

TAOnline

The internet – the way forward for TA training and supervision?

I really appreciate the invitation to write this article about why I see a need for a virtual TA group, and my experience in connecting with trainees digitally, through supervision sessions, workshops and online events.

In this article, I give you some background as to why I have increased my online presence as a trainer: my thoughts about embracing the technology; and considerations around teaching philosophies, and the elements of which to be aware when working online.

Background

I am based in the southwest of the UK and I am in the organisational field. I gained CTA status in 2007, PTSTA in 2008 and TSTA in 2013.

I am Deputy Director for the MSc programme, run by the International Centre for Developmental Transactional Analysis (ICDTA) which is conducted internationally, and I co-train with Julie Hay running professional development and exam preparation workshops. Webinars support the face to face input. Alongside my TA community work, I run a busy learning and development consultancy, founded in 1991. I am currently in the middle of conducting a large piece of leadership research.

On qualifying, I became a member of the assessing team for the International Centre for Transactional Analysis Qualifications. We are a team of P/TSTAs from all fields, offering TA qualifications online accredited through Canterbury university in the UK. I also joined an international training team, delivering programmes in St Petersburg, Poland, the Ukraine, Turkey and China and I have worked and continue to work with some of those participants online, giving supervision and running online workshops.

I ran a small organizational TA group based in Exeter, UK for three years, but this came to an end because it was a small group, and not financially viable or viable from a group dynamic perspective. In the UK coaches and trainers and consultants are not required to be qualified in order to practice, and although many see the benefits of continuous professional development, the rigorous standards of TA development and certification are too much of a commitment for many. Not just in time but also financially. The route to CTA and beyond is expensive, and when it is an optional expense – this tends to shrink the market for a TA trainer.

I really dare not add up the cost of becoming qualified in TA! While I do not regret the many thousands of pounds I have spent over the years on my development for one moment, I realise that this alone can make TA learning impossible for many people. The online approach offers a place for people to belong, network, share ideas etc – people who may not be able to get to regular face to face training, or attend conferences whether due to cost or travel time or mobility issues. This for me is one of the main reasons I started the online TA tribe: to make TA accessible to many more people.

I give you this background in order to help you see how I came around to the understanding and realization that a technological online approach was perhaps one which I could nurture, hoping that it will blossom in the future. We are busy professionals, balancing our work and development activities with our home lives. Time is precious. Money, a consideration.

Embracing the technology

When I first entered the world of work way back in the 1970s, I learnt to touch type. I learnt this skill in a secretarial school run by a local engineering firm. I learnt on a manual typewriter – the keys were heavy and had to be struck with force – by comparison to the keyboards of today, it was hard work.

One of my concerns about online training was, being far from a “millennial” I have not exactly grown up with the technology. I know people of my generation who struggle to send text messages How would I manage to train, run a group, monitor process, respond to questions – and deal with the technology all at the same time?

When I began my career, the computer in my organization took up a whole room! Only certain people were allowed access. The room was environmentally controlled and had an air of mystery about it. Today, most of us carry around a computer that is usually not far from our fingers, and often seen as an extension to our arms! There is a Facebook meme which has updated Maslow’s Hierarchy of Human Needs (1943) triangle to show a new foundational level as that of “wifi”, more important even than seeking to meet basic human needs. This is funny - and almost true for many people.



So what I have found is that I need not have worried about my ability to run the webinars. As with most things, it is an attitude of mind and simply another learning loop for me, which I have (mostly!) mastered.

My own learning has been enhanced by online connection. I belong to an online peer supervision group which has been working now for more than two years and spans three countries and two continents. Our work together is enhanced by the different frames of reference and our differing experiences. I have been giving supervision over skype for many years, and over the last 3 or 4 years running occasional workshops online. I started TA Tribe in 2016 with a more cohesive offer and I will continue to develop it over the coming years.

