Training for democratic therapeutic community staff: a description and evaluation of three experiential workshops

Barbara Rawlings

Barbara Rawlings is based at Growing Better Lives, Slough, UK.

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to compare and evaluate three experiential training workshops, each set up as three-day transient therapeutic communities, and established to train therapeutic community staff.
Design/methodology/approach – The author carried out participant observation of all courses and analysed these using thematic analysis. The description is provided in Part 1 of the paper. The evaluation, in Part 2 was based on written feedback from participants and from assessment against relevant audit criteria.
Findings – All three workshops achieved their aims of providing participants with an authentic TC resident's experience. Additionally, each offered personal understandings of how participants felt and why they felt that way in the community setting.
Research limitations/implications – This was largely a piece of qualitative research, carried out in the field, to achieve depth of description and understanding rather than statistical outcomes. Some numerical scores were derived from feedback forms. Further analysis of feedback from future workshops will strengthen findings by increasing the numbers of respondents.
Practical implications – The workshops should continue largely as they are, although there may be some small changes to the designs. They achieve the aim of advancing the understanding of TC staff members.
Originality/value – The paper is based on three earlier unpublished reports and is new published research of interest to trainers in the fields of mental health and experiential learning.
Keywords Qualitative research, Training, Therapeutic communities, TC practice, Groups, Transient therapeutic communities
Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

This paper is based on qualitative observations of three different experiential courses established to train TC staff by giving them an experience of being a client in a democratic therapeutic community: Learning for Action, in Italy, the Living Learning Experience in the UK and the Living Learning Experience in Sicily. It is important to note at the outset that whilst similar ideas could undoubtedly be employed to train staff members of addiction TCs (De Leon, 2000), here the work focuses on the democratic TC model (Kennard, 1998).

The data collection methodology employed was that of ethnographic research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). There is a strong tradition of using ethnographic research for the study of therapeutic communities and their processes (Baron, 1984; Bloor et al., 1988; Genders and Player, 1995; Rawlings, 1998; Stevens, 2013). There is also a separate literature of using qualitative methods in TCs (Morant and Warren, 2004; Rawlings, 2004). The author attended all three courses, carried out all observations as described below, wrote notes in spare moments, reflected on personal feelings, thoughts and behaviour, and went onto expand the notes once the observations were completed. All three courses had some element of written feedback from participants in addition to these observations. A form of thematic analysis

(Braun and Clarke, 2006) was employed to develop the findings from field notes. Using the analytic ideas of Braun and Clarke, the expanded field notes taken for each of the three transient TCs observed here were read and re-read. Through this process, themes and sub-themes were identified and organised, and ultimately reports were written which presented the settings in ways which would be both true to the events experienced and accessible to the reader. This fairly gentle analytic process allows description to emerge from the data. Although any form of analysis and reporting will inevitably alter the matter it describes, this approach aims to alter it as little as possible so that it remains authentic and recognisable. For the descriptive element of the reports, it was the desire for authenticity which underlay the thematic analysis. Additional evaluative sections were introduced through participants' feedback forms and via an audit checklist developed specifically for therapeutic communities (Paget *et al.*, 2015). The unpublished reports (Rawlings, 2015a, b, 2016a) have been used here to compare the three workshops. In this paper, the description is provided first, in Part 1 and the evaluation next in Part 2.

The researcher had previously carried out qualitative research into several TCs, both in prisons and in the community, and had already attended an LLE in Kent as a participant observer. People knew from the start that she was a researcher and she was received with friendliness and interest. On the courses in Milan and Kent, her role brought her closer to the participants than the staff. In Sicily, the language issue, described later, and the fact that here she attended staff meetings, seemed to give her more of a "staff role". On a reflective note, the main difficulty seemed to be balancing the need to become a "full participant" in order to gain an authentic experience, and holding back in order not to steer the action. This is not an unusual problem for a participant observer. For the workshops in both the Milan course, and particularly for the TC training, weekends were initially organised, described and studied by Kennard and Roberts (1978, 1980), and revived in the 1990s (Haigh and Lees, 2014). The literature on process and evaluation is still sparse. Rawlings (2005) described one of the Kent workshops, using methods similar to those used here and that study was used to develop the feedback forms currently in use and so extend the evaluative element of the research. The LfA workshop in Milan and the LLE workshop in Kent have been described and compared by Lombardo (2014), a professional TC clinician who joined one course as a staff member and the other as a participant. The Learning for Action course in Milan 2014 was additionally described in a published paper (Rawlings, 2016b) and the overall idea of setting up a transient TC as a learning experience has been described and assessed by Lees *et al.* (2016).

