Some reflections on not knowing in the here and now

De auteur van dit artikel heeft de opleiding IPDP gevolgd in 2006 en was *staff member* in de simulatie The Yachtclub. Hij beschrijft wat dit voor hem heeft betekent en bespreekt vervolgens vier multi-partijsimulaties die hij samen met anderen ontwikkelde voor de Babeş-Bolyai University in Roemenië. Tot slot bepleit hij nut en noodzaak van deze vorm van leren in het hoger onderwijs.

Door **Petru Curșeu**

Leopold Vansina's thinking and writings on organizational development and psycho-dynamic approaches to organizational analy-sis and consultation had profound implica-tions for how I understand and facilitate experiential learning and group consultation. I followed the International Professional Development Institute Programme (IPDP) in 2006 and this is how I first met Vansina. I was introduced to the IPDP community by Sandra Schruijer. She supervised my PhD and told me that it would be important to engage with new ways of learning about groups in order to really understand groups and group dynamics. This remark came just after I defended my PhD on group decision-making. At that time, I was teaching about small groups for about two years, so you can imagine that after successfully teaching about and researching groups for a while, I thought: 'I understand groups'. The declared aim and the expressed ambition of the IDPD was to help develop participants in truly understanding groups and group dynamics, and in order to do so, Vansina and Schruijer started from 'where the clients (meaning the participants) were'. I am convinced that most, if not all of us, thought we knew groups. Some of us from a vast professional experi-ence of working in and with groups, some of us from reading extensively about groups and group dynamics in books and scientific

papers. In my case, it was this 'arrogance of knowing' that Vansina and the IPDP-team had to start from, and eventually work their way forward.

Attending IPDP started a learning journey that helped me gain a better understanding of the deep undercurrents through which

I think the 'arrogance of knowing' is one of the key points Vansina and the IPDP team had to break through

individuals and groups learn, change and eventually evolve. Working with Vansina challenged me to go beyond rationalistic theory and technique-driven methods of analyzing groups into more nuanced, relational and emotionally centered approaches. I did not really know this back then, in 2006, yet thinking of Vansina and his legacy for me as a person, researcher, educator and group scholar, I think this 'arrogance of knowing' is one of the key points he and the IPDP-team had to break through. When your mind is filled with theories, models and rational thoughts about groups, how can you look at groups with no resort to memory? It was Vansina's bright mind and sharp observation spirit that deconstructed my arrogance about knowing (about) groups.

In my notes from 2006, I read today one of his remarks: 'As a group observer, the more you let your inner world take over, the less you truly understand what happens in the group, yet the reality of what happens in the group is illusory and it cannot be defined independently of the observer.' Building on

Bion's notion that group facilitators should be receptive to the group 'without memory or desire' and not be clouded by personal biases, expectations and theoretical concepts (Bion, 1961; 1970), he emphasized the importance of the observer's state of mind in perceiving group dynamics and he cautioned against letting theoretical constructs, unconscious reactions or personal projections interfere with observing group phenomena. While observing and working with groups, one has to maintain openness to what really happens in the group, which requires the capacity to tolerate uncertainty, doubt, ambiguity and cultivate a state of 'not knowing'. Seeking peace with the 'not knowing' and finding that attunement to the group that allows me to pin down unconscious group processes remain a struggle and a challenge for me to this day.

Another key point that Vansina emphasized was that meaningful change arises from engaging directly with experience and not merely analyzing it retrospectively in a rationalized manner that empties it from the emotional tensions and contradictions. He underscored the importance of engaging with the tensions instead of trying to resolve them too quickly. It is not sufficient to discuss (group) emotions, it is paramount to create a learning context in which these emotions are first experienced and then reflected on in the here and now. Focusing on the here and now, allows a deeper exploration and understanding of emotions in a real-time and context-rich environment. Reflecting on the here and now, means to create spaces where emotional discomfort can be surfaced and worked through, rather than avoided.

