another way in which laboratory training has been diminished, stating "… this training method has been taken over by hundreds of 'trainers' of varying degrees of competence, and hundreds of thousands of people have been participants; but the theory and the research which should have been an integral part of the workshop method have been ignored; and even *action* has been redefined by whatever is done rather than what might have been planned intentionally" (19).

The current model of the NTL HI Lab takes into account this feature of 'planned intentionality' referenced by Appley and Winder. It features between 25 – 27 hours of T-Group training and approximately ten hours of community sessions. The community sessions consist of brief lecturettes and theory input by the trainers, often accompanied by some type of experiential activity meant to deepen the learning.

In writing about the significance of the community sessions to the overall development of T-Group training, Yalom (1995) asserts: "The use of such cognitive aids, lectures, reading assignments, and theory sessions demonstrates that the basic allegiance of the T-group was to the classroom rather than the consulting room. The participants were considered students; the task of the T-group was to **facilitate** learning for its members."

Yalom's comments are useful in helping to elucidate the role of the community sessions in passing on skills that can later be used by members of the T-Group in the facilitation of their own learning. It also underscores the importance of the intentionality of the trainers in designing the community sessions.

Intentionally Designing for Diversity and Inclusion

In 2009 NTL published a revised version of its HI Lab Manual for training staff. The introduction to the manual states that its purpose is two-fold: to "provide guidelines and resources to Human Interaction Laboratory (HI Lab) staffs as they design and facilitate their programs; and, by

doing so …ensure participants in the NTL Institute HI Labs have the highest quality experience possible". (HI Lab Trainers Manual, Revised, January 2009.) Standardizing the NTL HI Lab offering was the task of a nine-member redesign committee, each of whom was an experienced trainer of T-Groups and well grounded in theories, concepts and models of group behavior.

In reviewing the section of the Manual devoted to sample designs for core community sessions, it is noted that the first among seven specific learning goals is "to develop community and an awareness of diversity among participants". The community sessions are timed to run for two hours and although the Manual suggests specific content for each day's community learning session, it also permits the blending of content should the training team choose this approach. Cognitive Framing; Self-awareness; Inter-personal Communication and Feedback; Group Development and Process; and Diversity and Inclusion are all learning components of the modern HI Lab. It is the norm to devote each of the five community sessions to one of these "key learning" components, with the intent that each should build on the other in a way that informs and strengthens T-Group life.

The authors were part of a four-person training team (Russ Forrester and Sheridan Gates were also part of the team) convened in March 2011 to design and deliver an HI Lab in Leesburg, Virginia, from March 20 – 25. The team consisted of four US nationals, all over 40 years in age. Three of the trainers were heterosexual, one identified as bi-sexual; one was Black, three were White; two were female, two male; one identified as legally blind; and one identified as having no religious leanings whatsoever. All spoke English as their first language and all identified as being middle-class. During the staff development day, the team agreed to try to weave diversity and inclusion content more tightly into the fabric of the entire HI Lab experience – with a particular focus on designing community sessions that presented the content suggested by the Manual, but using a diversity and inclusion lens.

Diversity and inclusion Integrated into the HI Lab: Our Design

Day 1
Opening Community Session: The opening started with a brief welcome from the Lab Dean, and moved immediately into a sociogram[i] activity in which members sorted themselves by social identity group, either into subgroups (allowing for neither or none of the above) or along a continuum. For example, participants grouped as they identified by gender (male, female, neither), and formed a line by age from oldest to youngest. The dimensions of difference used in this lab were staff/participant, age, gender, race, ability, and birth order. These dimensions were selected for use based on the group identities of the individuals in this particular community, known in advance from participants' application information. With each new depiction of the sociogram, a discussion topic was suggested for the group members in the various aforementioned dimensions.

The opening session also included a presentation of the experiential learning cycle and incorporated a demonstration of the Experience, Identify, Analyze and Generalize (EIAG) reflection process, using an aspect of difference in the group as the area of focus. As with all HI Labs, the practice of journaling, the overall workshop goals and the framing of the T-Groups were also part of the content of the opening session.

T-Group Session 1: With 15 Lab participants, two T-Groups were formed – one with seven and one with eight members, plus two trainers for each T-Group. Both T-Group training teams reported a shorter-than-usual period of shoe-staring silence. The training teams also reported some initial conversation about group members' identities, similarities and differences.