At first sight, the three programmes look much the same. All run for three days, they have large and small groups, democratic decision making is prized and the participants engage in work groups as well as talk groups. In all three, the participants are professional mental health workers, many of whom work in therapeutic communities, and the staff are experienced and qualified group therapists and analysts. The intention of all three is to provide experiential learning for mental health workers, in which they can better understand the experiences of their clients, explore their own authentic responses to community living and to the behaviour of others, and improve their professional practice.

There are, however, some clear differences between the programmes, and this paper will bring these differences out and compare the three. This next section will begin by briefly giving a flavour of each programme, it will go onto identify the many common features, and then outline the unique features of each one.

2. Ethical note

For all three programmes, information was given out beforehand about the researcher and the research and evaluation project. It was also discussed with all participants in the first large group or community meeting held. It was stressed that the research focussed on the workshop, not on individual participants or staff members, that no names would be used and that any information likely to reveal the identity of an individual would not be used in any written report or paper. There were no objections to the presence of the researcher or to her role as a participant.

3. Brief introduction to the three programmes

3.1 Learning for Action (LfA): Milan

This course was held in October 2014, run at a conference centre in Maccagno, by Lake Maggiore near Milan. It was developed by group psychoanalysts (Hinshelwood *et al.*, 2010), and many of the participants had trained in the Group Relations model and had attended Leicester Conferences (Brunner *et al.*, 2006; Sher, 2003; Young, 2003). The emphasis of these conferences is to place participants into stressful situations and allow their consequent "poisonous projections and group madness" (Young, 2003) to emerge so that these can be detoxified by staff, examined, understood and avoided or defused in real-life situations in the future. The emphasis for the LfA is on understanding action, rather than using words, and participants are encouraged to examine their behaviour and their reactions to behaviour in order to better understand their own clients and their own behaviour with their clients. There were 39 participants on this course from six countries and seven staff members, three of whom were allocated to one of the small groups. The talk in meetings was either in Italian or English, depending on who was speaking, and then translated into the other language by an interpreter.

3.2 Living Learning Experience (LLE): Kent

This was held in November 2014 at a conference centre in a country setting in the UK. The workshop was developed by and for therapeutic community staff. There were 20 participants and four staff members including the administrator who had organised the course but did not stay when it was running. Three of the staff, all group analysts, each ran a small group. All the talk was in English. During the course, three formal teaching sessions were held, covering aspects of therapeutic community theory.

3.3 Living Learning Experience (LLE): Sicily

This was based on the Kent LLE and structurally was very similar except that there were no formal teaching sessions. There were 15 participants and five staff members including the administrator and translator. Three of the clinical staff each ran a small group. In addition, two group analysts from the UK observed proceedings as part of an accreditation check for the Institute of Group Analysis in London. As most of the spontaneous talk was in Italian, and the researcher and observers were all from England, an interpreter – himself an experienced therapist – was needed to make the course accessible to the English speakers.

4. Part 1 – description

4.1 The three workshops – common elements

Despite some differences in background theory, there were some clear similarities between the three courses. To cover these courses, I will first outline a generic programme, which all of them would fit.

The courses ran for three days, beginning with lunch on day 1, and ending after lunch on day 3. In most cases, participants shared bedrooms, although there were some single rooms available. Each programme had a pre-prepared timetable which indicated times of meetings, breaks, meals and leisure time. Participants worked in groups – small discussion or therapy groups and large community meetings, and in each case a group took a turn to prepare and wash up meals for the rest of the community. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their actions (the things they said and did), to reflect on the feelings that arose for them and to explore the experience of being in a resident's role – with the staff on "the other side". Staff were encouraged to enable participants to speak and to take responsibility for themselves and each other, rather than to "take over" and take charge. Much of the process was thus similar to the process to be found in a therapeutic community – a succession of small and large groups, residents and staff working together at domestic tasks and staff standing back to allow the residents to experience their own power.

