

Transactional Analysis Certification Exams: An Opportunity to Learn

Marco Mazzetti

Abstract

This article presents some theoretical reflections on transactional analysis certification processes and exams. Exams are considered as both an evaluation process and a learning experience. The author discusses the relationship between evaluation and power and stresses the value of a clear distinction between the two. During certification exams, there is a clear difference in power: examiners can pass or defer candidates. There is no reciprocity, although reciprocity does exist in the overall process because each participant (examiner, candidate, sponsor, etc.) explicitly accepts being evaluated by others. The main concepts discussed are: exams are learning experiences for everyone who participates in them; to promote a good learning experience, all individuals must accept reciprocity in evaluation; and it is possible to promote and maintain reciprocity in evaluation even with awareness that power is unequal. The main goals of certification exams are considered from the perspective of the evaluation of candidates, examiners, and the training system. Three examples of dysfunctional exam boards are described.

There is a paradox in the transactional analysis world. All of our certification processes are based on evaluation via rigorous examination processes, yet almost no criteria have been established as to what defines a good examiner, how to become an examiner, or how to train examiners, let alone what it means to examine and be examined in transactional analysis, what the goals of the exams are for both candidates and examiners, and what it is that is evaluated.

In fact, in the transactional analysis literature, little is written about exams and their characteristics or their andragogic value in the learning experience. Almost the only theoretical reflec-

tions are included in various editions of the *Training and Examinations Handbook* (EATA Professional Training and Standards Committee, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2003, 2008). There the focus is on the process of the exams, describing carefully the correct procedures and stressing the value of maintaining an “I am OK, You’re OK” position.

In recent years, some articles have appeared (e.g., Mazzetti, 2005; Sills, 2004) that have had as their main goal a discussion of whether there are other ways (better than exams) to certify transactional analysts. But these articles do not offer real theoretical thinking about what exams actually mean. More recently, in an Italian transactional analysis journal, some articles (Ligabue, 2007; Mazzetti, 2007; Tosi, 2007) reflected in depth on the evaluation process, but unfortunately, they were not widely read in the broader international transactional analysis community.

To address this paradox, the European Association for Transactional Analysis (EATA) Commission of Certification (COC) (the certifying body of EATA, which runs EATA exams), decided to begin a program to focus on the quality of exams.

The first step was to send observers to all exam venues to verify if local cultural aspects or other matters influence the way in which exams are run and/or their quality and to see how EATA might learn from such local variations.

The second step was to stress the value of the briefing (before) and debriefing (after) exams, not simply as organizational moments but as training ones. With this goal in mind, a new job description for exam supervisors was drawn up.

Another step was to include a specific “exam section” in the new experimental version of the Training Endorsement Workshop (TEW), the Training Preparation Workshop (TPW) that the Professional Training Standards Committee (PTSC) is testing in Europe.

The next step was to establish a task force to reflect and focus on the meaning of exams in the transactional analysis world: what are their goals and how can good examiners be prepared and trained?

The members of the task force are Barbara Classen, TSTA-P and chair of the EATA Ethics Committee; Sabine Klingenberg, TSTA-O and chair of EATA's PTSC; Trudi Newton, TSTA-E and chair of the Training and Certification Council (T&CC) and former cochair of ITAA's Board of Certification (BOC); Charlotte Sills, TSTA-P and former chair of EATA's PTSC; Stefan Sandström, TSTA-P; and me, chair of EATA's COC. I am deeply grateful to these colleagues, who have given freely of their time, energy, and thoughtful intelligence to the advancement of our community. The future of transactional analysis is highly promising with this kind of professional involvement.

The task force started by reframing the exam, stressing the basic value implicit in the process: humility and a willingness on the part of both candidates and examiners to be evaluated and "legitimated" by others. In this sense, examination is a matter of reciprocal evaluation and an opportunity for growth for everyone. This view is consistent with Ligabue's (2007) opinion that the main characteristics of good evaluation processes are intersubjectivity, bilaterality, contractual interactivity, and the stimulation of an ongoing self-evaluation process that promotes growth.

Moreover, exams are an important moment in the professional life of candidates, a kind of initiation rite that acts like an imprinting for future professionals. For most, this is their closest (and sometime only) moment of contact with the wider transactional analysis community, with its values, way of life, and style. To ensure a serious, rigorous, and fair event is of paramount importance, because it models how to be a good transactional analysis professional in the future and how to have the fairest and widest impact on the world around us.

Evaluation and Power

Evaluation is common in our lives. We are constantly evaluating others and being evaluated by them. Teachers evaluate their students,

and students evaluate their teachers; husbands evaluate their wives and vice versa; parents evaluate their children and children their parents. The same process occurs between boss and employees, football coach and players, and so on. Naturally, the same process is present between us and our clients. Eric Berne (1966/1994) explicitly encouraged it when he wrote, "Since contractual treatment is bilateral rather than unilateral, the next step is for the therapist to say something like: 'Well, why don't you come a few times and that will give you a chance to look me over and you can see what I have to offer?'" (p. 88).

