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Trencadís, Social Imaging Group (SIG)

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Trencadís, Social Imaging Group (SIG)

Abstract

Trencadís, SIG is a new approach to working in large art therapy groups that has emerged out of a Barcelona based art therapy training that has from its inception included a group analytic large group as a principal experiential learning device. *Trencadís, SIG* combines two methods of working with groups: the group analytic large group and art psychotherapy. Within a structured framework we combine, in a single session model, image-making, metaphor and collaborative art work, using an art technique belonging to the local Catalan social unconscious.

Introduction

In this paper we introduce a new approach to working in large art therapy groups that has emerged out of a specific training, organizational and socio-cultural context, namely a Barcelona based art therapy training that has from its inception included a group analytic large group as a principal experiential learning device.

The group analytic large group has been an intrinsic component of the art therapy training programme at *Metàfora*¹ in the 15 years during which it has been pioneering the training of art therapists in Spain. The Large Group, according to the dossier of the training, serves the following training functions:

- a space, within each weekend of the course for the trainee to feel, investigate, reflect, and, above all, to enter in dialogue with the whole student group about the experience of training as an art therapist in *Metàfora*;
- an opportunity for the trainee to experience and learn about themselves in the context of the group setting;
- an opportunity for the trainee to experience and learn about group theory as well as the dynamics of large and median groups;
- the opportunity, through participation in a group led by an experienced group analyst, for the trainee to experience and learn about how to conduct, facilitate and lead groups.

Some of the challenges and limitations of using a purely group analytic approach to conducting large groups, particularly when working with

groups on a single session basis or with groups that have little prior experience of large group dynamics, as is so often the case at conferences, on short courses and at professional gatherings, have caused us to find ways of adapting the traditional large group format, to, as it were, paint on the large group canvas through introducing a form of art making which addresses some of the practical and institutional difficulties of doing art in large groups.

As we will see, *Trencadís*, SIG offers an alternative large group approach to working in a single session format. Despite being relatively structured we believe it retains some of the benefits of the traditional group analytic large group.

Much of the literature in the field of large groups centres on the initial traumatic encounter with the indeterminate nature of the space, the lack of order and leadership, the hate and frustration, and so on. The transposition (De Maré et al, 1991) of context and re-enactment of divisions and traumas (Hopper, 2003) within the context are fundamental to understanding why large groups can themselves be experienced as disturbing and traumatic. In general there is a focus on using large groups either with populations of hardened and experienced professionals or students within a training process. The existence of time for a process of working through from hate to dialogue is generally assumed. The art therapy large group (Jones and Skaife, 2009) appears as a recent development in the field, stressing the potential for institutional and political learning as well as the importance of art in its social and political context. A key question in the development of this approach is: how do we need to adapt the traditional large group format when there is insufficient time for what Jones and Skaife (2009b) call a ‘transformational process’?

Trencadís: the meaning

Trencadís (pronounced with the stress on the í) is a Catalan word meaning something breakable. *Trencadís* is a synonym of fragile, like a wine-glass, a china tea cup or a soap bubble ... *trencadís* is anything delicate that can break easily. *Trencadís* - using a poetic language and referring to a person - also means vulnerable, with delicate health, with a fragile character, on the edge of a breakdown...

Apart from those meanings, *trencadís* or *trencadissa*² could also be translated into English as the resulting effect of a big crash, like what might be found on a street after a tsunami or an earthquake, a million pieces of broken glass scattered on the floor, chaos and disorganisation all around. *Trencadís* then is what you imagine is happening when you

hear some sudden sound like glass breaking, a sound that takes you by surprise, like the sound you might hear from the dining room if a cupboard full of china fell over onto the floor, “Oh my God, what a disaster!” (in this case we would say “oh Deu meu, quina trencadissa”).

