

How can a trainer upgrade own competence?



The opportunities that we use,
potential which is still left*

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This article describes and analyzes the experience of the study circle for trainers which took place last year and is still going on.

The text is built on consideration of three main questions:

- Who does the initiative of creating this study circle belong to?
- What topics and activities have been put into practice recently?
- What are the perspectives of such work?

Analyzing the gained experience I will use the opinions of study circle participants that they wrote in the questionnaires and at the final introspective stage (according to the results of the year).

PAST

How it all started

This study circle appeared as a result of the project "School for trainers"¹ which revealed the need for creating a special "place" which could unite and support the trainers' community of Belarusian NGOs. The problem was how to implement this idea if there is no finances i.e. it is not financially supported as a project. And the main question sounded like: **How should this community on self-support and self-development function (without attracting external experts) so that very busy trainers could spend their time on self-development?**

In autumn 2003 there was made the first attempt to organize joint voluntary movement of trainers aimed at development of their professional competence. The first step was made through spreading among trainers information letter. There was offered to think about possible means to upgrade the trainers' competence. Also there was outlined the topic for discussion "How to work out the programs of various types of interactive seminars?" This topic at that period of time seemed very important. On the one hand everybody seem to have

common idea about making a program but on the other hand when discussing it the trainers team go through various types of communication (questions, team discussions, negotiations and conflicts).

In the first informational letter there was outlined the problem field:

- A seminar — is it a unique event or we can speak about the technology of educational seminars which we use without knowing really a lot about it?
- What do we put as the basis of educational process at a seminar, how does our participant develop? Do we cultivate, push, suggest and retreat ...?
- What logic or connections between sessions² do we use? And what logic exists during a session?
- What allows or doesn't allow us to see a seminar as an integrity?
- Who, when, where and how managed to make a seminar "according to Colb model"?
- Is a seminar one of the types of experimental learning or is it our myth?
- How can we work with a program (before a seminar and during it)?
- How can we involve participants in the process of making a program? etc.

May be the most important in this first letter was the question to the community about people who would like to spend their time and intellectual efforts on this idea. Fortunately there was a number of people for whom this idea seemed to be interesting and they started to work together in a Swedish study circle.

Looking closer at the gained experience

Trainers community — is it Utopia?

"On the whole it was an interesting new experience of cooperation with «old» faces. Though at some stages

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¹ The project "School for trainers" was fulfilled by two partnership organizations from Belarus and Sweden 2001-2002.

² Session means a period of time at the seminar which lasts as a rule an hour and a half.

there was an intellectual exhaustion. It is good that it was possible to prolong the norms of the community «School for trainers» (Lena K.) "It is very good to have a study circle for trainers even though we all are very busy. It provides an opportunity to make pauses and introspect own activity." (Dima K.).

It is very interesting to fix one moment: even after a year of attending the study circle when answering the question "What other topics are interesting for you?" the majority of trainers had difficulty with suggesting definite topics. It is interesting why it happened so? It doesn't seem that the trainers were intellectually "constrained" but it is more likely that it was difficult for them to find common topics and types of activity which could be productive for this community and helped to achieve pragmatic results. (It is important not only what to discuss but also why to do it or better say what can we do with this discussion.) In other words such interpretation puts us back to the problem of the basis of trainers' community or how we can be useful for each other. And this problem is not trivial as its solution should be "real". Just "bare" motivation like "let's just meet because we feel fine together and we can spend a nice time" is not enough for this community. For example during "Open space" method devoted to the problem "How we can develop civic education with the efforts of "the third sector?" (Minsk, 2004) the group which worked with the topic "How and (why) should we develop the Union of civic education including 70 members?" outlined the following "needs" of such union (we would like to mention that the whole problem under the discussion was much wider – the community of NGOs – but the problem itself is very close to the one which is discussed above):

- solving complicated problems (coordination of joint projects);
- protection (common lobbying, juridical consultation);
- exchange of experience (through the magazine "Adukatar", joint projects, meetings, conferences);
- Making the revision of the situation: who works in what directions (for example editing the reference-book with the addresses of representatives);
- PR.

The answer which was received by the group illustrated that there are not so many "real" mechanisms which can fulfill such compatibility. Maybe the most reliable ones are financed common project, common activity... and may be that's all? Or no? Can we support the trainers' community through study circles where they can exchange their experience and analyze programs of seminars? Further we will discuss the lack of means to fulfill these types of activity. And one more difficulty which is crucial for a study circle: professional activity of a trainer is too wide topic. On the one hand it creates flexible and mobile situation and on the other hand always makes participants to make a choice at every step they make in order to focus their mind and make it more productive and definite.

