When sleep proved elusive on the overnight flight to Rome, we thought about the task ahead. We were on our way to staff a Diversity Work Conference (DWC) for NTL Institute (wwwntl.org) and The Lincoln Workshop Series (www.appreciative-inquiry.com). Old hands at leading the DWC in the US, we were on a different edge when it came to delivering that lab in a global context. How to make it relevant for a diverse, international group of participants who were mature and competent in their own fields of endeavor, including group work?

The DWC is an intensive, experiential, weeklong diversity-inclusion learning and competency development “conference” based on NTL Institute’s signature T-Group1 technology. The DWC develops awareness, skills, and use of self2 in relation to the myriad social identities present in any group of participants, with a particular focus on power, equity, access, and inclusion. It was created to assure quality in the delivery and facilitation of NTL’s laboratory education programs. Successful completion of the DWC is required of NTL members in order to staff the Human Interaction and other core labs.

The DWC had never been offered outside the US. Given NTL’s presence around the world and commitment to its global membership, we wanted to provide access to NTL’s qualifying process for non-US members and expand critical competencies in the membership by offering a DWC outside the US.3

The lab was held in a 15th century Benedictine monastery remade into a 21st century retreat and conference center, just outside the medieval walled city of Gallese, Italy. Participants came from Europe.

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1. A T-Group (or training group) develops one’s interpersonal effectiveness in both one-on-one and group-level encounters. As participants work together over an extended period of time, they learn by analyzing their experience in the group, including the feelings, emotions, reactions, and perceptions that emerge as the group works, as well as behavior (theirs and others’) and its impact (see Cooke, 1999). T-Group technology was innovated in the late 1940s by the founders of NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science.

2. A competency has three parts: knowledge, skill (behavior), and use of self (Moore & Huntley, 2011).

3. The authors acknowledge Mette Jacobsgaard, a member of NTL Institute, and Scott McVicker, then-COO of NTL Institute, for ensuring that DWC Italy took place. It would not have happened without their efforts.
(Denmark, London, The Netherlands, and Scotland), India, Israel, and the US. They were professionals trained in various fields involving group work, from OD to psychotherapy, international human rights law, and social work. About half were NTL members.

The design of the DWC allows for any diversities present in the T Group to emerge organically in response to the continuous and complex interplay of social power dynamics among members as the group develops over time. Many social identities and dimensions of difference component also include an experiential activity beyond nationality and geography were named in the Gallese T-Group as the week unfolded. These included (but were not limited to) race and skin color, sex/gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, class, and age/generation.

The design also provides for various conceptual inputs to be presented by faculty. In terms of topics, the primary conceptual inputs typically include social power dynamics (e.g., cultural dominant-group and subordinated group system [i.e., in-group/out-group, up/down] dynamics), race and skin color, sex/gender, sexual orientation, and class. The conceptual components also include an experiential activity and reflection time in learning pairs or trios as well as in plenary.

The primary responsibility of faculty is to create a safe container for learning, risk-taking, and self-development, in addition to creating a solid design that can flex in response to emergent social phenomena in the T-Group. The operative word in that statement is safe. We work to create a container for learning in which participants can take risks toward developing themselves at their own personal/professional learning and growing edges.

However, we do not seek to keep participants comfortable because comfort in social space is often about social power. In an oppressive system, status is determined by whether you belong to the culturally dominant group or the culturally subordinated group on the dimension of diversity that is figural in that context. Cultural dominants expect to be kept comfortable by the culturally subordinated group. Having
time to creating a solid design that can flex in response to emergent social phenomena that statement is in response to making a living. The design decision that made the lab relevant and powerful for their learning is the week unfolded and the T Group developed.

Once we had locked onto power as the starting point, the concept was startling in its clarity and simplicity. We knew that it would be a mistake to begin with a specific dimension of diversity; for example, race and skin color, as if we – American consultants – had something to teach professionals from outside the US about specific issues of diversity that might be seen as most relevant in the US context. Indeed, one participant reflected on the second day that he had been worried about this being a “70s-style American” diversity workshop and thus a waste of his professional development Euros. He was pleased that it was not that, and that he was having the opportunity to examine his own cultural dominance and its impact on his intervention practice, presence in the group, and use of self.

As we reflected on the whole lab experience in the days to follow, we were able to see – given the wisdom and clarity of hindsight – that we had both designed and facilitated “outside the box” that had been built from all the assumptions, learnings, and insights from our collective experience prior to the Italy experience. It was a good and sturdy box that supported us well in the past but going to Europe to work with an international group illuminated its limitations. The work in Gallese would need a better box.

The program may be pushing us too far beyond the limits of our competency or our psyche, into our personal danger zone. It is a job for each of us to critically examine the reasons for our discomfort, and to be as honest with ourselves as we can be so that we don’t, for instance, blame an agent outside ourselves when we really need to be holding ourselves accountable for being challenged in our cultural dominance.

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