Going spiral? Phenomena of ‘half-knowledge’ in the experiential large group as temporary learning community

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In this paper I use group-analytic, philosophical and psycho-social lenses to explore phenomena associated with the convening of an experiential large group within a two-day conference on the theme of 'knowing and not-knowing'. Drawing in particular on the work of Earl Hopper, two different models of large group convening - in which the chairs for the group are arranged either in concentric circles or in spirals - are described 'topographically' and compared in terms of the tasks which each model might address. I argue that the spiral topography may be more suited to the attempt to construct what the conference organisers posited as 'insecure edifices of knowledge' and I borrow from the letters of Keats on 'negative capability' to suggest that phenomena of 'half-knowledge' may be generated and fleetingly perceived within the dynamic processes in the dilemmatic spaces of experiential large groups thus constituted.

Keywords: large group; dialogical; experiential; cosmopolitan; negative; capability; dilemmatic spaces

In December 2012 a conference was convened at the Institute of Education by the Psychosocial Studies Network to explore the theme of ‘[K]nowing and Not Knowing: Thinking Psychosocially About Learning and Resistance to Learning’. The conference call for papers opened with the observation that the social world is ‘saturated with powerful formations of knowledge that colonise individual and institutional identities. Some knowledge emerges as legitimised and authoritative; other knowledge is resisted or repressed’. The conference organisers asked the question: ‘What might it mean to build insecure edifices of knowledge?’

On each afternoon of the two-day event, delegates were invited, as one of two options within the conference structure, to elect to attend an experiential large group, which I was asked to convene. In the conference programme I offered the following description of this group:

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The Experiential Large Group is a work group within the temporary learning community of the Conference. Its task is to come together for ninety minutes each afternoon to reflect upon the Conference theme of ‘knowing and not knowing’ … An Experiential Group has itself as its own object of study and research … Its objective is to learn from its own experience something about the nature of opportunities for learning – and resistances to learning – that may emerge within the unstructured spaces of the Group.

By virtue of this invitation to join one or other of two events on a given afternoon, it follows that membership of this Experiential Large Group was self-selecting from within the wider membership of the Conference community. By taking up membership in and of the group, the individual conference delegate was taking up his or her membership of the wider system of the Conference-as-a-whole in a particular way. Hopper and Weyman (1975) observe that a given group is charged with limited aims and that therefore:

a group must exist within the context of a larger social system on which it depends for the solution of those problems with which it is not concerned directly … Furthermore, the limitation of its aims makes a group a relatively transitory system, no matter how long it has been established. Permanence requires institutionalisation. (Hopper and Weyman 1975, 177)

These limits in time and scope need not be construed as disadvantageous. In this paper I play with the notion that the work of a large group such as this might be recognised as providing a particular form of temporary accommodation for unhoused minds (Adlam and Scanlon 2005; Scanlon and Adlam 2011a) within the wider system of the conference (and the wider systems within which the conference itself was more or less securely housed).

Whereas other parts of the conference aimed to find new ways to address the needs of the membership for other more familiar forms of experience, such as for example, presentation and discussion of research, administration, networking, the Experiential Large Group offered a form of insecure housing that could then be understood as potentially productive of a particular kind of ‘insecure edifice of knowledge’, interdependent and impermanent – ephemeral even – that was then made available to the temporary learning community of the conference.

Spiral (adj) winding in a continuous and gradually widening (or tightening) curve … around a central point on a flat plane. (Oxford Dictionary of English 2005)

In experiential large groups the available chairs are generally placed either in concentric circles or in a spiral formation. They are thus distinguished from plenary large group sessions, in which either all the chairs are in one
circle or all chairs face towards a podium at the front of the hall, in(viting) dependence upon a Chairperson at a lectern. Stiers describes the structure of a particular series of experiential large groups thus:

the chairs are arranged in a spiral shape, spanning out from a few chairs in the center into larger and larger spirals until there are enough chairs for the entire membership and the consultants. Given the size and the configuration of this large group, face-to-face interactions with all the group members are difficult to maintain. (Stiers 2012, 10)

Stiers proposes a model of ‘dialogical learning’ based on the work of Paolo Freire (1996) and he argues that the group is experiential in that it aspires to ‘an acquisition of insight from experienced happenings’. We might then say that the experiential quality of such groups is brought into being and structured by the topography of the chairs on the plane of the floorspace at the given event and the human geography of what it is like to be invited/challenged to take up one’s membership of such a group by seating oneself within its borders.