Day 2
Community Session: Following the Manual norm, the topic for this day was Cognitive Framing. Concepts about mental models and the process of making meaning from what we take in through our own filters provided the content for the session. Using the JoHari Window model, participants were asked to identify a number of filters they might use to define individual social identity groups. They then had the opportunity to explore their own primary filters and how the filters might be affecting their relationships. They were also asked to consider their own levels of awareness and openness relative to difference and inclusion.

T-Group Sessions 2, 3 and 4: The notion of filters was prominent in these and subsequent sessions. Issues of race and gender may have been closer to the surface, but for the most part were not explicitly engaged.

Day 3
Community Session: The topics for this day were the effective use of giving and receiving feedback, and emotional intelligence. In the feedback segment, participants self-organized under a social identity group banner (race, gender, age, national origin, religion, class) and discussed several questions about giving and receiving feedback, such as what makes it easy or difficult to give or receive feedback. (One learning point from this experiment was that it may be better to frame the discussion question more directly about feedback *as it relates to social group identity*, rather than around giving and receiving feedback in general.)

T-Group Sessions 5 and 6: These sessions reflected continued awareness of group identities, and sharpened skills in giving and receiving feedback.

Day 4
Community Session: The goal for this session was to ease more explicitly into a discussion on diversity and inclusion theory. In support of this goal, the trainers created a three-part oscillating design that included:
(1) A team-building activity called "A Big Wind Blows" (www.mtcompact.org), in which participants identify a series of characteristics, experiences, circumstances, etc. that are true for them and maybe true for some others. Participants engage in a type of "musical chairs" game that generates a high level of energy and enthusiasm. This activity was meant to lighten the mood of the community before moving into a lecturette on theories of dominant and subordinated group memberships and behaviors, and power dynamics in group interaction.
(2) A theory presentation on Social Identity Groups (SIG) (Halverson & Cuellar, 1999) was designed to draw out differences between the experiences of those with dominant and subordinated group memberships. A key feature of the effectiveness of the SIG presentation was the presenter's 'use of self' in personalizing aspects of the theory by referring to his own experience as an 'up' or a 'down' in several SIGs.
(3) A reading of Robert Terry's "Parable of the Ups and Downs" completed the session. Here again, the intent was to up-shift the energy of the group.

The trainers spent a considerable amount of planning time discussing the impact of an opening 'light' activity, to move into a heavier content piece. The decision to end with the reading of the Parable was thought to be a helpful way to reframe the learning and make it more accessible to connections "back home."

At the end of the Day 4 Community Session, the T-groups were reformed through a process of participant self-organization – bounded by instructions that the new groups should be comprised a maximum mixture of the diversity present in the group. This process took about five minutes, and the new T-Groups were assigned to a remixed team of trainers. [The discussion about whether or not to reform the groups had been an ongoing one among members of the training team throughout the first few days of the Lab. They agreed that the T-Groups would be reformed only if each training team member was comfortable doing so, and believed that to do so might enhance the group learning, overall. Lab Participants had been informed in the opening session that their T-Groups might be reformed on Day 4.]

T-Group Sessions 7, 8 and 9: Issues of diversity and inclusion figured prominently in the discussions of both T-groups. Each training team reported an increased willingness to embrace conflict as part of the work being done in the group.

Day 5
Community Session: The topic for this day was Group Process Dynamics. The session began with a brief presentation of the primary task and maintenance functions a group needs to manage, *in addition* to the notions of "access and equality" as theorized in the Power Equity Group (PEG) approach to group dynamics.

Both T-groups were then given a different 10-minute task. While the first T-Group was attending to its task, the participants of the other T-Group were placed in fishbowl

fashion around the working T-group. The individual members of the outside group were each assigned one task function and one maintenance function to observe. One member was also assigned to observe how the team acted on the intention to embody the PEG values of access and equality.

The first T-Group was tasked with inventing a game using an object supplied by the trainer, and then playing with the game. The task was completed, and each of the observers reported. The positions of the T-groups were then reversed, and the process was repeated. The task of the second T-Group was to make up a creative story and tell it in a creative way, using a different trainer-supplied prop that had to be the part of the story.

T-Group Sessions 10, 11 and 12: Diversity issues continued to be a subject of interaction in the groups. In one of the three T-Group sessions of the day, each group spent most of the time in a fishbowl exercise, in which the members of one side (dominant or subordinated) of a social identity group discussed in the inside circle their experience as part of that subgroup, the outside group subsequently reported their observations and reactions, and then all members had an open discussion of the experience. The process varied between groups as to whether or not members of the subordinated subgroup had an inner-circle conversation, and what specific topic of conversation was given, if any. The training team had discussed this possible intervention during one of its staff meetings, as a way to test the willingness of each group to look more closely at the social dynamics in their respective T-Groups.

