

This does not mean that everyone is completely comfortable in the group, but the community feeling starts to emerge and the “norming” starts.

With the relationships and roles somewhat defined, the group might reach the “performing” stage, when they have a common vision and a common goal. This will very much depend on the length of the learning process and type of training activity. In any case, participants are more likely to start approaching each other assertively and are at the height of their performance.

Finally, the time comes to say goodbye and in order for the group to separate in a healthy way and continue to follow their own paths, “adjourning” is very important to let go of the group and make closure.

This is Tuckman’s model in a nutshell, and its stages can be very helpful in deciphering what is happening in the group, as well as in deciding what method or intervention to apply to support it in functioning more constructively. Of course, reality is hardly ever like a model. Very often a group does not follow the stages in such a linear way. The beginning and the end, forming and adjourning, are or should be there, but the rest of the stages might go one after another, or there might be some back and forth, or some stages might even be skipped. Essentially, trainers as a team should be aware of different stages and support the group in functioning as constructively as possible in order to support individual and group learning. Some of the usual case scenarios that can be encountered are as follows:¹⁴⁹

- ▶ “We did our two sessions of group building. It all went well! It’s all smooth sailing from now on.” Well, not necessarily. Group building does not only happen at the beginning and we strongly recommend that the team keeps following and working on the group dynamics throughout the training in order to support the group process.
- ▶ “Our group is getting along so well! I think this storming business is fake news!” That is great! However, keep in mind that:
 - Storming might be happening, but trainers are just not aware of it (it can happen in smaller groups too).
 - Storming might still come and if it does towards the end of a training session, it can really mess up the whole process.
 - Storming allows the group to work through the tensions and stop being polite and superficial. So trainers might want to see if they can support it to happen.
- ▶ “Help! Our group is stuck at the storming level. No one seems to be talking to anyone else and some of them were even insulting each other!” If that happens, some of the things that trainers can do are:
 - First calm down and take some deep breaths. And remember: this is a normal and expected phase.
 - Start by bringing the group together and discuss what is going on. Often when participants understand the process, they also feel more comfortable about it.
 - Help them address the issues, explain their feelings and find solutions in order to move on.
 - Support them in setting up some common rules and dividing roles.
- ▶ “We are almost at the end of the training and the group does not seem connected at all! What can we do about it?”
 - One thing that could have been done is to notice it sooner and introduce activities that are likely to bring the group together.
 - But even then, there is no guarantee that it will actually happen. Some groups simply do not click or are too stuck in the storming phase and can’t seem to find a way out.
 - Luckily, it does not happen that often. So, next time it will be better for sure!
- ▶ “Our group is working so well together! Our street campaign is coming along smoothly and everyone is just so happy about it!” Fantastic! Congratulations! When it happens, it is pure magic. Almost like the aurora borealis. Almost... :)
- ▶ “Our training is coming to an end. Participants are so sad to be leaving tomorrow. We just can’t do additional activities – that would make them even more miserable!” We know it is tough, but trainers should still try to do it. Adjourning activities might make participants more emotional in the moment, but would help them move on in a healthier and happier way. Courage!

Now this all might imply that you, as a team and individual trainers, are the only ones responsible for the group dynamics. In fact, this is not and should not be true. Only by sharing this responsibility with the participants

149. Borrowed from *Cherry on the cake*, SALTO-YOUTH publication, available at www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3198/Cherry%20on%20the%20cake%20%20publication.pdf, accessed 6 October 2020.

is there a chance of creating a group as a source of learning and support. It is important to provide spaces for participants to learn about themselves from others and to support them in their learning through (self) reflection and feedback. Self-awareness at individual level is essential in order to create self-awareness in the group (see section 3.5.3, Focusing the programme on the participants).