In general then, all three courses had this same structure so that in many respects they were similar. However, there were differences in how the workshops were designed in detail, and in

how they "felt". I will go on now to explain some of the obvious differences, noting to begin with that the Sicily and Kent LLEs were fairly similar to each other, whilst the Milan LfA, based as it was on another therapeutic tradition, was more obviously different.

4.2   The three workshops – unique descriptions

4.2.1   The LfA. Research note: on this course, although I attended the initial staff meeting, I became a participant for the rest of the course, only attending the final staff meeting once the other participants had left.

Much time was taken up at the beginning with participants choosing which groups were on offer and which to join. Although the staff suggested three tasks – cooking, cleaning and leisure – there were no requirements that there should only be these three tasks, or that people should stay in the same group, or that groups should be of equal sizes or that the tasks would rotate among the groups. All these questions were debated at length in the first large group. Eventually, however, people decided that the groups would be of equal sizes – 13 participants in each – that they would rotate the tasks over the three days, and that they would choose their group on the basis of the task to be carried out first (cooking, cleaning or leisure). At this stage staff had not been allocated to groups. Thus groups were chosen on the basis of task rather than the staff member who led it (as would be the case later in the LLEs).

Although this group of 13 would be the participants' base group over the three days, and were the groups in which decisions about tasks were taken and in which tasks were carried out and reviewed, there were other groups too. There were a number of large plenary groups to reflect on the programme, on feelings and on decision making, and smaller highly structured "review groups" which gave each person a chance to speak uninterrupted for five minutes and the others a chance to respond. Leisure time was timetabled for the period after dinner in the evenings, and each day one group would organise something for the rest of the course. One evening there were games, another evening, dancing. Towards the end of the course there were two structured groups to review the learning and see how it could be applied to the work setting.

This course was seen very much as a means for participants to learn the language of actions. The idea was to get away from words and to explore how another person's actions affected oneself, and how one's own actions affected others. To focus on this, some of the meetings were specifically aimed at reflection on actions and tasks. This specific allocated time did not happen on the LLE courses, where reflection and review of behaviour was seen as part of whatever emerged rather than something to be formally addressed.

Boundaries were noticeably adhered to. All meetings began exactly on time, the staff would sit together at the front of the large group, and stand up and leave at the exact moment that it was scheduled to end, regardless of what was being said or who was speaking. Staff had a separate table at mealtimes, and ate together, while the participants found other tables. There was some mixing with staff during leisure times, but in general, they kept their distance from the participants, individually becoming known only to their small groups, if they ran one. As a researcher in a participant role, I had little to do with the staff once the programme was underway, and found that this was the case for many other participants. As had been planned, most participants turned their attention towards each other. Staff were regarded in some of the meetings, by some participants, as "them", and became the target of some anger. Nevertheless, they stuck to their staff roles. This was to be expected since issues about the taking and giving of authority are fairly central to the Group Relations model, and participants had an opportunity here to reflect on how the real experience of being on the other side felt to them.

Two new themes were introduced for this workshop. Neither had been tried before. One was that six participants who had been on a previous course were returning to this one as "seniors", people who had been through it all and could thus lend their own, more considered, view. In this way, the workshop attempted to copy the TC tradition of having senior members to "carry the culture" and help the staff to ensure some stability and understanding. The other new theme was that for the first time participants would be allocated a budget, and would need to buy the things they needed from the local shop, instead of using what had been laid in by others.

It was predicted that the cooking group would use most of the money, since they would be preparing meals and would need ingredients, but some disputes were anticipated, since the other groups may well decide they needed to go shopping too. Neither of these themes were present in the LLEs.

Although participants were to be provided with money to buy food, many basic ingredients, such as coffee, pasta, oil and herbs were already provided. These provisions included enough wine for mealtimes, and in addition, participants had been asked to bring an example of typical food from their own country to share.