Day 6
T-Group Session 13: The looking back and looking forward that was part of this session reflected participants' heightened awareness of diversity and inclusion dynamics.

Closing Community Session: We followed the conventional pattern for an HI closeout, with the following customizations. We included a brief piece on how group development stages reverse themselves as groups reach the end of their time together framed by the Inclusion-Control-Openness (ICO) Model (Schutz, 1994), particularly noting the diversity dynamics around inclusion, and the power issues related to ICO. In inviting participants to further opportunities in NTL, we highlighted some of the offerings in the *Diversity, Inclusion and Social Justice sequence of events.*

Our Learning

In reviewing only the portions of the HI Lab participant evaluations meant to measure the learning around diversity and inclusion, the authors found the March 2011 Lab received a slightly higher than average rating in response to the statement designed to measure the Lab's success in "increasing (participant) effectiveness at working in diverse, multicultural environments." Of the 12 HI Labs NTL sponsored in 2011, the March Lab received

a rating of 4.36 out of 5.0 from participants when asked to judge their own increased effectiveness in working in diverse environments. This was the highest rating on this evaluative statement for the twelve HI Labs held in 2011 (NTL Participant Evaluations Data, 2011.)

Similarly, the aggregate response to the statement: "Trainer demonstrated sensitivity to and valuing of diversity" resulted in the March team receiving a higher than average score (tied with the April team with 4.75 out of 5.0) among the other 4-person training teams conducting an HI Lab in 2011.

Since posting our learnings from this Lab on the NTL Learning Circle (the virtual community space to which all NTL members have access and are encouraged to interact), two other HI Lab training teams have shared their designs detailing similar experiments involving the weaving in of diversity and inclusion content into the Community Sessions. In their posts, members of the HI Lab training teams for the October 2011 and the December 2011 Labs affirmed the following relating to "trainer intent" prior to the actual staffing of the lab.

> The October team shared that "During our conference call and planning session, we agreed to integrate diversity into each day of the lab." The posting then reports that the opening session included a differentiation activity in which participants were asked to move themselves to a part of the room that represented where they lived most of their life, their age in decades (30s,40s,50s,60s), their race or ethnicity (People of Color, White, Define Differently), and gender (man/woman/choose not to disclose). (NTL Learning Circle Posting, CoP - Core Labs 2011, Item 19.)

> The December team reported that as early as their initial telephone conference call beginning their team-building process, there was "a decision to be committed to integrating diversity and inclusion into all community sessions and also to involve the full staff in the specific Diversity Community Session. Each trainer agreed to consider how to integrate diversity and inclusion into their planning for the community sessions." (NTL Learning Circle Posting, CoP - Core Labs 2012, Item 12, Response 24.)

A four-person training team supported each of the three HI Labs referenced thus far – March, October and December 2011. In reviewing the data for all NTL HI Labs that ran in 2011, the authors found that a two-person team (May 2011) actually had the highest ratings overall among trainers, and the second-highest rating on the question of effectiveness at working in diverse, multicultural environments. Because these ratings were so high, and there had been no reports rendered on the Learning Circle about any change in the design of the Community Sessions, we decided to interview the Dean of this lab – Robert Wallace – to learn more about the approach taken by him and his co-Trainer (Cathy Royal) to the Community Sessions of the May 2011 Lab.

In sharing his recollections, Wallace affirmed that he and Royal were quite intentional in their decision to infuse each community session with Diversity and Inclusion content. "We didn't want to just introduce diversity content on, say Tuesday, of the Lab. We wanted to draw attention to it each and every day." (R. Wallace (personal communication, March 21, 2012).

Conclusions

As the authors of this article, who seek to report on ways to integrate diversity and inclusion in the NTL HI Labs, we draw a number of conclusions:

Blending diversity and Inclusion content into each community session is do-able: We have, ourselves, achieved this integration, and have since learned from at least three other HI Lab training teams that they have also successfully weaved issues of D & I into their Labs without difficulty. While we are confident that this approach to blending issues of diversity and inclusion into all of the Community Sessions has been experimented with by many others over the years, we assert that models that do so enhance the likelihood of T-Group dynamics including issues of D & I earlier in the life of the T-Group and the total Community.