I had the privilege of working with Leopold Vansina, Sandra Schruijer and Tharsi Taillieu

in various contexts in which The Yacht Club multiparty simulation (Schruijer, Taillieu, Vansina & Curșeu, 2024; Vansina, Taillieu & Schruijer, 1998) was used as an experiential learning context, or as a transitional space to help practitioners develop their understanding of complex collaborative relations. Such sessions were authentic learning experiences for me. On the one hand they offered me the opportunity of experiencing the group dynamics as it unfolded in its complexity in real life. Participating as a staff member in The Yacht Club, introduced me to a different way of looking at groups. They opened up a rich, context specific way of looking at groups as living systems (Schruijer et al., 2024). During the multiparty simulations, I always looked up at how Vansina, Schruijer, and Taillieu engaged with 'sharing, comparing and finding out'. I tried to absorb and learn from the way they jointly made sense of the dynamics unfolding in the here and now. Every time different, every time special, every time tough and complex. I was always fascinated by Vansina's capacity to emerge from the 'not knowing' with the most insightful remarks and observations of dynamics unfolding in the here and now. Sometimes he looked as if he was asleep during the plenary meetings. Once I dared to ask him whether he was indeed asleep. He replied: 'When there is no energy in the group and somnolence and drowsiness kicks in, very little really happens in the group. Some other times you have to allow the images of the group to come into your mind in a dreamlike state in order to integrate what is manifest or what is being said and what is latent or the music behind the words.' Sometimes, Vansina had the funniest ways of illustrating such abstract terms as 'music behind the

words' or 'unconscious emotions'. I noted one of his analogies: 'A psychoanalyst and a dog listen to a patient talking about his experiences. Every now and then the dog pricks up its ears. For the psychoanalyst, this is a sign that the patient expresses emotions that are deeply unconscious and independent of the psychoanalyst.' This, Leopold said, was presumably a joke initially mentioned by Harold Bridger.

One of his later interpretative tendencies was to describe the plenary sessions in The Yacht Club in very concise ways, sometimes using a single word, sometimes a sentence. In the early stages of the simulations statements like 'how good ideas are turned into procedures', 'being in the dependency mood', or 'the storm' clearly relate to the unconscious social dynamics, while later in the simulation he used statements like 'the escape in the fantasy of achievement', 'the unbelievable surprise' or the 'the crash landing' to describe the confrontation with reality as participants struggled to get to terms with the complex interdependencies unfolding in the multiparty simulation. 'Labeling will not

The learning groups and learning communities Vansina facilitated had a deep personal impact as well

change things', Vansina used to say, but I believe it offered the participants (and me as an apprentice in group dynamics) cues that helped us make sense of the dynamics that unfolded during the plenary meetings in The Yacht Club. In these transitional spaces, he

opened windows for change. He enabled people to work through tensions that arose from the simulation (past) and head towards a plausible future that, he used to say, 'is only partially known'.

Meeting Vansina did not only change my professional and scholarly outlook on groups. The learning groups and learning communities he facilitated had a deep personal impact as well. Not only for me, as far as I can tell, but for most of the other IPDP participants, who made major changes in personal and professional lives for the better as a consequence. Personal integrity and truth seeking were key values that he emphasized not only for consultants, but for any person seeking authenticity and fulfilment in their lives. In the truth seeking quest, he advocated 'sharing, comparing and finding out' by using multiple and diverse methodologies, perspectives and viewpoints. He once stated that 'alternative truth seeking methodologies can yield similar results, yet they are not equally effective tools for learning'. Learning about groups does not emerge by simply accumulating facts, theories and models, but also by processing emotional experiences and transform them into valuable insights into group dynamics (Bion, 1961). To make things clear even for the ones unaccustomed to the psychoanalytic terminology, Vansina provided yet another compelling analogy between truth seeking and eating/tasting soup: 'A single spoonful is not necessarily representative of the whole bowl of soup.'
Vansina encouraged us to look at the greater picture, he was teaching about and stimulated participants to think about Corporate Social Responsibility, before the concept really took off as a trend. As professionals, he