The timetable seemed familiar to many (but not all), as the names of groups and the ways in which they organised the day came from the Group Relations model which had been part of their training. Overall the LfA felt more structured than the LLE's since there was very little real unstructured free time, and the meetings had an internal structure which was followed. This was not always evident though. The large plenary groups in the morning – which I initially saw as similar to TC community meetings – had no formal structure other than some administrative information given out at the start, and were always quickly thrown open for anyone to speak about anything. Each morning, one or two people would outline dreams they had, and offer their own interpretations. One participant who was having trouble following the timetable spoke at length about feelings of fear and shame adding that these were exacerbated by further feelings that others were impatient with her. My sense was that people were expected to find their own way in this workshop, and not to rely on others for support. I put this down to the Group Relations approach, since others more familiar with Group Relations seemed to accept that that was the way things were done[1].

My own role was different for me in this workshop. Being unfamiliar with both the LfA and the Group Relations model[2], I felt at the start that the only way I would know what this course entailed was by living through it. I felt strongly that by day 3, all of these meetings and structures and ideas would make sense to me, but that on day 1, I was launching myself into the unknown. This partly had to do with my lack of prior experience of the workshop, but also with the lengthy staff debates about the new additions – the budget and the seniors – and of course with the fact that whilst much of the talk was in English (two of the staff were also English speakers) some if it was in Italian, or basic English, and I probably would have heard some of it differently if I had understood the original Italian.

4.2.2   The living learning experiences. Since the Sicily LLE is based on the LLE in Kent, and continues to be monitored by people who have long experience of being staff members on the Kent course, it is unsurprising that the two workshops are very similar. Both have a timetable of community meetings and small groups, both have a procedure to select a participant to chair the community meeting[3], both use one session for each small group to prepare a meal for the community, both include a good deal of unstructured social time and neither offers sessions specifically identified for reflection on learning. Both courses aim to work with whatever emerges and reflection on learning may or may not emerge. There are some differences though, of structure, language and culture, which it is important to note, and these are detailed below.

4.2.2.1   The Kent LLE. Research note: for this course I joined in with the original staff meeting, and did not rejoin the staff again once the course began and I became a participant. As a participant, I had more to do with the other participants than the staff. It was agreed in the initial community meeting that I could join a small group. In the group itself I tried hard, aided by the group leader and the other participants, to be fully a participant. This was not easy because as a researcher I did not want to lead or shape things, but to observe how this was done by "real" participants. I found it much easier to take a back seat in large groups and leisure time. This course is run in England, the language of the course is English, and on this occasion all participants worked in organisations in the UK (although as individuals one member of staff and some participants were from overseas).

The major unique feature of the Kent course was that it included three teaching sessions on therapeutic community theory. There was no formal, timetabled teaching on the other courses. The three staff members took it in turn to present a topic. Each of these had been written by

others, and included a PowerPoint presentation. They were delivered in the large group room, at intervals over the three days, and course members clustered round the screen to provide the audience. Topic 1, "Belongingness", looked at how people feel welcomed or rejected in a TC and how their own issues with belonging might affect this. Topic 2, "TC History and Method", generated a discussion of TC and talk therapies vs a medical model of psychiatric illness, and Topic 3, "Social Learning and Responsibility", looked at the ideas which underlie TC methods and aims. This inclusion of formal teaching was a new departure for the workshop and this was only the second time it had been delivered. The reasoning behind this move was partly that some trainers felt that old "apprenticeship method" of TC learning left people unsure about underlying models, and partly that if the course were to form part of an accredited training programme it would need to specify outcomes rather than leave them all to the happenstance of whatever happened during the three days. Papers had been sent out to course members before the course began (Campling, 2001; Haigh, 2013; Pearce and Pickard, 2012; Whiteley, 2004) and an instruction was given in the first meeting for participants to read them if they had not already done so. From the start then, this course felt a little more theory-driven than the Sicily course, although immersion in the groups and community meetings meant that the formal teaching did not become an overriding factor. Moreover, the teaching was mainly discussion-based rather than didactic so as not to counter the TC "feel" too much.

Unlike the Sicily course, people came to this course in ones, twos or threes rather than in large groups who already knew each other. This was helpful in the distribution of people around the groups, as it meant people could work with strangers rather than with colleagues. All ingredients for meals were bought earlier by the administrator – although it would be up to the cooking group to devise a menu – and wine was provided for mealtimes.