Evaluation results support this emphasis: While we in no way propose that the very high level review of the HI Lab evaluation results undertaken for this article are declarative in assessing the impact of the "blended approach", we are encouraged by what the results do capture. In addition, it seems that the practice of not delegating diversity and inclusion content to just one day of the lab is more common a practice than we first suspected. Also of interest is the finding that each training team that undertook to design blended community sessions had at least one person of color on the team. This data point was not a question we sought to explore at the outset of this article; however, a review of the preliminary data does appear to call for additional research relating to the composition of HI Lab training teams in achieving strong ratings from participants in areas specifically designed to measure learning related to diversity and inclusion.

Intentionality of staff is key: Based on the data collected from the four training teams referenced in this article, the decision to take a blended approach to the design of the Community Sessions is one that was raised in the early stages of the HI staff team-building process. The suggestion to blend the content seems always to have been followed by a discussion among training team members as to how this might be accomplished, and then an agreement reached on what content would be infused into each community session.

Building community at all levels of system is fundamental: While trainer intentionality with regard to community session content is figural in what we hoped to examine here, it must also be acknowledged that all teams reported having a twin goal of closely monitoring the needs of the group and adjusting the design, if needed, based on that need. Over two thirds of the time spent in an HI Lab is devoted to learning in the T-Group. To this end, the focus on building a strong learning community at all levels of system (staff, community, staff and participants, T-Group, learning pairs) capable of having difficult conversations as part of its development appears to have been tracked throughout the four Labs highlighted here.

In discussing leadership and change, Fletcher (2003) cites the effective management of diversity as a core leadership competency. We share this belief, and although we must acknowledge that ours is a US-centric approach to diversity and inclusion, it is hoped that other trainers of T-Groups – worldwide – will be encouraged by what they read here to add to the literature on the link between trainer intentionality and participant competency in the areas of diversity and inclusion.

BIOGRAPHIES:

Sukari Pinnock is a labor futurist, organization change practitioner and executive/leadership coach. Her clients are those looking to manage the fast pace of change in an environment which all too often under-appreciates the value of pause and personal reflection. Believing that the future is created by the things we do in the present, Pinnock works with her clients to create a preferred future at the level of system most open to change.

Ms. Pinnock holds a M.S. in Organization Development from the American University, as well as a coaching certificate from the Georgetown Center for Professional Development. She is also certified by the International Coach Federation, (ICF) at the ACC level. She has worked overseas on strategic development initiatives, in addition to her extensive work within the US labor movement on numerous transformation change efforts. Additionally, she has coached executives and leaders in a variety of government, non-profit, small business and Fortune 500 organizations. Known for a client-centered approach to her work with individuals and organizations, Pinnock focuses on "possibility development" as opposed to "problem solving." She is a member of NTL Institute for Applied Behavioural Science (NTL), the Organization Development Network (ODN), the World Future Society (WFS), the AFL-CIO Department of Professional Employees (DPE – Board Member), and the Wilson Center for Public Research (Executive Board Member).

Ms Pinnock resides in Northern Virginia with her life partner, Will. She enjoys belly dancing, mystery and science fiction novels and a competitive game of scrabble. She has written three children's stories, and published several articles on the impact of change and information technologies on the labor movement in the US.

Jim Henkelman-Bahn is a principal in Bahn Henkelman Consultants. He practices as an independent consultant in organization development, leadership development and diversity management. Much of his work in recent years has been in developing countries working through United Nations agencies. While his practice includes both the non-profit as well as for-profit organizations and agencies, more focus has been with non-profit organizations including educational and faith-based organizations.

Jim has his doctorate from Harvard University and a Master's Degree in Applied Behavioral Sciences from Whitworth College. During his career on the faculty of the University of Maryland College Park, he initiated and directed an experiential doctoral program in Human Resource Development. He is currently an Emeritus Associate Professor in the College of Education at the University of Maryland. He has also been a member of the faculty of the Cleveland State University Master's Degree, Diversity Management Program, offered in collaboration with the NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Sciences. He is a member of the NTL Institute and the OD Network.

Recently Jim has worked with a new non-profit organization in his community of Silver Spring , Maryland, to develop leadership for diverse grassroots existing and potential leaders. The organization, IMPACT Silver Spring, envisions a community of empowered peoples where all have a full voice in this demographically changing inner suburb of Washington, DC.

NOTES

i Developed by Jacob Moreno, a sociogram is a representation of an individual's social links. Often used in the opening community session of HI Labs, participants are asked to move themselves physically around the room so as to render visible general information about themselves – how far they have traveled to get to the lab, the part of the world in which they were raised, whether or not they were "sent" to the lab, etc.

ii Power Equity Group theory advances the belief that flatter, more egalitarian structures enhance creativity and acknowledge the full range of diversity among members of a group.

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