

The Practice of Social Dreaming: Guiding Principles

David Armstrong

'Social Dreaming', as pioneered and developed by Gordon Lawrence and his colleagues is, put simply, a practice of sharing and working with dreams within a social space. It is the practice that, in turn, informs and shapes theory and against which theory is both built and tested.

Since the first experiment, launched by Gordon Lawrence and Paddy Daniel at the Tavistock Clinic in 1982, while practice has continued to evolve and develop there have been a small number of constants which may be taken as guiding principles that serve to define the field and its boundaries. These concern respectively the parameters of task, process, setting, management and leadership.

Setting

From the outset the setting in which social dreaming takes place was called a 'matrix' not a 'group'. Suggested initially by Paddy Daniel, Gordon Lawrence was later to write how "we thought that to call it a 'social dreaming group' would elicit the dynamics and transferences familiar to us in group relations settings and might cut across and intrude into the work: of transacting dreams and exploring the multiple 'dreams in association'. In short, our fantasy or working hypothesis was that dreams would speak with dreams: breeding, growing and developing new thoughts and new thinking, beyond either the more subjective focus of individual therapy (what does the dream mean for me?) or the more group centred focus of Group Relations events (what does the dream mean for the group?). (Lawrence, 'Social Dreaming: making the unconscious available in systems', 2011, unpublished).

The shift of perspective underlying this decision was to become built in to all later practice. It informed the ways in which task came to be defined, process understood, working space designed and management and leadership taken, (see further below). In the last of his publications, *An Introduction to Social Dreaming* (Lawrence 2005, p14 ff), Lawrence distinguished between the 'Matrix' as both a form and a process, "as a form, it is a configuration of people that provides a unique space, or 'container' for thinking out of the content of dreams to consider and discover their hidden, elusive/infinite meaning. As a process, the matrix is the system or web of emotions and thinking that is present in every social relationship, but for the most part unattended and not acknowledged. It can be thought of as mirroring while awake, the infinite, unconscious processes in waking life that give rise to dreaming when asleep".

In practice it may take time for the sense of the matrix to make itself felt. Correspondingly, there can be occasions when the conscious or unconscious pull of group processes may threaten to override the dreaming work. This is one of the major challenges facing leadership of a matrix (the role of Hosts), i.e. to avoid collusion with this pull and find a way of enabling participants to re-engage with the integrity of the dreaming task.

Task

Every Matrix starts from a statement of task or purpose. (In his later practice Lawrence avoided using the idea of ‘primary task’, probably as a way of maintaining the distance from a more conventional ‘group relations’ tradition). Over time the framing of task has shifted in a way that has opened out a broader emphasis on aim and purpose, e.g:

‘to transform the thinking of the dream by free associating to the dreams offered in the matrix in order to find links and make connections and discover new thoughts.’

It is an open question how far this or related versions should be taken as definitive. Perhaps the most significant consideration is to maintain the focus on the open-endedness of the enquiry, as Lawrence was later to emphasise, its “multiversity” of meaning, that is, to resist the pull towards ‘interpretation’ or the closing down of exploration, its plurality of reference.

Process

The heart of the process turns on the distinction between dream and dreamer. As Lawrence put this, succinctly, in his last public seminar (Lawrence, 2011, op cit, unpublished), “It is the dream, not the dreamer that is the subject of the Matrix. The dreams shared are seen as objects existing in their own right (rather than as disguised messages from a private, psychic world). The participants are invited to look at a dream as if it had never existed before, seeing its uniqueness and rarity. It is comparable to picking up a pebble on a beach as a child. You look at it in minute detail, as the poet Rilke put it, something that “finds itself in the centre of your universe”. The movement within the Matrix is not to interpret the dream, but through offering associations or drawing parallels to the dream from film, literature or any other cultural or social object to expand the narrative (amplification) without prematurely seeking to close it down”.

As with the distinction between ‘matrix’ and ‘group’, managing this distinction as it may emerge in practice, is a key requirement of leadership of a Matrix (viz, the role of ‘Host’, below). In effect the focus on the individual, if it surfaces, can operate as a defence against the ‘shadows of the social’ as present within the ‘community of dreamers’, the patterning and linking between one narrative and another.

Working space

The arrangement of the working space within which a Matrix takes place is designed, as far as possible, to synchronise with this process, as Lawrence put it “to convey something of the spirit of the enterprise”. From early on the seating of the Matrix has tended to be clustered in a pattern that represents a star-like shape, a bit like a snow flake seen under a microscope, in which all the chairs are linked, but ordered in a pattern facing into the centre of the room. One might think of this arrangement as corresponding to and evoking what the British psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott, referred to as the capacity to ‘be alone in the presence of others.’ It avoids the group associations linked to the circle or the spiral, while

preserving the idea of community. There may be other arrangements consonant with the practice, but this is not arbitrary, i.e. the link between the mental and physical space of the Matrix needs to be consistent.

Management and leadership

Both functions are represented through the role of ‘host’, a term deliberately chosen to avoid the cluster of associations linked to ‘consultant’, ‘conductor’, ‘facilitator’, etc. There are usually 2 or more hosts within a Matrix, one of whom may also take responsibility for recording the dream sequence. The role of host is, in the first place to manage the boundaries of the Matrix: time, task, confidentiality, safety from intrusion, and in the second place, to offer, through their practice, leadership in exemplifying and respecting the boundaries of task and process. This includes, as described earlier, maintaining the distinction between ‘matrix’ and ‘group’ and between ‘interpretation’ and ‘formulation’: that is, the emerging patterning of the material, the links and connections opening out from the sequence of narrative and association. This may be no more than the noticing and naming of links between the material offered. Or it may, on occasion, include offering a comment on what seems to be emerging: new themes or patterns, contrasting or complementing, which may come into view as the hosts play in their minds with ‘working hypotheses’ arising out of the dream material.

It has become customary for one of the hosts, who may sit anywhere in the Matrix, to briefly introduce the sequence of meetings, stating the task and then a simple open invitation ‘Where is the first dream?’ There may also be occasions when a host draws the matrix’s attention to one or other feature of its process, e.g. the drying up of dream and/or associative material. It is important to keep in mind, however, that at times the most effective response may just be silence.

In conclusion

While the above may be taken to include many of the core principles serving to define the practice of Social Dreaming, they are not intended to be either exclusive or exhaustive. Each has emerged out of the experience of engaging in and with practice and as this further evolves there may be either additional or alternative elements that come into view. No account is taken here of the possible significance for how both participants and hosts work with differences in the contexts within which this work takes place - organizational, professional, societal or thematic. The focus of attention has been on the more generic features of the field as these emerge in the Matrix, as against the wider framework of Reflection and Dialogue within which the Matrix may be located.

References

Lawrence, W.G. (2012) ‘Social Dreaming: making the unconscious available in systems’, Presentation written for a Policy Seminar at the Tavistock Clinic, unpublished.

Lawrence, W.G. (2005) An Introduction to Social Dreaming, London: Karnac.