Although boundaries were discussed and meetings began and ended on time, staff often left large groups slowly, continuing to talk to participants, rather than leaving immediately as they had done on the LfA. Everything took place according to the timetable, but meeting ends and beginnings were slightly more blurred. Staff sat with residents to eat and talk, and mixed with them whenever they were not in their own meetings. There was a strong sense of "we are all part of the community", even though staff are staff and residents are residents.

4.2.2.2   The Sicily LLE. Research note: for this course I remained with the staff group, relying on translations much of the time. Although I tried to participate, especially in meal preparation and social time, I did not have the language skills to join a small group or have truly deep conversations with others. Although I had a fairly good idea of what was going on most of the time, observing a workshop which conducted in a foreign language that I hardly speak, meant that there always seemed to be gaps. I found that often the sense of what was happening would come after the event – in a staff meeting or a later discussion with a participant. This issue of communication became of interest in itself, as did the issue of the influence of Sicilian culture on TC activities. In later workshops (not reported here) Italian-speaking researchers are being recruited and trained in a bid to better understand the events that take place. Whilst some participants came from mainland Italy, most of the participants worked in TCs in Sicily, and thus many worked together and knew each other before the course began. Participants included representatives of all members of staff, housekeepers, social therapists, group analysts and supervisors. Sicily is a relatively small place and this workshop is seen as one of the essential vanguards of TC and mental health staff training.

All meetings with participants were in Italian, and the interpreter spoke quietly to the three English people, who sat near him, to translate what was being said. All small groups were entirely in Italian, and as the researcher I did not join one (except to observe and help the group whose turn it was to cook). Some of the participants spoke varying amounts of English, so it was possible to talk to others. Staff meetings were in a mixture of Italian and English.

We were told by both staff and some residents that Sicily has a particular culture, due to its history, whereby people apparently stick to the rules, but break them quietly. They are not used to speaking openly to criticise a regime, but may well criticise it in private. Whilst speaking open criticism is encouraged in a TC, it is difficult, perhaps still dangerous, for participants to change

their behaviour. The English staff, noting behaviour which would have been unexpected on the Kent LLE, interpreted these as "little rebellions" seeing them as ways to object to the programme without explicitly objecting to it. For example, on the morning of day 2 residents stayed out in the sun for an extra few minutes, talking and using mobile phones, before walking in *en masse*, late for the community meeting, whilst the staff, who had arrived on time, sat inside waiting for them. However, it was never really clear whether this was just the Sicilian way of doing things, whether the timetable had been misunderstood or whether there really was an undercurrent of mild rebellion.

Thus, although boundaries were discussed and meetings began and ended on time, these times were blurred – even more so than on the Kent LLE. Not only did some meetings start late (detailed above) but once or twice a staff member was very late for a staff meeting because a participant had asked to speak to them about a current problem. As with the Kent LLE staff members sat with residents to eat and talk, and mixed with them whenever they were not in their own meetings.

All ingredients for meals were bought earlier by the administrator, although it would be up to the group cooking to devise a menu. No alcohol was provided on the grounds that if this was to be a real TC experience, it would be alcohol free. However, since the Kent LLE, which was seen as a blueprint, does provide wine, some was subsequently bought in for this one.

4.3 Reflecting on the three workshops

Having attended all three workshops, my impression is that there were more similarities than differences. Table I shows the main differences.

5. Part 2 – evaluation

Qualitative evaluation usually focuses on the original aims of a programme or project, and asks if these were fulfilled. Where evaluation rests largely on the observer's assessment, it is often considered more subjective than an assessment based on the views of different stakeholders (Shaw, 1999). In these three pieces of work, the researcher's participation helped to enlarge her understanding of the programme and the events which took place. Further evaluation was obtained:

1. through questionnaire responses which asked how participants had felt about the workshops and what they had learned; and

2. through comparison with the Community of Communities Audit Criteria to ascertain whether this transient community had indeed provided an authentic TC experience.