Working with the content

The content of the study circle didn't present a logical consequence of topics but rather resembled a free traveling around the town which you know very well. There were used various types of activity.

- discussing the seminars which were planned;
- analyzing the seminars which were held;
- experimenting with new methods (for example introducing the participants to "the position of participants");
- working with the texts trying to find the solution to some problems typical for our practice.

We tried to discuss various topics:

- An effective seminar (discussing the experience of holding a seminar "Development of local communities: singling out the problems and finding the ways of their solution"). (Kiev, 2003)
- Learning styles and a seminar program
- The opportunities of making a learner-centered program (analysis of the article "How to make the participants of the program its accomplices" by Larissa Kiriluk.
- Ways of presenting the program of the seminar.
- ole expectations from the seminar.
- Using the scheme "challenge – realization of the content - introspection" for working out the program of a seminar (the experience of making the seminar "Developing critical thinking through active learning methods").
- Resistance of seminar participants.
- "Open Space" as a technology of working with large audiences.
- Experience of working out and holding seminars:
 - "Working out the program of a study course in active learning startegy" (Kiev, 2004).
 - "Professional competences of an NGO trainer" (Ternopol, 2004).
 - "Me and a group" (Novogradok, 2004).
 - "Study discussion: from processing to constructing knowledge" (Minsk, 2004).

And now some analytical comments about the things that were mentioned above.

Soon after the beginning of the study circle we found out that we "lost" the subject of work that was announced in the information letter (constructing a seminar program). "The subject was very blurred and was hard to get" (Lena K.) Why did it happen so? There can be various interpretations. For example the topic was very difficult, "not clear" and "sliding away" or "alien", given to the participants from the outside.

According to the participants the most useful was the process of discussing certain seminars and programs "topics which are relevant and real" (Inna G.). At the same time we discovered several interesting prob-

lems. For example how “to get” the experience of the seminar at which you were not present? How to describe your own experience to another trainer? It seemed that all the participants worked in the same field and there are certain general schemes of making the programs etc. Nevertheless analyses of the programs revealed how hard it is to reconstruct the events of a seminar. When programs are transparent for the colleagues it is really very interesting and curious revelation. The question which is quite reasonable sounds like: may be one shouldn't expect too much from the text of the program? It is quite possible. And also it is very necessary to distinguish the situation of transparency for the colleagues and for the participants of a seminar. The most important thing in the “life” of a study circle is in my opinion is stating that such work has got a big potential for trainers introspection. It is a unique opportunity to feel from the inside the situation which happens at the beginning of every seminar – discussing the suggested program with the participants.

Very interesting was the problem: how to analyze a seminar – the way it happens, “as you can” or some other way? At the meetings we tried various ways: for example through correlating the planned aims and acquired results; there was made an interesting attempt to rationalize the elements of a seminar which make it successful. It was interesting to analyze through fixing the unexpected things which impressed trainers. Gradually there appeared such norm of analysis as getting an open feedback from other trainers.

But such matters as means of analysis as well as concepts of the seminars which could be at the same time the schemes of analysis still remain open and relevant...

Study circle of trainers – a form of communication or a spare time?

“... Learning form without definite objective and which is given a lot of time allows the participants to take more responsibility”. (Elena K.) “Effective form gives opportunity in a relaxed atmosphere to discuss smth important for the participants and at the same time gives more than a mere education”. (Olia S.) “A very flexible technology which makes education process less formal.” (Dima G.) “Study circle for trainers is more connected with the profession than just a hobby.” (Dima K.)

Does a study circle for leaders need a program?

The analysis of the gained experience discovers a dual attitude towards the “flexible” advancing in the content that happened this year. On the one hand **the refusal from the structure** allows preserving the peculiarity of a study circle as a form of education. “Structure may turn a study circle in one more work” (Olia S.) or one more variant of formal education. On the other hand the participants expressed the wish “to make a study circle program...with a possibility to correct it” (Inna G.); “there is a lack of systematic approach as well as consistency. It would be better first to make a program and then to

improve it; there was not enough structure in the program, meetings, participants.” (Ira B.).

Looking back at the first meeting I can't but mention the failed attempt to make a program of the study circle with the help of mind mapping. It is interesting that this year the work has started also without any preliminary program. We discuss different programs and the experience gained by the participants at the seminars. May be in such way the participants fulfill their need in pragmatic aspects.

It is interesting that the participants differentiated such functions of the study circle as educating and introspective which are to a certain extent opposed. As for the educating methods which have been practiced this year we can name only one – problematising (Elena K.) And in such situation the objectives are seen as search for, rationalization and practice of mediators both for analyzing programs and exchanging experience.

What result is possible in this situation?