However, there is another reason why *Trencadís*, the word, has crossed the borders of Catalonia. Antoni Gaudí, the architect, used this word to describe the technique he used to make mosaics out of broken pieces of pottery. With his unique originality Gaudí retrieved and redefined the *opus tessellatum*³ of the Romans. He would collect pieces of broken pottery as if they were the scattered pieces of a jigsaw on a table, and put them together again forming capricious shapes on many different surfaces, such as benches, columns, floors, ceilings, etc.

Trencadís, Social Imaging Group: the context

For over 12 years, and many hundreds of students, Metafora has been training art therapists in Barcelona, Spain. Experiential group work has from the start been a core element of the Metafora / Barcelona University (later Pompeu Fabra University) training. For two of the three years of the training, students participate in two distinct forms of experiential group. Firstly, an on-going experiential art therapy group of between 8 and 10 students conducted by a qualified and experienced art therapist. Secondly, a large group of between 30 and 50 students conducted on group analytic grounds by a qualified and experienced group analytic psychotherapist and usually the last session of each of the nine block training weekends. One of the reasons for the emergence of this approach is Metafora’s on-going commitment to the large group as a rich source of learning for both student and course alike and a concomitant wish to include large groups at all levels on the training ladder.

The ‘convenor’ of the large group had regularly wondered whether a large art therapy was the more appropriate format for the training of art therapists. A persistent theme and source of tension in the group has been the absence of art making or any other form of organized activity. The group stays in the circle and restricts itself to communicating with words. Learning to paint with words and silences has been a regular metaphor used by group and conductor alike. Nonetheless, students have often been observed to be drawing during sessions. On a number of occasions students have generated art, either in-session or out, which has been later shared with the group.

Trencadís was first introduced as a single session large group within the structure of Metafora’s two annual two-week summer schools, one

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in Spanish the other in English. These 9 day full-time courses addressed to professionals (psychologists, teachers, artists, etc.) from all over the world interested in beginning to get to know about art therapy, consist of a series of workshops, talks, case presentations and small art therapy groups. During the first summer schools, we completed the experience with a large group to which everybody, staff and students, was invited.

Initially the conductor approached these groups believing that the way to limit the situational and existential anxieties inevitably arising out of a large group, in particular a group made up of students relatively new to the group analytic space, was to adopt a more active facilitative approach, providing clear suggestions for how the group might be used and actively assisting the group as it took up these suggestions. Unlike the single conductor large groups in the block training, other members of the staff team attended. The group more closely resembled a plenary session as we would invite participants to reflect on the experience that had come before during the summer school. However, the invitation to give feedback would often result in some previously unexpressed criticisms surfacing and would tend to precipitate surprising and sometimes worrying expressions of individual distress and even disturbance. We agreed we needed to rethink the large group format and decided to find a way of incorporating some form of art making which would serve to provide a more containing format for this the last session of the summer school.

We began to imagine an activity that was educative in itself, that could somehow bring together experientially the contents of the previous two weeks, which belonged more clearly to the culture of art therapy, which did not generate new and uncontainable amounts of frustration, hate and disturbance and which, on the contrary, maintained the general mood of optimism, openness and positive self-learning, in particular with regard to participating in groups, generally characteristic of the summer school as an experience.

Description of the activity

Trencadís, Social Imaging Group (SIG) is an hour-and-a-half activity (although we have also developed a two-hour variant) informed by the theory and practice of both art therapy and group analysis. Broadly speaking, it involves a large group, 20 to 60 people (whether a professional collective – we have worked with a team of health workers in one area of Barcelona - a complete summer school group, members of an association, etc.) in one single session, during which the participants

initially generate metaphorical images that in some way describe or represent the social and emotional experience of its members, whether individually or as a group, during the course of their shared work together as a team or workplace or their shared experience together on a course.

The group commences with the conductors inviting each member of the group to think of an image which describes for them their experience or perception of the group to which they belong or in which they have been participating, perhaps they've already been carrying one around or one may well occur to them as they sit here in the circle. In addition the conductors invite group members to share these images in the here and now. Once an image has been shared, through asking clarifying questions or suggesting associations to the image, the conductors attempt to develop the complexity of the image without making use interpretations. At the same time, group members are similarly encouraged to engage with this clarifying and associative task. No attempt is made to interpret or attribute meanings, with the task at this stage entailing amplification, seeking to develop the complexity of any image brought to the group, and involvement in the associative task.