Table I Summary of main differences			
Item	LfA Italy 24-26 October 2014	LLE Kent 11-13 November 2014	LLE Sicily 1-3 April 2015
No of participants	39	18	15
Theoretical model	Group Relations + democratic TC	Democratic TC	Democratic TC
Researcher role	Mainly participant	Mainly participant	Mainly staff member
Language	Italian and English	Italian and English	English
Choice of small group	According to task	According to group personnel	According to group personnel
Participants	From different countries – came as individuals or small groups of colleagues	From UK – came as individuals or small groups of colleagues	Mainly from Sicily – many worked together. Some knew some staff
Time boundaries	Strictly according to timetable	Clear but slightly blurred	Clear but sometimes stretched
Structure	Structured timetable, little unstructured time. A specified group devised and organised leisure activities	Structured timetable, much unstructured time which was open to democratic decisions for group activities or left free	Structured timetable, much unstructured time which was open to democratic decisions for group activities or left free
Learning	All experiential	Formal teaching + experiential	All experiential
Reflection on behaviour	Some specified reflection groups	Emerged spontaneously	Emerged spontaneously
Seniors	Yes	No	No
Budgets given	Yes	No	No

5.1 Evaluation using participant questionnaires

All three programmes were interested in participants' views. The LLE's pre- and post-course questionnaires and three month follow-up questionnaire had been developed by the researcher and staff team some years earlier and were in regular use on the Kent course. These had been translated into Italian and were used for the first time on the Sicily course. The LfA used only the three month follow-up questionnaire, enabling some comparison of feedback with the other courses. However, like the other courses, far fewer responded to the follow-up questionnaires than attended. Some numerical questions on each questionnaire asked respondents to rate aspects of their experience out of ten and otherwise all the questions were open-ended and asked respondents to reply in their own words. Italian speakers helped with the translation of answers. Participants' views for all three courses were overwhelmingly positive, with very few criticisms. In this section I will draw out some of the responses.

5.1.1 The LfA. The aim here was to create a temporary learning community, which comprised all the workshop staff and participants. Within this, individuals could learn more about how the unconscious and non-verbal communication of the people present shaped the decision-making processes – both their own and those of other people – and how this in turn affected the group and the wider community (Il Nodo, 2014, p. 1).

The follow-up questionnaire asked participants what they remembered of the course, how it changed the way they felt or behaved at work, what they had gained and how they would rate it out of ten. Only six participants responded, but this attrition of numbers is common with follow-up questionnaires delivered sometime after the event. For example, Betsey *et al.* (1985), having studied 400 reports on youth training programmes, noted that attrition was one of the most critical and frequent problems with the research they studied (p. 20) and saw it as "a fact of life that social researchers have to live with" (p. 206) despite fairly short follow-up periods of between three and eight months[4]. Whilst there may be a common reason for course participants not responding to the current programme follow-up (may be they did not after all find it helpful, or perhaps they are now too busy to think about it or perhaps they have moved on) it is not possible to know this, since there is no data to work from. Of those who did respond though, people remembered lively debate in large groups, and busy work in activity groups. One person noted that there was a "dual anxiety" – a concern to get the job done which conflicted with the concern to pay attention to other people's views. Back at work people felt they were better able to understand situations and – now that they had experienced the role of participant – to better understand the patient's point of view:

> Maybe what had the biggest impact on me, is when I felt that our patients must feel the same way a lot of times. For example when I felt we didn't receive an answer from the staff […] when one staff member seemed to be okay with how we used our free time, but another questioned it.

In terms of what had been gained, participants reported that they found themselves better able to work with authority and responsibility, and better able to progress along paths they were already treading:

> Although I was trying before the workshop to collaborate with others and to put my own ideas at the service of the group, the experience of the workshop has made this easier for me.

There was little any of them would change about the course. More opportunity to communicate between groups perhaps, more chances to talk and listen to each other, a slightly longer course. It is difficult to know if such perceived problems were a function of the design or whether they were a result of the way the participants on this programme behaved. Like the LLE's this was a short course which threw up problems as well as resolved them, and there was no hint that the participants who replied were overly concerned about these issues. When it came to scoring the course, two participants scored it at eight out of ten, one at nine and three gave it ten.

5.1.2 The Kent LLE. The aim here was to give the participants an experience of being a resident in a TC. Through this, it is hoped they will become more effective staff members in their own organisation and gain immediate personal experience of group process and the development of a community. They are also likely to gain insights into their own behaviour and the behaviour of others.

The pre-course questionnaire asked about expectations and worries, the post-course questionnaire asked what they had learned, what they had liked and what should be altered.

Before the course participants hoped they would find out how it felt to be a resident and would gain more understanding of groups and group processes.