- “There wasn't any common result” (Elena K.);
- “A good way of self-education” (Dima G.);
- “... managed to work with own needs” (Dima G.);
- Advancing in the content: methods of group discussion, understanding the phenomenon of participants resistance (Irina B.);
- Singling out the problematic areas of trainers work (Inna G.);
- Local results referring certain styles, expectation of the participants (Lena K.);
- Almost everybody states that the work in the study circle allowed to change own professional activity. For example “opportunity to use gained experience in professional work, finding new problematic areas of trainers work.” (Inna G.).

The frequency of meeting: how many, when, where?

The flexibility of study circle work supposed that we were free to choose the time for meetings: it was negotiated with all study circle participants. The shortcoming of this principle was that sometimes we had long breaks that slowed down the process of advancing.

Future that changes into present

What topics and types of study circle activities seem to be perspective for the future practice of the participants? The list of topics below illustrates the group opinion:

- Working with large groups;
- Studying the foreign experience of trainings;
- Trainers competences, difficulties and findings, problems of university education;

- Discussing narrow, definite, applied matters and cases;
- Product-centered approach;
- Experience exchange with other participants (for example during certain sessions);
- Training for trainers.

It is still relevant looking for the mechanisms of study circle work which can make a study circle a tool for developing our seminars practice instead of making a burden out of it. "It is clear that bare experience is not enough. Without regular supervision and analysis the mistakes which are made only become stronger because of being repeated." [1, C. 570]. To a certain extent we can speak about creating a **service practice which offers trainers means of professional analysis of seminars**. Such practice is waiting to be constructed! Or to be more exact to be specified. (though we should say that such kind of activity in a study circle may be only one of many other forms).

The existing forms of analyzing trainings and other forms of group work should be carefully considered: institution of supervision, tradition of Balint groups³, on-line communication etc. We should mention that it is not smth totally new For example the experts of trainings for the trainers state that "for a number of year there has existed a need which has finally been expressed - about different forms of supervision: group and individual. I would even call them a supervision support which could help to develop those trainers that actually don't need special education." [3].

Supervision, Ballint groups that appeared some time ago in certain spheres — psychoanalysis and practice of training doctors — today are being transformed stimulating the appearance of new forms and types for various kinds of professional activity. And this fact is interesting and it is interesting to consider the advantages and threats of spreading this practice on adjacent professions. The peculiarities of these forms is that they offer a certain **mechanism** of analyzing practice and a case (whether it is analysis of counter-transferring of psychoanalytical supervision or analysis of communication a patient - a doctor for a classical Balint group.) And such mechanism is as important as the form of such work (whether it is a group, a study circle o a club⁴).

Literature:

1. Yalom I. "Theory and practice of group psychotherapy" — St. Petersburg, 2000. — p. 570.
2. Balint groups and supervisions in training the specialists working with people: Manual. St.-Petersburg Military Academy of Russia, 1998. — p. 83.
3. Michajlova E. Business-trainer: from a teacher in a drug store to a coach http://igisp.ru/ptc/articles/Coach_Mikhailova.shtml



But for our educational seminars one more thing is very significant. All institutions of upgrading qualification of specialists (doctors, therapists, social workers etc) appeared within **already existing practice** that has got its own rules and norms. It means that the following processes take place there: **correspondence analysis** (with technologies, results, program) and **analysis of mistakes** (difficult cases). For our educational seminars the task is more difficult as there is a need for constructing analysis of the technologies of seminars which are not yet worked out. Such construction happens now in different ways. For example intuitively we found out during the work of study circle that positive case study turns out to be very productive as well as singling out reasons and mechanisms that influence the effectiveness of the integrated practice. These thoughts turn us back to the problem of rationalization of the educational seminars that we hold. In this sense the trainers community can take a risk to work out practice of holding and practice of examining (analyzing, supervising) seminars. Is it possible? May be the answer to this question should be discussed during the study circle in future.

To sum up we would like to mention that the given article has more a framing rather than content function: it outlines the work of the study circle and defines future perspectives. We really hope that this study circle has a future which can bring serious results. And of course we hope that this initiative will arouse interest and discussion in the trainers' community.

³ According to the Balint the technology which was worked out can be regarded as an active form of learning and improving doctors competence in the sphere of communication "doctor-patient". In its classical sense supervision is one of the methods of practical upgrading qualification in the sphere of psychotherapy. Supervision is the feedback of a qualified specialist — psychotherapist. (More detailed information one can get in 2).

⁴ Clubs as a form of work gains more popularity among business-trainers. And as an example we would like to mention the club of consultants and trainers (St-Petersburg), TM-club (time-management club in Moscow).