

# Portfolio approach

**LIZ JEFFRIES** considers the nature of a four year training programme, and outlines why, for her, taking a more flexible approach felt more appropriate

IN THE LAST article I wrote for the 'In training' column I talked about being moved to write about personal therapy for trainees. I explained how important I feel it is for trainees to be supported in a space outside of a training programme, with a degree of privacy and sense of safety which enables development as a person and as a therapist. In this article, I address a different element of the training process. I explore the nature of the four-year training programme and how, while it may serve the training needs of many trainees very well, perhaps there could also be another, more flexible option, of an independent, portfolio approach to training.

I've recently been considering my own training process, and have felt unclear about what permitted training routes there actually are. In correspondence with the ITA's Training Standards Committee I have received clear communication about the status of training programmes – that they meet UKCP HIPC requirements, and lead to UKCP registration (Training Standards Committee, personal communication) – but it is not clear, in any handbook that I have read (ITA, EATA or UKCP) what the options are for trainees to engage with training programmes flexibly. I am of course aware, that primarily TA psychotherapy training has recently consisted of attendance at, and progression through, a four-year training course at an ITA-Registered Training Institute. Indeed, the *ITA Training Handbook* includes a flowchart of a 'typical trainee's progress through an ITA Registered Training Establishment Training Program...' (Institute of Transactional Analysis, 2012, p3). While the inclusion of the term 'typical trainee' seems to imply an expectation (or even requirement) that trainees complete a training course at a single institute, I am also mindful of the Basic Values espoused by EATA, those of self-determination and security. The EATA Code of Ethics states that 'each person needs to be able to explore and grow in an environment that enables a sense of security, yet also to learn from their experience and being in charge of themselves' (EATA Ethics Committee, 2013). EATA stresses too (in their *Training and Examinations Handbook*) that trainees should actively plan and structure their training, and take responsibility for their personal and professional development and training process. (EATA Publications Committee, 2008). Taking

these requirements into account, I wonder whether in addition to the four-year training programme, in some circumstances and for some people an alternative approach might be considered as a valid training process.

Cornell (2008) suggests that training which involves exposure to a variety of therapeutic styles and approaches, may counteract a tendency in training to overadapt to the primary trainer. Perhaps a portfolio approach to training, by which I mean a model involving training at different training institutes (in one-year blocks) being combined with a portfolio of individual workshops, would give such an exposure to therapeutic styles and approaches. The overall training process could, in such cases, be guided by the principal supervisor, rather than a training institute. After all, EATA considers the principal supervisor to be responsible for guiding and assisting trainees according to personality, learning style and particular circumstances (EATA Publications Committee, 2008).

This is a route I have followed so far, having trained at two different institutes, and planning to train at a third institute for a further year. I have also accumulated training hours from attendance at a range of workshops so that with three years of training at different institutes and the hours of training experienced at these workshops I will have accumulated the training hours required by the ITA/EATA to be eligible to take my CTA exam.

I should like to stress here that while I am advocating a flexible, dynamic, independent route through the training process, I am not suggesting that trainees abandon the notion of enduring, long-term relationships with trainers who guide and support them in their personal and professional development. I am instead saying that therapists and supervisors can fill this role. I have been with my current therapist as a client for eight and a half years to date, and last November I signed a five-year EATA training contract with my supervisor, who I have been working with for two years so far. So I want to be clear that in advocating an independent portfolio approach to training, I am not suggesting a route in training that facilitates an avoidant attachment process in any way!

I acknowledge too that psychotherapy training, developing as a competent psychotherapist, is not just a matter of attending courses and accumulating training

hours. Rather, training may be viewed as comprising three elements: a 'taught' component, supervised practice, and personal therapy (Tudor, 2009). Personal therapy, Tudor suggests, in addition to being a space for reflexivity and growth, provides experiential and phenomenological learning about ways of therapeutic relating (Tudor, 2009); and I, too, in my earlier article (Jeffries, 2012), have said that in personal therapy I found the therapist I want to be. In a similar way, I have found that a portfolio approach to training has helped reveal the therapist I am becoming. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that this approach is not one that is suitable for everyone. We each, as trainees, strike a unique balance between self-determination and security after all. Yet, when making decisions about my own training, there were two main issues that I took into account and which led me to adopt a portfolio approach rather than follow an integrated four-year training programme.

First, as all training institutes in the UK are privately owned (either by individuals or groups of trainers), the training is often delivered according to the philosophical orientations of the particular trainers who run them. While there are core competencies that need to be addressed in TA training there is no core curriculum (EATA Publications Committee, 2008) and so the trainers running these institutes have a considerable degree of freedom to deliver training according to their personal interests and philosophies. While I have felt supported by all of my trainers in my training process I am also aware that there are a variety of ways by which people can be helped to construct their understandings of concepts and psychotherapeutic practices. Subscribing to a given discourse (that of just one trainer, or one institute) has felt philosophically limiting and has not felt as though it has supported my own learning process. It is my belief that to experience training at different institutes with trainers with different interests and philosophies can only make for a richer and more diverse training experience, and lead to trainees developing more rounded and inclusive philosophies themselves as they explore their own psychotherapeutic practice.