Most of us live “logged-on” lives these days. Berne identified humans have a hunger to connect, a hunger for recognition, a hunger for stimulation (Berne, 1970. Evans (2014) says that Berne can rest easy, “technology has expanded our capacity to communicate and relate, to seek and be recognized globally”. Sally Evans is the clinical lead for a UK online organization (www.kooth.com) which offers an online therapy service to young people. She says they surf the internet for pleasure and play, connect with friends, discover information

and quotes a 17 year old as saying that the internet is a part of their daily life “so that even when chatting to a counselor online, we are not completely out of our comfort zone”. I believe that the internet already has a huge impact on educational processes, and this impact will continue to grow.

Long before the internet, children in Australia living in the outback gained their schooling with the aid of shortwave radio. The idea of remote learning is not a new one. I truly believe that TA Trainers of the senior generation overcoming any technophobe fears and delivering online will be continuing Berne’s mission of radical social psychology. We can reach communities in this way! And I believe if he were alive today, he would be embracing the opportunities for teaching and learning in exactly the same way.

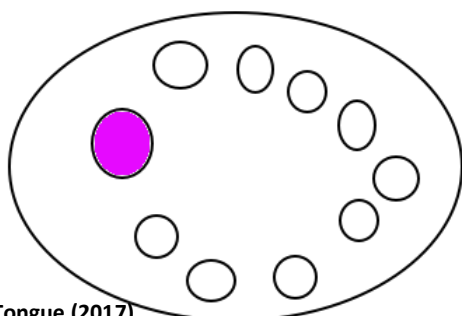
The technology is such these days that we can connect from wherever we are, with whomever we want. There are platforms which allow us as teachers to see and be seen by our participants, share our screens, run presentations, put participants into syndicate groups and conduct discussions across geographical boundaries. There are some barriers of course, those of internet connection, language and time zones are the obvious ones, and there are other, more subtle considerations to be made when working online, and I will come to those later.

The genie is definitely out of the bottle – younger generations are comfortable with online work and as trainers, I think we need to be able to offer this route to make TA accessible to all.

Teaching philosophy

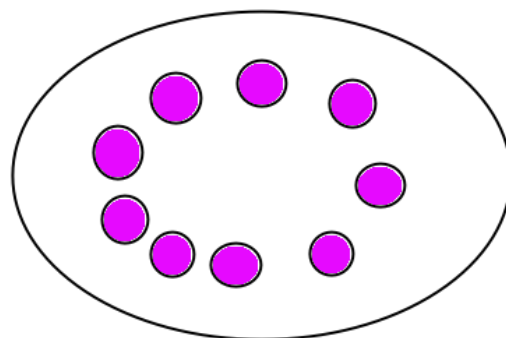
In his 2009 article, Shotton argues that there is a danger that TA training is becoming too rigid, highly structured and where people are encouraged to complete their training with one training institute. I believe that adult learners benefit from an eclectic approach, experiencing different trainer styles and benefiting from a diversity of approaches. To the dimension of training institutes, summer schools, conference workshops we can now add the benefits of the internet and the digital age.

When face to face, my teaching philosophy is a mixture of Newton’s Progressive and Radical styles (2003/2014). The Progressive style is where the teacher may guide the learners who as adults bring knowledge, experience and specialisms, and I as the TA teacher bring advanced knowledge of TA theories), the Radical style is we learn and change together (learning between teacher and student is reciprocal and we increase our awareness together). Newton diagrams these as follows:



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Progressive



Radical

When online I notice that my style is more on the Progressive side – I am more overtly in control (the technology demands that – I can even mute and unmute people!) and because we have less of the non-verbal cues to follow I make sure I am clear in my direction and the dynamic appears to be more trainer – learner – trainer – learner, and less learner to learner interaction than you would expect in a face to face group. This of course is mitigated when syndicate work is undertaken. Here the learners discuss and work together, blending their experience and understanding, supporting each other just as they would in a face to face group. This more structured approach is enabling to many learners. I find myself being very overt about format and structure of the workshop as a way of offering safety and boundaries in the “unboundaried” ether of online work

I notice when I am working online, the process is in many ways more “concentrated” than when face to face with a group. We all listen more intently, are more careful about interrupting people, in many ways are more “polite” with each other. Often it is easier for those working in a second language, because people are more careful in this way. Barrow (2011) cites the need to contain an inherent tension in the learning process – *“the certainty of change alongside the uncertainty that comes in trusting the co-creative potential of the learning process”*.