Immediately after the course, participants commented on the unusual and "eye-opening" position of being a TC resident for 24 hours a day. They noted how they had experienced the kinds of things a resident might feel: joining a community, the power differential between resident and staff, being part of a decision-making group and the difficulty of speaking in a big group. People felt these experiences would improve their professional work. Some felt they had learnt more about their own feelings and how these affected the things they said and did in groups, and how that in turn affected the group. Several noted that they had found space and time to reflect.

Average numerical scores ($n = 20$) ranged between the lowest at 6.7 and the highest at 8.2 (out of 10). The highest scores were given to feeling pleased with the course and finding it possible to support one another. However, people felt they were less able to challenge one another.

At the three-month follow up there were only five replies. These focussed mostly on how the experience had impacted on participants' professional work. Opinion was divided about the usefulness of the teaching sessions, with some saying they should be dropped and others saying they had been helpful. The experience of being in large and small groups had left one person more aware of the impact he had on others and another had gained a lot more confidence as a group facilitator. One who had felt her own community was getting too serious had been reminded of the importance of play and having fun together and another felt he had learned much about the feelings of residents, in particular "how nerve-wracking it is to join a new community".

Criticisms were few, but one participant would have appreciated more guidance about the large group session and another would have liked the course to be extended by one day, so that there was more space for small groups.

5.1.3 The Sicily LLE. The aim here was similar to that of the Kent LLE. Participants would become more effective staff members in their own organisations through the experience of being a resident and through gaining insights into their own behaviour and the behaviour of others.

The pre-course questionnaire found that the range of experience amongst participants varied from very little to very much. In general, learning expectations centred on gaining more knowledge and experience of the DTC from a different perspective, and importantly to improve group work sensitivity and skills. Pre-course anxieties reflected a sense that participants did not really know what to expect, despite the information that they had. This was seen by staff to be similar to the uncertainty a new community member feels on entering a therapeutic community in the "real world".

Immediately after the course people were specifically asked to rate the course out of ten on three aspects. Their answers to all three questions were on the positive side – they generally felt more empowered, they had been able to challenge and they were happy with the course ($n = 14$).

Respondents offered images – one suggested a kaleidoscope to denote the diversity of elements and one a network composed of all the different individuals on the course. One reflected on the various ways in which she had experienced both her dependence and her independence, another on how she had found it less constraining to be a resident than to be a member of staff (as she normally was) and several noted how useful it was to compare their own work experience with that of others. People had found they were able to talk and listen in groups, often more than they had expected. One noted that he had discovered his talking and listening skills rather than learnt them, but that he had needed the workshop experience to make the discovery. Clarity of communication was seen as especially important. Respondents used words like "respect" and "clarity" to describe what they had learned through the experience of both the large and small groups, whilst words like "sharing" and "honesty" described some of the qualities they had found they valued through collaborating with one another.

At three-month follow-up there were 11 replies. Participants were asked whom they would recommend to attend the workshop, what priority they would give this training for others and for one word to describe their workshop experience.

Most respondents felt the workshop was appropriate for TC staff, at all levels, and others added that it would help staff in the healthcare sector generally especially those who worked with severe mental illness. Almost all respondents felt the workshop should be given a high priority when considering training needs. The single word answers were all positive and the workshop was felt to be an interesting and enriching training.

5.1.4 Participants' evaluations overall. In general participants for all three training courses were positive in their comments. The experience of being a resident had given insights, which would help improve professional practice. Moreover, many people had gained insights into their own feelings and behaviour, and this too would help them to be more aware of themselves when acting in staff roles. Overall then, the training courses achieved their aims. There were no major criticisms, and any suggestions for change were fairly minor matters of design. The two which seemed most prevalent were some ambivalence about the training sessions incorporated into the Kent LLE and a suggestion that courses might be a day longer.

In addition to the formal questionnaires, it was possible in the large community meetings to get some idea of participants' learning, since individuals frequently reflected on their own behaviour and occasionally on the behaviour of the group. Participants discussed knowledge and insights they had gained into the structure and processes of communities, the experience of TC clients and the working of their own psyches. Since all the workshops aimed to improve the professional skills of participants, the regularity with which they related much of their learning to their professional development can be seen as a positive outcome, although only the LfA set aside specific times to do this.

