Dealing with difficult situations in an ACT group training

We get a spicy email, my colleague and I, with whom I give an online ACT group training at Skils. The mail comes from one of the participants, after the second session. She finds it annoying that she knows so little about the background of the other participants. It is true that we did not give it much attention. In our introductory exercise we tried to connect with what people find important in their lives. In pairs, people showed a photo, from their mobile phone. The photo represents something of value and everyone is invited to tell something about it, to explain what is so important. We didn't talk about what went wrong and what they're seeking help for.

The comment that touches me the most is that she thinks that participants are given too little space to tell their story. We interrupt participants in their story and she finds that inappropriate.

It's quite a dilemma for my colleague and me. What do we do with this? The participant has also told us that she normally does not express herself with feedback, but has now taken the plunge. She does not feel completely safe, she indicates, because we interrupt and because she does not know the other participants well. I always think it's important to take criticism seriously, but especially now. If someone is learning to express themselves better, I want to contribute to that process. At the same time, my colleague and I have a purpose in interrupting participants. There are a few participants who answer rather extensively the questions we ask. In doing so, they follow side paths that are not relevant to the training we provide. Letting them talk comes at the expense of the material we want to cover.

The participant's e-mail arrives, just before I have a few weeks of vacation. The holiday helps me to take sufficient distance, so that I can come up with a plan, how to respond to the issues raised by the participant. I don't want to say in the group meeting that she emailed us, because I could put her in an awkward position, which could make her feel unsafe. At the same time, I want to keep space to interrupt people. We don't want to avoid the dilemmas, but it also takes some courage and tact to discuss this in a good way. In consultation with my colleague, I decide to present the atmosphere in the group as a theme to the participants at the next meeting. I ask them what they think about us interrupting people sometimes. We explain why we do this and that we realize that this is not always pleasant. The participants, whom we interrupted, indicate that they are not bothered by this. Other participants indicate that they like the fact that we keep the group 'focused'. We also discuss that we try to work more in subgroups, if possible, to stimulate connection between the participants.

In the sixth session we get to work with values. We do a values ​​game, in which my colleague and I join, each with a subgroup of participants. I join the group that the participant is also in. We talk about our values ​​and I tell them that the value “taking others as they are” is important to me. And that in recent years I have been working on making it: “take others *and yourself* as they are”. And I explain that I think “being brave” is important. I also find that very difficult, I say. For me it's not about big things, like saving people from a burning house, but about the small everyday things. Starting a conversation that you find difficult, for example. The participant says that she wonders if her values ​​are hers, or if she is doing what others expect of her. That she wants to learn to be more gentle with herself and that she notices how critical she often is. And that she didn't value 'being brave' for herself until she heard my explanation.

That meeting made my heart skip a beat. How nice to see how this participant dares to be vulnerable. How well she is doing exploring what is important to her. We don't know exactly how it all worked out and what led to what. But we managed to get her to engage and take advantage of what we offer in the training.