considered that managers and consultants have to be engaged with the larger societal contexts and to contribute to these actively by dealing with its challenges. Up till his final years, he was himself active and socially engaged in an attempt to help underprivileged groups like migrants and refugees. He also helped organizations look at the greater societal picture and take their role as societal change agents seriously. Such a holistic approach and epistemological diversity had a major impact on my choices as a scholar. My current research interests are eclectic and the research methods I use are diverse. I also try to convey this diversified and holistic approach to the younger generation of scholars I collaborate with.

Vansina certainly inspired me to take my role as educator more seriously and go beyond simply, and mechanically, conveying concepts and models of groups during my classes. In the joint assessment that followed my learning groups sessions in 2006, he and Schruijer dared me to 'take risks and experiment with other ways of teaching students about groups and group dynamics'. Based on my IPDP experience and insights, I introduced courses on group dynamics at BA level (my Romanian colleagues now run a multiparty simulation weekly for the first six weeks of the semester) and I have introduced a whole discipline on multiparty collaboration in a MA program at Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. To support these curricular activities, we developed several multiparty simulations that use specific Romanian contextual elements, and two Romanian PhD students graduated on topics tied to multiparty systems. It is difficult to maintain such topics in the educational programs, as group dynam-

ics vanished almost completely from the curricular activities in higher education across Europe (Schruijer & Curșeu, 2014), yet I must say that students (in their own words and assessments) seem to benefit strongly from such educational approaches. I try therefore to keep the group dynamics legacy alive and share it with the new generations of students. In what follows, I will reflect on some insights from four multiparty simulations that I used as experiential learning tools during the past years.

Stories from four multiparty simulations

One of the suggestions received during the IPDP program in 2006, was to engage with group dynamics more deeply, by for example, making it part of curricular activities and by creating a context in which students can engage with group dynamics through experiential learning. It was this recommendation that led me to develop together with my colleagues at Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania several behavioral simulations that were used in various courses, either as short experiential learning exercises, or as core educational approaches in courses of multiparty collaboration and negotiation.

> *Between 1977 and 1989 psychology was considered a subversive science in Romania*

Group dynamics, in the Bionian tradition, was never popular in Romania. After the publica-

tion of his influential papers in the 1950s and especially after 1961, when his transformative insights were synthesized in *Experiences in Groups* (Bion, 1961), Romanian psychology was continuously under threat and surveillance of the communist authorities, as it came at odds with the propagandistic idea of a 'new communist human being' (David et al., 2023). Between 1977 and 1989 psychology was considered a subversive science and as a consequence was forbidden in Romanian universities (Glaveanu, 2009; Neculau, 2004). After 1989, when psychology was reintroduced in the major universities, its focus was predominantly individualistic, seeking alignment with the dominant western scientific trends at the time. Working with elements of group dynamics in psychology was (and still is) rather difficult, as the dominant mindset among students was (and to a large extent still is) that psychological experiences are reducible to what happens between one's ears. The sociality of human mind was elusive, while the (psycho)dynamic phenomena were considered pseudoscientific constructs with no sound scientific grounding. To some extent the psychodynamic study of groups remained divorced from the dominant trends in the western world as well (Schruijer & Curșeu, 2014), therefore it should come as no surprise that when we first started to work with behavioral multiparty simulations, and brought in the notion of unconscious dynamics such as collective emotions and basic assumptions, during debriefing, one of the key questions students asked was: 'Why do I need to know this?' The question remains a concern to this day, as students are used to (more) conveniently finding out what they need to know about groups by asking Google or some other AI-powered systems, rather