I have found this to be just the same online but something that Barrow also mentions is the need for the teacher to be grounded. I must admit, when first running online workshops attaining “groundedness” around the technology was quite a challenge! My learning to master the technology was useful – it reminded me how it feels to be uncertain in our skills – always good for a trainer to experience! I agree with Barrow in the general principle of the educator doing whatever work is needed for them to be grounded, to provide a safe space for the learning, change and growth to occur – a stimulating, unthreatening environment where participants can be nurtured to grow can be just as effective in an online community.

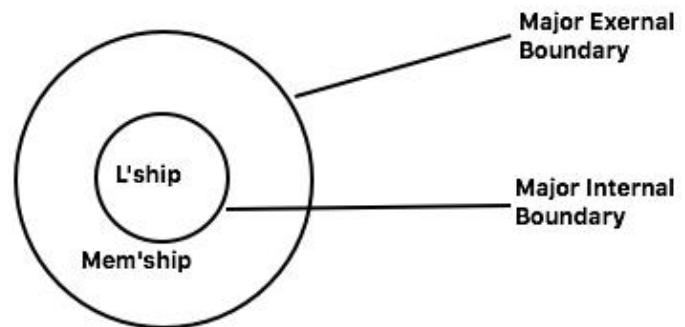
When working with adults I think it is important to embrace the different experience and specialisms each learner brings to the learning sessions. With new people, I may not know what they are bringing to the learning process until they begin to share it. I think it is important to create a space where we can all learn from each other – and it is also important for the teacher to be flexible about this, to not be intimidated by it and to facilitate a process where the contribution of each learner blends with the teacher’s input. Co-creation, in other words!

Recognising that we join together in groups to get our psychological hungers met is even more important online.

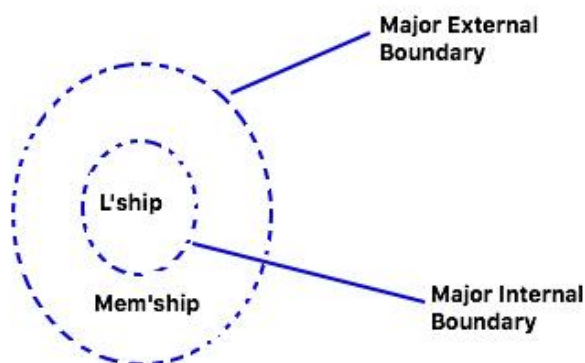
Berne (1963) diagrammed a Simple Structure to describe some organisations. TA Tribe fits this description to a degree.

I am in the leadership role, workshop attendees form the membership and there is a major internal boundary between us, and a major external boundary around us all.

However, as for conventional organizational TA training, the external boundary is permeable.



**Simple Organisational Structure
Berne (1963)**



We have people coming and going (just as in organisations), the group is not a closed membership group. Also with TA Tribe, the boundary between myself and the participants is permeable. I can give the control of the workshop to a participant if they have something they want to contribute and need share their screen to do so. So in fact, our organizational structure is better shown like this:

I as trainer am in overall control, leading the sessions. Online we have no doors and walls to physically represent 'containment'. As an online leader I am conscious of this, and pay attention to time boundaries, offering recognition so that all individuals feel "seen", and included. Workshop numbers are kept to small groups to facilitate this.

One of the ways in which a trainer takes care of psychological needs is in clear contracting. This offers structure, an opportunity for strokes, and stimulation in the learning on offer. It also helps people to adjust their imagoes – hearing introductions helps them to fill in the undifferentiated slots by gaining information, being able to "place" people geographically, perhaps realise they have connected before at conferences, workshops or online. I open the link roughly fifteen minutes before the workshop is to start to enable some pastiming in the group. I offer opportunities to connect with each other on a dedicated Facebook page. There are other online group meeting places such as Slack and Flock – places where teams can have on-going conversations, share references and updates etc. These advances in technology help people to connect and help me as the trainer to embellish the learning offering.