In our view, this task and the images it generates serve to distance participants from possible direct traumatic experience, reducing and containing the emotional impact of participating in a large group. Both task and image facilitate the sharing of personal experience, while maintaining a sufficient degree of distance and the furthering of group cohesion.

The session is divided into three parts: the first part consists of the aforementioned verbal exchange among the participants during which metaphorical images are shared and developed. The images, while emerging out of individual members of the group, soon become, in part through the facilitative work of the conductors, metaphors refined and developed by the whole group; the second part, often conducted in silence, involves the creation of a mosaic (*trencadís*) that gives the name to the experience; and the third part, in which the group reflects on the mosaic and the experience. A key moment in the session is the transition from the initial social imaging phase of the group to the mosaic making phase. It is a dramatic moment in which the structure of the group (like a Gaudi ceramic) is broken into pieces in order for something new to be created. The conductors walk to the centre of the circle and empty several bags of multi-coloured card fragments onto the floor. The conductors then invite the group to together create a mosaic on the floor within the circle. In order to prioritize the mosaic making we suggest that the group works in silence. No further direction or indication is provided and the

conductors withdraw to the edge of the space to observe and witness the process of between 20 and 60 people creating a mosaic. We discuss later in this paper the roles we have observed during the mosaic making.

A moment arrives when it is clear that the mosaic making has terminated. People have either returned to their seats or are no longer adding pieces or moving pieces around. Given the importance of the final phase the conductors keep an eye on the clock to ensure there is time for reflection, perhaps a minimum of 15 minutes. A tradition that has emerged is that photos are taken of the resulting mosaic, both by students and the institution alike.

Roles in the group

The following is a list of some of the roles we have observed to be present during the mosaic-making phase of the group:

- The creatives (abstract and figurative)
- The organisers
- The linkers / bridge makers
- The isolates

Although this is something that we feels needs more exploration, we feel some compatibility with MacKenzie & Livesley's (1983) typology of social roles present in group psychotherapy: sociable, structural, cautionary, and divergent.

We have also wondered whether the mosaic making activity, an invitation to the whole group to engage in the same art-making activity, promotes states of fusion and merger within the group, calling into being the amoeboid state referred to by Earl Hopper, in his development of a 4th basic assumption, characteristic of massification. At the same time calling into being the polar crustacean type typical of aggregation.

Image making in the group

The depths of the mind are reached and touched by simpler words that speak in images and metaphors, speak in a universal timeless language, pre-dating contemporary ideas. (xxiv – Malcolm Pines in the Introduction to Cox and Theilgaard)

The act of image making, done intentionally or without thinking, is deeply embedded in language and communication. We daydream, we imagine,

we fantasize, we dream, we make art. Images come and go from our minds and bodies with great ease. According to Samantha Warren (2012), writing about the organizational consultancy process in the Social Photo Matrix, the image is symbolic of unconscious thought in dreamwork, art cinema and its function is as a transitional space. In the transitional space of the social imaging group, it is as if the images are fragments of this transitional space. These fragments as they are gradually piece by piece brought into manifest being and begin to associate and relate, will later achieve greater coherence in the *trencadis* stage of the group.