Multiparty decisions on the Education Law
The first simulation we developed used elements familiar to the Romanian students and created a more structured context, in which students were organized in six parties that had to interact, discuss, debate and eventually reach a collaborative decision on two key topics related to an Education Law (EL). In order to foster students' engagement and identification with the parties as participants in the multiparty simulation, we have selected six key stakeholders of the Romanian education system, namely the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, the Ministry of National Education, the National Alliance of Student Organizations in Romania, the National Trade Unions Federation, the Civil Society and the Romanian Association of Entrepreneurs. The generic information used in the simulation described the context in which two articles of the Education Law were under debate and the core task of the participants was to jointly decide whether these two EL articles should be (1) immediately applied, (2) postponed for a limited period, (3) postponed for an unlimited period of time or (4) suspended. All in all the multiparty simulation captured a collaborative decision context in which parties with divergent views had to discuss the EL in order to reach agreement on the two articles. The simulation was particularly useful to illustrate power dynamics in multiparty systems and to illustrate some of the unconscious dynamics that emerged during interactions (Flestea, Curșeu & Fodor, 2017). Dependency in relation to the Ministry of National Education was often manifested by participants asking for a clear vision to be shared with the group and tell them what to choose. In some simulations National Trade Unions Federation was scapegoated as blocking any progress towards a meaningful agreement and the Civil Society and the representative of the entrepreneurs rallied against this enemy of progress in higher education.

A resource allocation dilemma in multiparty systems
We have adapted a multiparty simulation context described in Mallinger (1999) to capture the hidden integrative potential of complex situations that are initially framed as distributive, such that apparently the parties involved have to divide resources in the form of a fixed pie. The simulation can be run within a two-hour window (Trif, Curșeu & Fodor, 2020) and describes a context in which the representatives of six universities negotiate on how to divide (unequally) thirty million dollars that are made available by a philanthropist. The participants are informed that if they do not manage to reach agreement in the allocated time, the whole amount will be lost and participants will leave empty-handed. The integrative potential consisted of the possibility to add valuable assets and resources that could be exchanged, in such a way, that all stakeholders could, in principle, achieve their goals (Trif et al., 2023). The simulation captures the essence of collaborative processes in which some parties possess resources that are of value to other parties that have the potential to reciprocate (Schruijer, 2006). Through deliberations, the parties can discover this integrative potential. During debriefings we revealed insights into power dynamics, negative stereotyping as well as

the interdependent nature of goals in multi-party systems. We could illustrate that the integrative potential is not always obvious and competitive positions at the onset of the simulation can generate adversarial relations that prevent the discovery and formulation of integrative solutions.

In the more than sixty runs of this simulation, we showed that in the vast majority of cases, the participants do not manage to discover the integrative potential and to help each other achieving their goals, while simultaneously maintaining their identity and autonomy (Schruijer, 2006). This is the shortest version of a simulation that we have used in working with students and although the dynamic elements are not as salient as they are in more complex multiparty simulations such as The Yacht Club (Schruijer & Curșeu, 2024), the simulation creates a valuable learning context in which students can discover some of the complexities of reaching collaborative agreements.

Multiparty negotiations in environmental debates – the case of Roșia Montana
Probably the most elaborated simulation we have developed was built around one of a very complex socio-environmental movement in Romania, namely the Roșia Montana gold mining case. The simulation captures the interaction of seven stakeholders involved in the regional development of a village with a mining history in the Apuseni Mountains of Transylvania. The Roșia Montana region has one of the oldest and richest gold reserves in Romania and the Roșia Montana Gold Company (a Canadian corporation) aimed to develop the largest open-cast cyanide gold exploitation in Europe. The project had clear economic, social and environmental implications, with significant consequences for the

regional development of the Roșia Montana area (Velicu & Kaika, 2017). The case was intensely mediatized and captured public attention for more than fifteen years, and formed the basis of the simulation. For Romanian participants it was therefore easy to identify with the stakeholders and engage with the issue at hand.