5.2 Evaluation using audit criteria

These workshops were set up as experiential learning courses. Participants were expected to learn by becoming residents in a therapeutic community. Thus a criterion for the success of a workshop should include some indication that the organisation created there was properly to be considered a TC. To assess this, the audit standards of the Community of Communities (C of C) were used. C of C is a London-based organisation which arranges audit reviews of therapeutic communities, and which has developed the standards through the work of TC members themselves (Paget *et al.*, 2015).

Seven of the Core Standards were selected as these looked the most relevant to a temporary community. These included having a clear model of practice, a structured timetable, allowing the open expression and discussion of emotion and behaviour, for community members to take part in the day to day running of the Community and for everything that happens to be treated as a learning opportunity.

As the communities only lasted for three days, there was less opportunity for mistakes to be acknowledged and reflected upon, or for assumptions about roles to be fully explored. That the possibility existed to challenge, confront, act out and be open about feelings, was however enough to validate these as authentic communities, and in general such behaviour was encouraged. All the workshops allowed the participants to talk and to shape events. In all three communities the staff worked alongside participants when community tasks were carried out.

All three courses contained many elements of the core standards. For example, there were small and large group meetings, clearly timetabled. Staff were well-trained and highly experienced. Relationships were encouraged, particularly between "residents", and to a greater or lesser extent the staff kept a little separate, holding staff meetings to which residents were not invited.

Importantly, there was no explicit role-playing in any of the TCs. No one pretended to be residents or staff – they really were residents or staff. Everyone was expected to behave as themselves, and learn any lessons from that. Comparison with the C of C's audit criteria offered reassurance that the temporary communities set up for the workshops provided many of the features of a TC, and thus authentic learning experiences for the participants.

6. Conclusion

One limitation of the research in this paper was language. The Milan workshop was conducted partly in Italian, and the Sicily workshop largely in Italian. Since the researcher did not speak Italian the work therefore required interpretation during meetings and translation of questionnaires and responses. A second limitation was the lack of follow-up data, due to non-response to questionnaires. Both of these matters could be addressed in any further research.

This description and comparison of the three workshops concludes that each of them provides an authentic democratic therapeutic community experience, although all exhibit some differences (as indeed do TCs). In so doing, they enable participants to gain some experience of being a resident – both feelings of powerlessness and dependency at being on the other side, and feelings of personal power and independence at contributing to the decision-making and the running of the organisation. As residents, participants experience these feelings from a different place than they would normally do as a staff member and in their feedback frequently noted how useful they found it to be put in the position of resident. Importantly, the difficulties residents often experience with joining a TC, joining in the talk and challenging others could be felt and understood, and both the situational reasons and the personal reasons as to why an individual might find some things easy and some things difficult could be explored. Thus, although the workshops lasted only a short time, all three were seen to create a valuable TC training experience.

Notes

1. It is difficult to be sure about this. In a TC there is often a notion that people ask for and receive support – for example, one or two people may publicly offer to sit with a distressed person over lunch and discuss the problem. But this is a little ideal and may not always happen. Similarly, what happened in the LfA may not be what always happens in a Group Relations meeting. Consequently, I offer this comment on group support vs the individuals looking after themselves rather tentatively.

2. I do not want to present myself as a complete novice here. I had read a good deal about Group Relations, and over the years have known many analysts and learnt more. But this was my first experience of actually being immersed in a Group Relations setting, and as an ethnographer, I was keenly aware of the novelty of some of the events and activities I encountered.

3. The generic agenda is laid onto a random chair before the community meeting starts and whoever sits there is the Chair for the meeting. Thus an individual can choose to avoid or take on the Chair role, by choosing that chair.

4. All is not lost however. The authors argue that better research design and improved means of collecting follow-up data would increase the response rate, and this has been noted for future studies of these programmes.

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About the author

Barbara Rawlings is a Qualitative Researcher who has carried out participant observation research into both democratic and addiction TCs in correctional institutions and in the community. She has also carried out research into other organisations, mainly in the public sector. She has taught qualitative research methods to various student and professional groups and is currently developing an Italian-speaking research group to take on the work of TC research in Italy. Barbara Rawlings can be contacted at: barbara.rawlings@talk21.com