Different topographies invite or invoke different qualities of experiential learning. Hopper (2002) emphasises the importance of distinguishing between varieties of large group projects: an experience, a demonstration or a consultation to the organisation. In a later paper (Hopper 2006), he echoes this point and makes the intriguing suggestion (one to which I shall return later) that a spiral arrangement

is more appropriate for large groups who have been organised in the service of learning more about the dynamics of them, and concentric circles are more appropriate for groups who have been organised in the service of discussing matters of concern to the participants in them. (Hopper 2006, 13)

The spiral topography perhaps promotes less secure modes and edifices of learning and Hopper gives a vignette that might be used to illustrate this point. In one particular Large Group event he was convening, he set out a spiral topography, despite going on to announce that the group’s task was ‘to discuss matters of concern to us’: in Hopper’s terms, a task more appropriate to the circular layout. On the second day of the group, one participant said that ‘she was glad that the group had returned to the co-centric circles that she was used to. In fact, this had not actually occurred, but she had made herself more at home by ignoring the spiral pattern’ (Hopper 2006, 13, my italics).

The potentially disconcerting nature of the spiral topography (where is the centre of the spiral? where does its outer boundary lie?) is reflected in a certain type of leadership that also generates and/or elucidates unconscious phenomena in the large group setting. The convenor(s) reflects upon demands for leadership from the group in a semi-structured meeting with no agenda, but does not necessarily act upon them. There is something
disturbing about the experience of facing some fellow group members while staring at the backs of others, whether in circles or spirals, without receiving ‘secure’ modes of direction from the figure identified as the convenor of the group. For these reasons, Hopper (2006) argues that when the project of the large group is experiential, interpretation ‘should be directed towards helping the participants learn from experience’ (13) and that the attentive silence more commonly associated with more psychoanalytic or group analytic projects (and, by extension of his own point, with the circular topography) ‘can be oppressive and even persecuting’ (13) when misapplied to the experiential large group.

Each individual is a component part of numerous groups, he is bound by ties of identification in many directions … Each individual therefore has a share in numerous group minds – those of his race, of his class, of his creed, of his nationality, etc – and he can also raise himself above them to the extent of having a scrap of independence and originality. (Sigmund Freud [1921] 1991, 161)

Large groups have dynamics all their own (Freud [1921] 1991; Kreeger 1975b), so that part of the experience of the membership has to do with numerical considerations: although, as Freud first noted, sheer numbers do not of themselves generate instincts that did not pre-exist the formation of the group in question. Kreeger (1975a) considered that his book treated of groups of more than 40 members; Foulkes (1975), in the same volume, thought that large group phenomena came into view at around 30 members; Hopper and Weyman (1975) suggest a membership of more than 50. Finally, Main (1975) has the threshold figure at 20. These variations are important but there seems to be consensus that beyond a certain number of bodies being in the room – sufficient that small group dynamics are effaced and not all members can see each other’s faces – the idea of the existence of an object known as a large group enters into the discourse.

This ‘idea’ is immediately disturbing, as numerous authors have attested (see especially Turquet 1975). Miller, discussing (and defending) the Leicesters Conferences (a particular tradition of group relations events featuring large and small group and intergroup events) reports that ‘many individuals feel disturbed at times, and some may exhibit seemingly bizarre behaviour – hardly surprising in a setting that is quite unconventional’ (Miller 1990, 183). Main writes that ‘in large unstructured groups … projective processes may be wide-spread and can lead to baffling, even chaotic situations, which can bring the group’s work to a standstill’ and that members ‘do not have their full thinking-capacities at their own disposal’ (Main 1975, 60). Hopper notes that ‘when anxious, which in a large group is usually the order of the day, because identities are always under threat, people oscillate between
Bion (1961) argued that a group is intrinsically a phantasied object in the mind of the individual (that is to say, the relationship of self to group is the unconsciously represented mental expression both of instinctual impulses and of defences against such impulses; Hinshelwood 1991) and he suggested that a group encourages regression in the mind of the individual because a group (whether small or large ‘in reality’) presents to the mind as a large object – associated with a bigger body – in relation to which one immediately feels small. This generates the unconscious experience of a feeding relationship to what, following Lévi-Strauss ([1955] 2011), we might term a frightening, anthropophagic/anthropoemic mother figure: a figure threatening either cannibalistic incorporation of the vulnerable needy self, like Kronos/Saturn feeding off his young in the ancient Graeco-Roman myth, or violently casting out the unwanted hungering mouth. This relates to the tendency in large groups to seize upon stereotyped sub-groups experienced as ‘other’, because the large-group-as-a-whole is such a vast object in the mind (Turquet 1975). The sub-group is then constituted as a problematically different but somehow more ‘manageable’ other and the feared fate of the individual (to be consumed or to be expelled) is projected into it.