We developed an elaborated scenario that captured various perspectives related to the regional development plans for Roșia Montana. The task was to address the socio-economic and environmental situation of Roșia Montana region and to find integrative solutions for sustainable development. Such solutions had economic, environmental and social dimensions. Seven parties with divergent interests were involved, namely the local authorities, the Ministry of Environment, the Roșia Montana Gold Corporation, investors, Alburnus Maior (a grassroots NGO that opposed the open-cast cyanide gold exploitation), the National Agency of Mineral Resources and the local community. The multiparty simulation was designed to last for a whole day, including the debriefing, and was an integral part of a course on multiparty collaboration and negotiation. Given the design of the simulation, debriefings allowed for the most complex and comprehensive explorations of group dynamics.

As at the time Covid-19 broke out, we had to run the simulation online and thus organized a Microsoft Teams environment in which students could engage within as well as between groups interactions. The online setting reduced the richness of interpersonal experiences and also raised challenges for observers, yet elements of unconscious group dynamics certainly emerged during the online interactions as well.

Especially scapegoating of the Roșia Montana Gold Corporation or the NGO were often present as the other parties rallied to blame these parties that they preclude any progress towards amiable resolutions. We also discussed dynamics such as pairing between the local community and the Roșia Montana Gold Corporation, aligned along a 'we are miners' identity that shaped the outcome of

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the simulation. The real life situation related to the open-cast cyanide gold exploitation in Roșia Montana is highly complex and unlikely to yield integrative solutions, yet in the simulations, the parties often agreed on solutions driven by shared conceptions of omnipotence. Seduced by such omnipotent ideologies, parties agreed they could relocate whole communities, the infrastructure, houses, schools, even the cemetery.

For me, one of the key learning points associated with having to run the simulations online was that the unconscious group dynamics are not bound to face-to-face interactions. Although the debriefing sessions allowed for in-depth sharing, comparing and finding out, working with the unconscious dynamics was always difficult in this simulation. Educated in a predominantly positivistic mind-set, students found it difficult to accept that unconscious dynamics were at play.

Dealing with regional development – the case of Rovinari region

The most recent simulation we developed dealt with a regional development issue in the Rovinari coal mining region in Romania. Insights from running the Roșia Montana simulation pointed out the complexity of dealing with situations that involved environmental protection issues. As such, in the Rovinari simulation, we balanced the stakeholder representation by having two stakeholders with interests revolving around environmental protection (Bankwatch, an environmental NGO, and the Ministry of Environment) and two stakeholders with predominantly economic interests (CEO, a coal-fired power plant, and ASFOR, a forestry exploitation association). Local authorities from Rovinari had a leading role and had to balance the economic and environmental interests among the stakeholders in the region. The Rovinari simulation was used as an integral part of curricular activities in workshops on social psychology during five weeks. Each week students engaged with each other, as part of the same stakeholder group and experienced different aspects of multiparty dynamics.

As two of the stakeholders had substantially less power they often played big, by taking over the discussions during the plenary debates. Coalitions were formed among parties supporting similar environmental or economic interests, eventually leading to intergroup conflicts and clashes. Minority dissent often emerged during the simulations, yet was swiftly silenced by the majority in order to preserve a sense of harmony during interactions. In some of the simulations, attempts to bring back the ecological interests on the table, led to some more extreme

forms of dissent with the NGO starting a 'public protest' in which they used placards and displaying these during the plenary sessions. Experiencing these relational challenges in multiparty simulations, made students aware of the complexity of group life and provided them with a more solid understanding of groups, as they engaged with the processes of sharing, comparing and finding out.

Reflections

A key insight of this educational approach was that multiparty simulations can be adapted as experiential learning and used as the backbone of educational activities, rather than peripheral components that will (only) incidentally expose students to experiential learning. I will reflect on some of the challenges I have encountered while using them in my educational work.