Even though evaluation is such a common process, the concept of reciprocity is not always so well accepted. In other words, it is generally agreed that a boss evaluates his or her employees or a teacher his or her students, but the opposite does not seem as normal. This is because often the concept of evaluation is confused with the idea of power. In relationships in which there is a significant disparity in power, the sense of the reciprocity in evaluation can be lost. In contrast, the philosophy of transactional analysis (as we are reminded by Tosi, 2007) is aimed at helping trainers and examiners avoid an autocratic evaluation process, which is more consistent with a dogmatic model of education as described by Newton (2003) and not consistent with transactional analysis.

However, our wish to stay away from a dogmatic, autocratic model of evaluation and from any exploitation of differences in power can jeopardize our freedom to evaluate. As a consequence, it is useful in evaluation processes to separate clearly any difference in power from the right to evaluate others and to be evaluated by others.

Evaluation processes are extremely useful in learning dynamics: Most of our acquisition of learning occurs because others judge what we know, what we do, and the way in which we do it. I think it is legitimate to say that a learning process is difficult (if not impossible) without some kind of evaluation.

Returning to the focus of this article, it is obvious that an exam implies that someone assesses someone else. It is also evident that in an exam process there is unequal power: Examiners

have the power to pass a candidate or not, while the candidate does not have a reciprocal power over examiners. Probably a similar dynamic occurs in many families, where parents judge the children without accepting the right of the children to judge them, or in organizations between those who have power and those who do not.

We cannot deny the fact that during examinations there is an unequal power relationship. But we can distinguish difference in power from the dynamics of evaluation. In other words, a key task in making an exam a fruitful learning experience is recognizing and accepting that there is nonreciprocal power but there can be reciprocity in evaluation.

The hypotheses on which we can build a good exam process are:

1. Exams are learning experiences for everyone who participates in them (candidates and examiners).
2. To promote a good learning experience, it is fundamental to accept reciprocity in evaluation.
3. We can promote and maintain reciprocity in evaluation even with awareness that power is unequal.

The examination process in transactional analysis promises to be fruitful if all participants are willing to enter into it with the idea that they will be evaluated and with an attitude of humility as an expression of the awareness that we learn through being evaluated by others.

The Goals of Transactional Analysis Exams

It is useful to distinguish between the evaluation of candidates, examiners, and the training system.

Evaluation of Candidates. In principle, transactional analysis certification exams were created to certify the quality of services offered by transactional analysts. It was implicit that ensuring high quality meant to protect clients (and the good standing of transactional analysis) against malpractice. That goal still has value. To certify the high quality of candidates means to ensure that transactional analysts are committed to offering the best possible service as well as protection against harm or ineffectiveness. This focus on protection is compatible

with the five target groups identified in the most recent revision of the EATA Code of Ethics (EATA Ethics Committee, 2006): the client, the candidate/practitioner (certification as a transactional analyst of a professional who does not have the required standards can mean putting her or him in an unsafe position), trainees (if a Teaching and Supervising Transactional Analyst or TSTA candidate), colleagues, and the environment/community. This means that the focus of exams is not only on the candidate but also on the candidate's whole environment. This underscores the fact that the protection of colleagues means the protection of the transactional analysis community: Each of us can be jeopardized by the possible malpractice of Certified Transactional Analysts, and this also means protection for the specific field in which the candidate works.

In addition to the value of protection, it is relevant to emphasize the value of exams as a growing and maturing experience for candidates. To face clear and challenging questions during an exam is not only a matter of OKness during the process but also an experience of empowerment for the candidate, an opportunity to grow in self-esteem, to demonstrate one's abilities, and to succeed as well as to receive clear feedback. Clear, honest feedback is useful in giving permission to learn and mature, even when the candidate is deferred.

Evaluation of Examiners. To create a meaningful and effective final event in the candidate's training journey, examiners are committed to giving the best service, offering protection (to the candidate and other board members), and being aware of the process. They are evaluated on these issues by various people during the exams, including the candidate, the other board members, the observer, the process facilitator, and so on.

To enter into the process in an effective way, examiners must accept the idea of being evaluated. By this I mean that they consciously must accept that they are being evaluated. The fact is, this evaluation will occur anyway but as an unaware experience, which leads to the risk of games or other dysfunctional behaviors. This will bring them, as well, into a growing, maturing, learning experience. The main areas in

which examiners are expected to learn are: discovering new ways to think theoretically; assessing trainees (especially relevant for trainers and the main reason why PTSTAs and TSTAs are explicitly required to participate in exams as part of their training as teachers and supervisors and in continuing education); and managing evaluation processes, especially maintaining an “I’m OK, You’re OK” position in a situation in which there is a significant difference in power.

The debriefing between board members that usually closes the exam process offers a good deal of important learning because of the open and frank sharing of opinions as well as the feedback offered by the candidate and the exam observer.