4.1.3. Theme-centred interaction (TCI)

As part of the discussion on training strategies (section 3.3.1) we considered the Swiss psychologist Ruth Cohn's theory of group and learning processes, theme-centred interaction (TCI) (1981), which is very nicely elaborated in the *Coyote* article "TCI or theme-centred interaction: a model for interaction in groups".¹⁵⁰

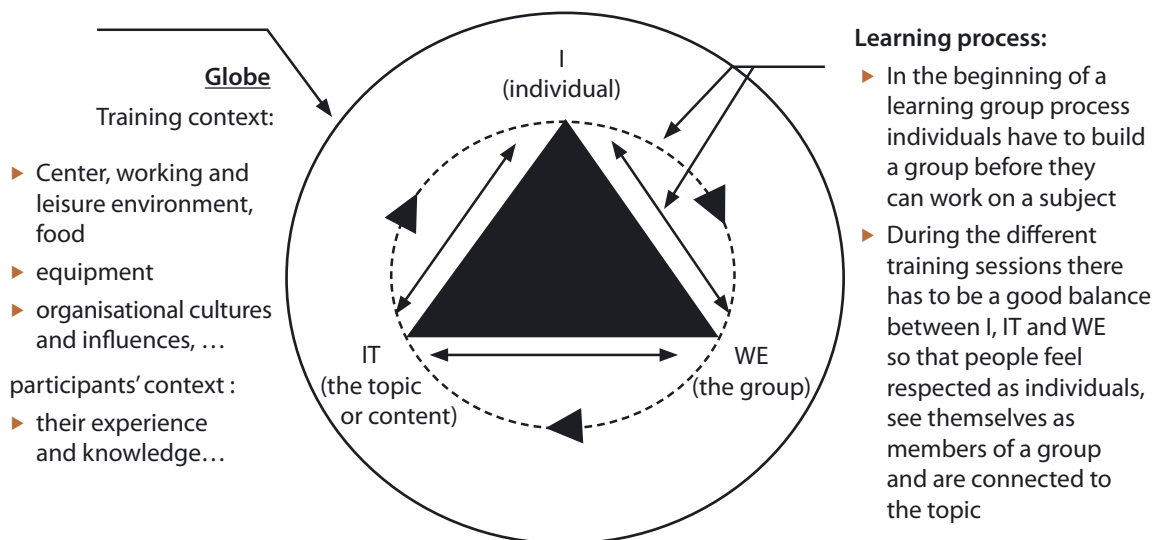
Each learning situation can be seen as determined by four factors:

- ▶ I (individual): motivations, interests, personal histories and levels of involvement of the individual participants, as well as the infamous luggage they may bring with them.
- ▶ WE (group): the relationships, dynamics and types of co-operation within the group.
- ▶ IT (topic): the subjects and content of the training.
- ▶ Globe: the training and organisational environment (also partly represented by the participants).

A crucial goal for the trainer and team is to enable conditions for harmony and balance between the individual, the group, the topics explored and the environment in which all of this takes place, while recognising that this balance is dynamic. There is a continuous flow and counter flow from the individual needs to the group needs to the topic to the individual, and onwards.

The theme-centred interaction model

The interdependence of the individual participants, the training group, the training subject(s) and the training environment



Adapted from Cohn (1981).

Disturbances result from disjunctions in these relationships. For example, if a participant is not well integrated into the group or there are a couple of participants that keep disturbing the process for the others, then very often trainers tend to focus on dealing with this, and the rest of the group, or even the focus of the training, might suffer because of it. Or, if the group is only concerned about dealing with itself for a long time, then there is no focus or a clear task to keep things moving. Treating these relationships as dynamic means realising that priorities can be different at different stages of growth. An obvious example is the need to allow time and space for a group to form before the training subjects can be introduced in depth. Or, at the beginning of the learning process, methods should be chosen (often based on smaller group work) which allow individuals to slowly integrate into the group. "Balance" is a notion that takes on meaning in relation to each individual group. Trainers need to maintain balance by focusing on the neglected aspects of the group and learning

¹⁵⁰ Wicke (2003).