What about connection?

As mentioned elsewhere, contracting is key to providing safety, protection, structure etc – it encourages connection.

I have worked with a triad of supervisees for nearly two years now, and we have never met face to face. We meet monthly online and within the first couple of sessions I was struck by

how rich our connection had become, and how quickly this had come about. Our thorough contracting and our individual willingness to engage with the process facilitated a level of trust between us which matches face to face work. And as yet – I have not met the participants face to face!

I have noticed that just as in face to face work, as a group becomes more comfortable with the process and with each other, they relax and enjoy connecting with people from other cultures, other countries. The level of diversity brings a richness all of its own.

I also think that for some, working remotely offers a layer of protection. Something in the closeness of the relationship between trainer and group, but at the same time there is physical distance. This distance is helpful for those in small TA communities as it offers opportunities to gain other perspectives and also freedom to get supervision from a supervisor who is outside their normal network.

Challenges

Practitioners such as coaches, trainers and consultants who are in TA contracts are able to use the online workshops to supplement their training. In some countries the provision of developmental TA programmes is very low. Some practitioners (coaches, trainers etc) have to attend therapy training groups, even though they have no intention of becoming a therapist. This may lead to a confusing of boundaries – the organizational context is different from the therapy context. Online work can go a long way to helping those individuals gain the training hours they need with trainers from their own field.

One of the challenges is that for some participants, I am an *additional* resource – I am not their primary trainer or sponsor and this can be problematic.

I have found that ways of interpreting the EATA handbook can differ – so I am mindful of keeping confusion to a minimum for trainees and supervisees. I refer people back to the handbook, and encourage autonomy in their decision making! It has highlighted for me several anomalies in our system and as an ex-member of EATA's Commission of Certification (COC) I will continue to feed-back my concerns and queries.

To illustrate my point, the handbook states in Section 5.3.3 page 10, that CEOs can become CTAs. I am of the view that if the CEO or manager is working with their own team, there is a contracting issue – the team are not in a position to say they do not want the boss to “use” TA with them. The handbook is not clear on this and appears to condone it. Other TSTAs may not agree with me. The handbook also states that for the organizational field the client is the organization and that the candidate must work with the whole organisation, not just individuals and/or team. I am of the view that as an organisational learning and development consultant, I work with multi-party contracts but I do not necessarily work with the whole organization. I do not know of a consultant who would work with the whole of Coca Cola for instance. Working with multi-party contracts means that I have the overall aims and objectives of the organisation firmly in my focus, but I cannot (as the handbook states), increase the “autonomy of organisations” because in my opinion an organization is

not an individual. Once again, other TSTAs may disagree with me, so it is important for me to manage this area carefully with students, to be clear about my own thinking and to encourage enquiry and autonomy in the students.

Considerations when starting an online group

- Explore the online platforms available before choosing one with which you feel comfortable and which gives you flexibility to share your screen, use a “whiteboard” etc
- Offer additional ways for participants to connect, through team technologies (Slack, Flock, What’s App groups for instance), Facebook etc
- Consider offering different day and time slots to accommodate different time zones
- Think about languages – will you work through a translator? What will your contract need to be with them and the group?
- Supervision groups are different to workshop groups – think about the ways they are different and how you will manage them
- Be clear in your contracting before the workshop and at the beginning of the sessions
- Pay attention to boundaries (time, inclusion etc)
- Consider conducting a pilot group before launching so you can practice using the technology
- Stay in the here and now! Understand and accommodate for the reality that is that your participants will be working with other trainers and supervisors – and avoid potential game invitations

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article I posed the question whether online TA programmes were the way forward. I truly believe this is the case. The internet has opened up possibilities for TA training which increases access by being cost-effective, time effective, allows people with mobility issues access and incidentally has very little impact on the environment.

In addition, learners are offered a freedom to choose who they learn with and potentially, as more TA trainers embrace the technology, the opportunity to learn from different trainers, and the freedom to design their own learning programmes.

In other words, the **autonomy** to engage with learning providers with different styles in an accessible, affordable way.

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