Lévi-Strauss ([1955] 2011, 388) described a process of (anthropoemically) ‘ejecting dangerous individuals from the social body and keeping them … in isolation’. In this scenario there is no difference left to trouble us, for the threatening object of the large group has been broken down into hated part-objects or sub-groups that have then been expelled from consciousness. However, if the large group is appropriately constituted and convened and the membership can retrieve aspects of its capacity for emotional thinking, the perception of difference – of individuals and of sub-groups – can re-emerge. There is then the potential for Freud’s ‘scrap of independence and originality’ or even Foucault’s ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges’ (Foucault 1980, 81) – the emergence of discourses other than those which overtly or covertly dominate – even if repressive or colonising (anthropoemic or anthropophagic) responses may also follow in their turn.

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…I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason – Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. (John Keats, from a letter to his brothers, George and Tom Keats, December 1817).

In the Conference programme, the above passage from Keats’ letters (Keats 2002, 41–2) was used to introduce the task of the Experiential Large
Group and to hint at possible overlaps between ‘method’ and ‘outcome’. There is a hint at method, because groups of this kind are ‘unstructured’ and follow no agenda of business but proceed associatively and therefore ‘uncertainties, mysteries and doubts’ confront the membership from the outset. The possible outcome of ‘half-knowledge’ is evoked, because perhaps the route towards the verisimilitudes of the ‘Penetralium’, the ‘inner sanctum’ of learning from experience is not a secure one and neither knowing nor not-knowing offer the key. I used the Conference programme to suggest to the potential membership that the Experiential Large Group ‘provides a setting and a quality of experience in which the “irritable reaching after fact and reason” may be set aside – or the resistances to so doing may emerge to become the object of study’.

Keats’ letter of December 1817 is the only point at which he is known to have made explicit written reference to his idea of negative capability. Indeed, there is some question of the accuracy or at any rate completeness of the text of the letter, which comes down to us only via transcription (Ou 2009). However, Ou analyses the corpus of Keats’ letters to show how he evoked and developed what for him was specifically an aesthetic of negative capability: ‘I can never feel certain of any truth but from a clear perception of its Beauty’, he writes in 1818 (Keats 2002, 175). In the same passage he avers that ‘I have made up my Mind never to take anything for granted’. The following winter he writes again to his brother and sister-in-law:

... Dilke was a Man who cannot feel he has a personal identity unless he has made up his Mind about every thing. The only means of strengthening one’s intellect is to make up one’s mind about nothing ... Dilke will never come at a truth as long as he lives; because he is always trying at it. (Keats 2002, 303)

This condensation of the idea of negative capability (don’t ‘try at a truth’ if you want to ‘come at one’) is directly referenced and echoed in Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials stories, particularly in the passages in which Lyra discovers how to use the ‘alethiometer’ and Will is taught to wield the ‘subtle knife’ (Pullman 2000). Ou (2009) writes that ‘to be negatively capable is to be open to the actual vastness and complexity of experience’ and therefore ‘to abandon the comfortable enclosure of doctrinaire knowledge’ (2). Negative capability is ‘fundamentally experiential, aiming to encompass and convey the ... complexity of experience, as opposed to an idealist stance, which seeks to abstract ideas or doctrines from experience’ (4–5, my italics).

Bion (1970) used the idea of negative capability to illustrate his notion that the psychoanalyst needs to approach the encounter with the patient in a frame of mind in which there is a ‘positive discipline of eschewing memory
and desire’ (31) in pursuit of a shared ‘Language of Achievement’ (125) – this latter term being an echo of Keats’ depiction of Shakespeare as a ‘Man of Achievement’ ‘so enormously’ possessing the quality of negative capability (Keats 2002, 41). Scanlon (2012) suggests that negative capability may be a necessary response to what Honig (1994) calls ‘dilemmatic spaces’. For Honig, all moral subjects are situated in dilemmatic spaces that constitute them: the subject is ‘positioned on conflictual axes of identity/difference such that her agency itself is constituted by and daily mired in dilemmatic choices and negotiations’ (568). Dilemmas are spaces rather than events. They do not come from nowhere; rather, they are ‘the eventual eruptions of a turbulence that is always already there … the periodic crystallisations of incoherences and conflicts in social orders and their subjects’ (569). In this argument, she anticipates Žižek’s distinction between subjective violence (the perceived violent event) and objective violence (the violence, symbolic and systemic, that is the background context for all our lives) (Žižek 2008). There is also an echo here of Bion’s comment that resistance to growth is ‘endo-psychic and endo-gregious; it is associated with turbulence in the individual and in the group to which the growing individual belongs’ (Bion 1970, 34). I suggest that Honig is giving an account, albeit in very different language, of the large group dynamics mapped out by the group analysts and other social theorists referred to in the previous section of this paper.