As the start of the session we invite the group to share whatever images they may have or may occur to them of the group, whether arising in the here and now, or in the there and then of this group to which they belong. As we wait for images to emerge, there is usually silence and some discomfort. And then the images appear... waves on a sandy beach, a jazz band, a dragon... In poet Ezra Pound's imagistic philosophy, "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time". Pound spoke of the image's "luminous details". The artist, he wrote (in his *Selected Prose 1909-1965*), "seeks out the luminous detail and presents it. He does not comment". For Pound images were not ideas but "radiant nodes or clusters" from which ideas are "constantly rushing". As conductors we see our role as facilitators of the detail of the image, amplifying and expanding the complexity of the image without comment or interpretation. In the same free associative spirit of Gordon Lawrence's *Social Dreaming Matrix* in which dreams and not the dreamer are explored within the here and now experience of the group, it is the emerging detail, the psychoactive ingredients embedded in the image that act upon us, and not the person, which is the focus of our attention. And, despite at times the seemingly obvious nature of the images and metaphors brought to the group, we try to "stick to the image" (Hillaman 1983: 54; 2004: 21) relying on the "distinctive qualities implicit in images" (Michael Vannoy Adams, 2006). As Foulkes might have said, trust the image. It is the image that contains the group and it is from the images, communicated, collectively elaborated and internalised that the group (hopefully) benefits. For Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962 in *The Poetics of Space*, quoted in Murray Cox and Alice Theilgaard, 1997) the image touches the depths before it stirs the surface. Through their exploration of the mutative potential of metaphor Cox and Theilgaard show us, in great detail, how the image functions through metaphor and consequently, at a safe enough distance removed from its manifest meaning, acts upon us and gradually translates for us the unconscious, often repressed and unbearable, aspects of our experience.

Images of the Group: destruction and creativity

The image of the large group as a secure large circle / container is shattered as the conductors move to the centre of the circle and empty a number of sacks of pieces onto the floor. The circle / container is broken into pieces. Similarly as we move away from words to things, the images generated in the initial phase of the session also feel as though they are shattered. We literally break the group into pieces, destroy it in order to re-create it. It suddenly feels uncomfortable again, messy and chaotic as the group members are invited to leave their seats, to leave the circle, in order to engage with the mountain of broken pieces and the mosaic. One of the striking features of the mosaic in all the instances of conducting *Trencadis SIG* is how some of the images in the initial image generating phase of the group find their way into the mosaic, for example, in a group from a *Metafora* summer school a lemon and a bridge, and in a session for a team of health care workers from Barcelona, the sun, a beach and a dragon. We wonder whether this is akin to the formation of protosymbols, as described by Volkan (2001), where an image, during periods of regression in the large group, carries a significant emotional charge for the group. Some images, perhaps only one or two of the many generated in any one session, begin to emerge as potential protosymbols as they seem to carry a charge or particular resonance central to the identity of the group.

The chaos, emerging from the initial breaking of the containing group circle and the scramble to start the mosaic which for a while appears formless, gradually recedes as images, suggestions of images and abstract indistinct forms gradually appear. Some students dedicate their efforts to coordinating the activity and adding form, others seem to randomly add pieces, unconcerned with making meaning. Some build pathways and bridges between remote parts. Rarely is anything allowed to remain disconnected, although this may have something to do with the emotional climate at the time. For example, in a recent session during a weekend in which the students had been told some difficult news about the future of the training, a male student (in a largely female group) talked about the attempt to create his own mosaic, made impossible by other students' need to connect him to the whole.

Conclusions

Trencadis, social imaging group has evolved in a specific context as a hybrid of group analytic and art therapy theory and practice. It has

emerged out of a concern for the risks of working in single session experiential large groups in which there is insufficient time to work from hate to dialogue. The unconscious dynamics of the group are contained within the image and mosaic making activities. Some images begin to reveal their protosymbolic potential, seeming to express something of lasting significance in the identity of the group.

Notes

1. *Metàfora, centre d'estudis d'artteràpia* is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) founded in Barcelona in 1999 devoted to the development art therapy and contemporary fine arts in Catalonia. It offers two branches of activities: The International Workshop, (Studio Arts); The Centre for Studies in Art Therapy. Up until 2011 it was attached to the University of Barcelona. Since 2011 it has been attached to Pompeu Fabra University.
2. *Trencadissa* is the feminine form of *trencadis*, both having the same meaning. The feminine form is generally used to describe a mess of pieces of something that has suddenly broken.
3. “Opus tessellatum” was the term used in Latin during Roman times to describe mosaics.

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