Second, I have found during my transactional analysis training journey so far that I have needed to strike a balance between psychological safety and psychological freedom. Rogers (1954) suggested that in training, three inner conditions help trainees creatively envision life in new and significant ways – openness to experience; an internal locus of evaluation; and, the ability to play with new concepts (Tudor, 2009). The best way to reconceptualise life in this way, for me, has been to explore training environments with different theoretical emphases.

I have, not, though, merely moved from one training group to another, from one institute to another, to experience a different training philosophy or trainer. I have also identified my own personal development needs

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(together with my therapist and supervisor). Changing training institutes has helped meet those needs. For example, in my first year of training, being in a training group with people at the same stage of training as myself gave me the sense of security that I needed, at a stage of training when the training had an emphasis on personal development which felt challenging.

However, by the end of my first year of training I felt a dilemma about my training environment. While I had felt that I was in a safe, containing, stable environment, I also felt the need to broaden my horizons and to experience different trainers and different training styles. In their article "Taking Counselling and Psychotherapy Outside: Destruction or Enrichment of the Therapeutic Frame?" Jordan and Marshall talk of maintaining the frame in therapeutic settings (Jordan & Marshall, 2010). They conceptualise the frame of therapy as being a safe, containing, stable space, on the one hand, but yet there also being a sense of a limiting and restricting nature to the environment (Jordan & Marshall (2010)). It seems to me that these ideas about the frame of therapy are readily transferable to psychotherapy training environments, and, in fact clearly express the dilemma that I had at the end of my first year of transactional analysis psychotherapy training.

Considering Berne's psychobiological hungers (Berne 1964), it may be said here too, that I was negotiating by need for structure, stability and safety with my need for incidence, novelty and difference (Sills, 2011). This I did in my second year of training at a different institute. As well as needing to explore different philosophies and training styles, I also recognised a desire for myself to have a more academic focus, a more diverse and larger training group (a mixed group including trainees at different stages of training) and visiting trainers each month. The organic model of personal learning according to which knowledge and skills were individually negotiated with personal responsibility according to personal needs had a fluidity of approach which matched my learning needs at that time.

In hindsight, I can see that the structure of this training group enabled me to feel safe within my 'schizoid compromise' under which I could keep others around but not too close. I could also maintain contact at an intellectual level (Little, 2001). As I consider changing my training institute again, I do so recognising that I no longer need to make that compromise. Now the balance I need of containment-stability-security versus psychological freedom and personal responsibility has evolved further. I need a training environment that feels more cohesive and

relational. Philosophically, I also realize my interests are in the realm of the therapeutic relationship as the central vehicle for psychological change. So my new institute has a model of training that fits with both my personal needs and professional interests.

In essence therefore, my training so far has involved a personal and professional journey that has benefited from a changing frame in my training environments. Not only has the experience of a broad range of training experiences given me a broader philosophical base on which to base my psychotherapy practice, but it has given me personal developmental opportunities, that might not have been available to me if I had completed my entire training at a single registered training institute with a frame that was in opposition to my personal development needs at any given period of time.

My training choices have not been randomly selected, and neither has my move between training institutes been impulsive. I have made carefully thought out choices with the goal of achieving the broadest, richest, most diverse training experience possible, and to give myself the best possible chances of being able to envision life in new and significant ways; in essence to include more possibilities and reduce self-limiting beliefs and behaviours – to reduce the impact of script. This is not to say that the goal is to be script-free. Indeed, it might be argued that to be script-free is an impossibility, and that outside of script, outside of social interaction and meanings there is nothing (Rowland, 2012). I feel that my training so far has enabled me to explore my script and what has been 'right' and 'real' for me has gradually become clear. Adopting a portfolio approach to training has enhanced the potential for both personal and professional development, given the balance needed between self-determination and security, and provided access to a variety of therapeutic styles and approaches.

However, I recognise that what have been appropriate training choices for me, and what has enhanced my training process, may be limiting for other trainees. My intention here is not to devalue the four-year training programme model. For some individuals, perhaps many, the support provided by a single-trainer, mentor model of training enhances the ease of the training process and establishes a place of psychological safety where essential skills and values can be learned (Cornell, 2008). Nevertheless, a range of training routes to the CTA Exam, as suggested by Shotton (2009), would enable trainees to negotiate a frame for training which meets specific personality and learning styles. A portfolio approach to training may be one such route that, if accepted as a valid alternative to the four-year integrated programme, has advantages of not only embracing the EATA values of self-determination and security, but also satisfying the EATA training requirement that trainees actively plan and structure their training.

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