An experiential large group, if we link and follow through these ideas, not only is then experienced as a particular dilemmatic space, in which ideas of difference and identity are unstable and troubled and contested: it is also a space in which the dilemmatic nature of the larger social system of the temporary learning community around it may be glimpsed and become apparent. Seen in this light, moreover, the idea of a ‘secure edifice of knowledge’ becomes highly problematic – for how could such a building be constructed in such a conflictual space, inhabited by such unhoused and bewildered subjects, without saturating it with rigid and enclosing formations of knowledge that are fenced off from too much interrogation and exclusive of those not held to be initiates? For the membership of such a group (and here I mean on principle to include the convenor as a member, albeit one with an apparently distinct allocated role), an insecure half-knowledge may be the safest experiential learning outcome.

...each of us is, as it were, circumscribed by many circles; some of which are less, but others larger ... the first, indeed, and most proximate circle is that which everyone describes about his own mind as a centre, in which circle the body, and whatever is assumed for the sake of the body, are comprehended. For this is the smallest circle, and almost touches the centre itself. The second from this ... is that in which parents, brothers, wife, and children are arranged. The third circle from the centre is that which contains uncles and
aunts, grandfathers and grandmothers … Next … is that which contains the 
common people, then that which comprehends those of the same tribe. 
Afterwards that which contains the citizens; and then two other circles follow, 
one being the circle of those that dwell in the vicinity of the city, and the 
other, of those of the same province. But the outermost and greatest circle, 
and which comprehends all the other circles, is that of the whole human race 
… it is the province of him who strives to conduct himself properly in each 
of these connections to collect, in a certain respect, the circles, as it were, to 
one centre, and always to endeavour earnestly to transfer himself from the 
comprehending circles to the several particulars which they comprehend. 
(Hierocles 1822).

How then can the experiential large group afford to its membership the best 
opportunity for the emergence of Freud’s ‘scraps of independence and origi-
nality’? I return now to the question of the topographical difference between 
concentric circle and spiral arrangements of the chairs in the room. My col-
leagues and I have explored the dynamics of ‘metropolitan’ systems of care 
and of government, concentrating upon the ways in which such systems and 
discourses exclude the out-group by the terms on which inclusion is offered 
by the in-group (Pelletier 2011; Scanlon and Adlam 2011b; Scanlon and 
Adlam 2013). We have made particular use of the figure of Diogenes the 
Cynic, who, when asked where he came from, replied ‘I am a citizen of the 
world’ (‘kosmopolites’) (Diogenes Laertius 2005, 6.63).

Diogenes may have coined the term ‘cosmopolitan’ but he was no 
proponent of ideological systems of any description and it was the Stoics, in 
particular Zeno of Citium, who started to teach in Athens around 300 BC, 
who developed a coherent philosophy of cosmopolitanism. Martin (forthcom-
ing; see also Scanlon and Adlam 2013) quotes Plutarch’s description of 
Zeno’s position:

The much admired Republic of Zeno … is aimed at this main point, that our 
household arrangements should not be based on cities or parishes, each one 
marked out by its own legal system, but we should regard all men as our fel-
cow citizens and local residents, and there should be one way of life and 
order, like that of a herd grazing together and nurtured by a common law. 
(Martin forthcoming, quoting from Plutarch, On the Fortune of Alexander 
329A–B)

Martin goes on to re-examine the Stoic doctrine of oikeiosis, which asserts 
a fundamental primitive attachment to one’s self and one’s own constitution 
as a living being. The Stoic philosopher Hierocles, writing possibly in the 
first half of the second century AD, offers the image, quoted above, of con-
centric circles, the smallest being the mind of the individual, expanding out-
wards through familial and tribal and citizenship ties to the largest circle: 
the human race itself. Although Hierocles wrote that the dilution of blood 
ties would naturally correspond to a diminution in warmth of attachment 
(‘for something of benevolence must be taken away from those who are
more distant from us by blood; though at the same time we should endeav-
our that an assimilation may take place between us and them’ (Hierocles
1822)), the ethical challenge, if we accept this metaphor of concentric cir-
cles, concerns whether or not it is possible to aspire to a communalism
within which all are equally connected or interdependent and no-one needs
to measure their distance from the centre in order to ‘know their place’.