Evaluation of the Training System. Transactional analysis exams are important—and probably the most significant—opportunities to validate, monitor, and evaluate both our training system and specific training providers (institutes and sponsors). Among the specific skills of a good trainer, and in addition to competence in supervision and teaching, is the capacity to competently assess trainees. Our trainees need sponsors who are proficient in evaluating trainees’ levels of training, preparation for exams, and skills as professionals, and exams are an invaluable opportunity to develop competence in assessing trainees.

As a matter of fact, exams are clearly an evaluation of the sponsor’s ability to assess the candidate. This is obvious to all of us who have endorsed a trainee for exam. I have never been without some anxiety at that point, not only because I love my trainees and hope all the best for them, but also because I am aware that my work as a trainer is evaluated via my candidates.

Reflections on the Process of Certification Exams

It would probably be useful to contract clearly that each professional involved in the transactional analysis examination process accept the idea of reciprocity in evaluation. That means (even if it is not limited to) being willing to receive feedback from all the others involved. “Each professional involved” means, obviously, the candidate and the examiners, but also

sponsors, people running training institutes, language coordinators, exam supervisors, process facilitators, and officers of transactional analysis associations with their relevant responsibilities.

We can be aware (and proud) that our certification system is working quite well. It has contributed to and promoted constant growth in the quality and quantity of members of our transactional analysis community around the world.

At the same time, sometimes things do not go as well as we would hope. The inquiry the COC began in 2005 by sending observers to all of the exam venues showed that although the quality of European exams is generally high, some processes are not run in a way that is entirely fair.

We identified three possible patterns of dysfunctional exams:

1. *Boards overadapted to the candidate:* Examiners lose their power, do not take responsibility for really challenging the candidate, and leave him or her to drive the process and the timing of the exam. A typical consequence is the prolonging of the length of the exam and the unpleasant feelings of the people involved in the experience, including often the candidate, even if she or he is passed with the highest score.
2. *Boards overadapted to a member:* Sometimes a prestigious member of our community sits on a board, takes the power, and other members overadapt to her or him, allowing themselves to be guided in process, scoring, and so on. The main risk of this is that the focus moves from the candidate to the member-leader, to the detriment of the quality of the evaluation.
3. *Competitive boards:* This occurs when two (or more) examiners start to fight to become the leader of the process. As described in the previous example, the candidate is no longer the focus of the exam, and the evaluation process is damaged.

The most common event observed was the first one. Transactional analysis examiners need to be aware of the risk of overadapting to the candidate. The reason for this tendency is likely rooted in good intention—to be fair to

the candidate, to help and support him or her—but the effect can be to discount the candidate's strength and competence in facing challenging questions in a stressful situation as well as the board's competence in efficiently assessing a member of our community.

A good strategy is for examiners to be aware of their own feelings. When something unpleasant occurs in an exam, when something related to anger, fear, or sadness appears inside the examiners, they need to give importance to it instead of repressing or discounting it and to openly discuss it with other board members. Another option is to call in the process facilitator. As soon as that occurs, the probability is that a good process can be reestablished. In this way, examiners can protect themselves from the risk of grandiosity in thinking that they can manage everything by themselves, without asking for help.

Conclusion

Evaluation processes are a fascinating theme. Evaluation accompanies human beings throughout their lives. We are constantly involved in evaluating and being evaluated. Understanding the processes that are involved and using them constructively is one of the most productive activities we can engage in. How can we evaluate efficiently? How can we best make use of the evaluations we receive? Nowhere is this more relevant than in an organization that is created to evaluate, as our certification system is.

Perhaps one of the most important keys to success in evaluation is to explicitly accept the reciprocity it involves. Every time our exam process occurs, evaluators are evaluated and vice versa. It seems useful for this reciprocity to become conscious and then fully understood, accepted, and utilized in the exchange between examiner and examinee. In this way, we can honor one of the founding principles of transactional analysis—equality in relationships—and we can find new energies for improving the quality of the evaluation.

A second key is to be aware of the power inequality that can occur in evaluation processes, to accept that inequality and face it with a heightened sense of responsibility. The person who has the most powerful role in the relation-

ship (the examiner, in our case) must take responsibility for the bidirectionality of the process by guaranteeing to the less powerful partner the permission to evaluate the evaluator.

The responsibility of the less powerful member of the relationship (in the case of the exam, the candidate) is to participate freely in the evaluation of the learning partner and to receive his or her own evaluation as a moment of openness that promotes evolution, growth, and maturation.

Marco Mazzetti, M.D., is a psychiatrist, a Teaching and Supervising Transactional Analyst (psychotherapy), a member of EATA and the ITAA, and a university lecturer. He carries out his clinical, training, and research activities at the Centro di Psicologia e Analisi Transazionale and at the Ethno-Psychiatry Service Terrenuove of Milan, Italy. Marco can be reached at Centro di Psicologia e Analisi Transazionale, Via Archimede, 127, 20129 Milan, Italy; e-mail: marcomazzetti.at@libero.it. The author wishes to thank Charlotte Sills for her brilliant editing of this article, which improved its quality immensely.

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