Maybe the most important challenge in using multiparty simulations in higher education, is how to legitimize the 'not knowing' in terms of learning goals. The general logic behind modern educational systems is the fact that teachers (educators) should be in charge of the educational gains promised to the students. Modern universities require that course aims and learning goals are explicitly formulated and the way in which progress towards the achievement of these learning goals is assessed, should be clearly stated and communicated to the students. Quality assurance bodies and educational committees would conscientiously check the alignment between the learning goals and the assessment method for each course offered by higher education institutions. In other words, the learning promises that are made

to students should be diligently kept and documented in each educational program. After working for almost twenty years with multiparty simulations, I can confidently state that what participants learn in each of these behavioral multiparty simulations is different.

> *With the rise of the AI technologies, higher education has to rediscover its lost experiential learning practices*

What participants take aways in terms of learning outcomes are personal experiences, interpretations, observations and insights. Of course, there are common themes that emerge in such complex multiparty systems, yet dynamics that unfold in each simulation are unique and make it difficult to promise ex ante experiential learning outcomes. Experience it seems, is not in and of itself, a legitimate learning goal anymore in higher education programs. I would argue though, that experiential learning is one of the ways in which higher education needs to be radically transformed to keep up with the modern socio-technical transformations. With the rise of the AI technologies, the traditional teaching and assessment methods in higher education will soon become obsolete and higher education has to be reinvented, or at least rediscover its lost experiential learning practices. Students use AI tools and modern organizations increasingly emphasize competencies for using AI as key in their personnel selection. As such the question is not

whether students will use AI, but rather how much and for which purposes. Multiparty simulations create an experiential learning setting in which participants first experience and then reflect on these experiences (Schruijer & Curșeu, 2024). These learning experiences cannot be mediated, or influenced by AI tools. They focus on the fundamental nature of interpersonal interactions as key drivers of learning and preserve the humanness in learning experiences. AI can emulate (and even surpass) human cognition, yet it cannot capture the learning value of human (interpersonal) experience. 'Sharing, comparing and finding out' is a key learning principle that values diversity and seeks discovery. The way I understand its spirit is as an attempt to discover what lies beyond the obvious and immediate observations. I can only hope that educational programs will rediscover its learning potential and make it central to their learning processes. The process of sharing different view-points about the here and now, comparing divergent views and finding out its integrative potential beyond what is obvious (the music behind words), is quintessential of humanness in learning.

Another key formal demand for educational programs is 'learning transfer'. Teachers are asked to specify how exactly students will use what they learn in class in their daily practice and more generally in their lives, while students 'just want to be happy with their studies'. How to make what happens in the here and now transferable to other settings and, even more challenging, a pleasant learning experience? Insights derived from the simulations are shared during the debriefing following a minimal process steering sharing, comparing and finding out. Participating

stakeholders take turns in presenting their own perspective by answering some core questions related to their goals and strategies used during the simulation and the others share their own perceptions of the interactions with each of the presenting parties. Experiences are first shared and then compared with other views and in this process new (systemic) insights emerge on what happened during the simulation. Such debriefings are not quests for an absolute truth, or for objective systemic views. The learning outcomes emanating from such debriefings depend on what participants share and how facilitators engage with the process of sharing and comparing.

Experiential learning often is 'unhappy learning' and is certainly not fashionable in modern higher education systems that rank study programs based on student satisfaction surveys. National rankings, based on how happy the students are with their learning experiences are nowadays trumpeted as key indicators for quality of education. Although happy feelings are integral part of human experience, (only) striving for satisfied students (customers) depletes educational programs from the learning potential of sharing alternative (divergent) viewpoints. As I came to understand during my work with Vansina, Schruijer and Tallieu, one has to grow into 'finding out', find value in the 'unhappy learning' and persevere in discovering the music behind words. Reflecting on my personal learning journey, this part is a difficult, unpleasant and long trip that can only be achieved by working in and with groups.

Throughout life, we each cross paths with many others. From the intersection of my path with that of Vansina, I am left with the insight that I can have impact without authority

and that I can gain wisdom through not knowing. I am humbled by social complexity, I am intrigued by the music behind the words, and I keep an open mind to different views, perspectives and methodologies in an attempt to share, compare and find out what truly happens in the here and now. ▪

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