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God loves from whole to parts: but human soul
Must rise from individual to the whole.
Self-love but serves the virtuous mind to wake
As the small pebble stirs the peaceful lake;
The centre mov’d, a circle strait succeeds,
Another still, and still another spreads;
Friend, parent, neighbour, first it will embrace;
His country next; and next all human race …
(Alexander Pope 1734, from Essay on Man, Epistle IV)

These precedents would therefore appear to offer a previously unformulated
rationale for the concentric circles of a certain type of large group, tasked,
as Hopper (2006) suggests, with deliberating matters of shared concern. In
this way of understanding the dynamics of learning from experience within
the large group, the figure of the convenor represents or signifies a practice,
not only of negative capability but also of inclusion. This figure then poten-
tially allows each member of the large group, whether in the ‘inner’ or
‘outer’ rings, to feel themselves in an equal position from which to take up
their membership (or what Hopper conceptualises in a particular sense as
their ‘citizenship’, evoking the concept of koinonia or ‘impersonal fellow-
ship’; Hopper 2000, 2002; see also de Maré 1975) in original and indepen-
dent ways. But what then are we to make of the idea that experiential
learning is best pursued in the spiral topography and that concentric circles
are in comparison a familiar formation, upon which one might fall back in
relief? Perhaps the Stoics and their Cosmopolitan successors have still not
entirely escaped from the seemingly benign but covertly oppressive
‘Metropolitan’ practice of ‘inclusion’.

The fragmented and agonised and excluded subjects depicted by Honig
(1994) or Judith Butler (1997) are perhaps more unsettled by the spiral
topography because their subjection is potentially more apparent to them
and, at the same time, the possibilities for at least a momentary reconstitu-
tion of self are more tangible and even tantalising. For a spiral has a
notional centre and a notional rim – a chair that is apparently closest to the
middle and another chair that appears to sit at the outer limit – but at the
same time, the topography evokes infinite continuations in both ‘directions’.
It winds inward towards the centre of the flat plane that one can never be certain of reaching and it winds outwards towards what is in essence an arbitrarily marked perimeter (one runs out of chairs, or runs up against the walls of the room, but the shape of the arrangement of chairs evokes its own indefinite continuation).

It is not quite obvious, in short, that there is an inside or an outside to the spiral – even though these ideas are frequently referred back to by the membership in their initial disorientation. The spiral of the experiential large group therefore could be said to exist outside of both ‘metropolitan’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ practices and models of inclusion or inclusivity, in a particular kind of dilemmatic space in which secure forms of knowledge can be interrogated and insecure edifices of learning can be developed. In the spiral topography, the convenor is much more of a member than in the concentric circle model. Undoubtedly, she has power \textit{a priori}, for it is she who sets out the chairs in the first place and names the time when the work of the group begins and ends. The conference space is also saturated with formations of knowledge that would covertly insist that she is the leader (and therefore a ‘front person’ for the oppressor(s)) of the group – and one must cautiously note that both permanence and impermanence, rigidity and chaos, have equal status as fantasies to be explored, rather than as facts to be assumed \textit{a priori}.

But there is room here for optimism – not perhaps to the extent that Pope was proposing in his \textit{Essay on Man}, but nonetheless something like a glimpse of what Rancière ([1987] 1991) terms a ‘practice of equality’. Rancière tells the story of Jacotot, the nineteenth-century schoolteacher exiled from post-Napoleonic France who discovered that if he discarded the ‘saturated’ idea of the knowledge/power differential between himself and his Flemish pupils, he could enable them to learn French, even though he spoke no Flemish. The experiential large group is more dialogical than didactic. Its concentric circles in exploration of ‘matters of concern’ to its membership are Cosmopolitan but its spirals in pursuit of learning from experience are more egalitarian; the challenge (the impossible task?) for the convenor is to try to hold the realisation that all the agonised subjects temporarily housed in the space of the group are equal in their common humanity and intellect and that all half-knowledges, all experiments in learning from experience in the group, including her own, are of equal validity and authority.

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