A College Class Discovers Group Dynamics

FRED BARNES

In Teachers College Record for October, 1947, Alice Miel, a faculty member in a graduate class, describes the way in which the group studied itself. Fred Barnes, a student in that class, and now curriculum director at Peoria, Illinois, draws upon the same experience to give his personal interpretations of the class experiment. He and Miss Miel use much of the same material in their interpretation of the record. Readers may wish to refer to the article by Miss Miel mentioned above.

Occasionally a college class of graduate students is permitted to do some original thinking. And occasionally such original thinking produces ideas of interest to other people seeking better ways of dealing with old and vexing problems.

This account deals with one such graduate class. Out of sincere dissatisfaction with their ability to work effectively as a group came a number of interesting introspective studies designed to analyze and improve the group process as they lived it.

Required of all majors in Curriculum and Teaching, 300 CR, Advanced Study and Research in Curriculum and Teaching, is a famous full-year course at Teachers College, Columbia University. Famous because the course is required but the specific content is not! Each year's group of students is en-
couraged to determine curriculum areas in need of intensive study and ways of organizing and conducting such study.

Facts and Grievances Stand Out

The 1946-47 300 CR students faced this problem and the consequent necessity of making appropriate group decisions. Problems related to intercultural education received priority during the first semester. At the semester's close, collective evaluation showed clearly that while this area retained its original significance for the class, inability to work well as a group prevented significant accomplishment in communicating and using concepts gained through more or less arduous individual study. In evaluating the work of the first semester in order to plan for the second, some inescapable facts and grievances arose:

Fact: Educators must learn how to deal actively with problems of intercultural relations here and now in terms of human behavior.

Grievance: Why did we individually learn so many unrelated things concerning anthropology, sociology, and statistics, and so few things about ways to deal with people in intergroup relations?

Fact: Intelligent educational procedure makes use of rich resources at hand. Due to its cosmopolitan structure this group was laden with such rich resources.

Grievance: Why did we evidence such affection for second-hand information through printed materials to the neglect of living source material within our own group?

Fact: Learning to work with curriculum problems means learning to work effectively with groups of people.

Grievance: How can we learn to work successfully with groups when our own experience has resulted in feelings of frustration and dispersement?

Frustration Continues to Prevail

300 CR moved into the second semester with more than its share of the usual "we're not getting anywhere" attitude. Stirred by the implications inherent in the grievances, several of the more vocal members began agitation for direct corrective measures through a study and a doing of the group process. The agitation caught on when the whole group agreed to study itself to improve itself.¹

Preliminary discussion of projected plans centered around definitions of group dynamics. The group began to structure itself around differences of opinion concerning definitions. Depending largely on individual academic backgrounds, individuals split into smaller groups, each isolated within the confines of its own knowledge limitations. Sociologists became embattled with psychologists while academic individualists carried the banner against collectivists. Amid this stalemate situation but one agreement could be reached: everyone else needed to perform further study.

Concepts Receive Tentative Acceptance

The various factions began to emerge as committees dedicated to the task of

¹ For a further report on the experiences of this class see: Miel, Alice. "A Group Studies Itself to Improve Itself," Teachers College Record, October 1947, 49, 1: 31-43.
ferreting information to buttress existent points of view. Some individuals, who could not accept the differing preoccupations of the committees, set about to glean information in solitude. The next several meetings saw a heightening of aggressions, additional frustrations, and finally a resolution of some persistent tensions due to tentative acceptance of a few basic concepts applicable to understanding the behaviors of people in any type of group experience. Because these concepts were influential in determining the class's remaining activities, they are presented:

The individual and his society are inseparable. A society is composed of individuals behaving in response to certain basic needs and drives. However, the specific forms of expression this behavior may take are, in large measure, determined by cultural patterns.2

The dynamics of social behavior must be understood in terms of dynamic—not static—concepts. This may be most adequately accomplished through the live, descriptive analysis of the "new" psychology: resistance, ambivalence, projection, identification, and the like.3 Behaviors of individuals in different group situations are largely determined by their statuses as ascribed to them by societal systems, and by the roles individuals learn on the basis of statuses.4

The group process, used as a deliberate technique for education (effecting changes in behavior) is a most complex and difficult procedure. Complex because the dynamics involved are as numerous and wide as the whole of human behavior in our society. Difficult because changes in behavior are achieved against the heavy weight of cultural and societal conditioning.5

Use Becomes the Imperative

At this point verbalizing and intellectualizing seemed to reach a level of diminishing returns. How actually to use the concepts so painfully gained became an imperative with some class members.

The class group began to re-structure itself through new volunteer committees which set out to seek instruments and techniques designed to capture, preserve, and analyze dynamics as they emerged through experience. In the following weeks a large number of techniques appeared and the class group was analyzed in many respects. All of these activities had merit and aided the group to better understand itself.

Space limitations prevent presentation of the wide range of contributions made by the various committees. Three analysis techniques have been selected for some elaboration: (1) analysis of statuses and roles through running notes of the class discussions, (2) analysis of dominant and recessive group members through a time chart depicting frequency and length of remarks made by each member during discussions, and (3) analysis of the group's thought patterns through charting the main line of thought, departures from group thinking, and tempo of group progress.

Running Records Are Developed

In an effort to identify consistent behavior types, hobby horses being ridden, and personal obsessions; one com-

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mittee developed the use of running records made while group discussion progressed. After several class meetings the collected comments of each member were compared and analyzed for repetitious strains. On methods of taking running notes, one committee reported:

In order to have objective material to serve as a basis for evaluation, several of the group members attempted at various times to take running notes of the group discussions. Since none was able to take shorthand this proved to be a difficult and strenuous task. Consequently, the results were not wholly satisfactory because the notes were far from complete or accurate.

The best plan evolved was to divide the responsibility for note taking among several members, making each responsible for a short period. These members worked in groups of three's for twenty-minute periods. Two members of the team attempted to take complete notes of all that was said and later combine their notes. The third member of the team was responsible for taking down plans and diagrams written on the board by the leader or members. This plan has the advantage of not tiring one or two group members nor of preventing their participating in the group for more than a few minutes.

A stenographic report or recording would be far superior to running notes; but few groups have the facilities for obtaining these, whereas the taking of running notes is a technique most groups can easily utilize. With practice, members will become skillful in using this technique. Running notes, even though not entirely complete or wholly accurate, are far more objective and reliable than the memories and impressions of group members.

Comments Reveal Statuses and Roles

This committee proceeded to analyze the notes of several class sessions and then reported to the class. They used the report to point up reasons for difficulties encountered in attempting to solidify group thought, make strides as a group, and arrive at consensus. The reader may easily discover reasons behind the various roles as described:

One member is firmly convinced of the value of group discussions, per se. She feels that general, uninhibited talk is necessary and that the time consumed is well spent.

A second member feels that the discussion must "get some place." She is concerned with proving the efficiency of the group process. This same member wants clear analysis of all points, a rigorous intellectual approach to the best that has been written in the field.

A third member wants to work inductively, proceeding to generalizations from specific cases which are not to be considered merely as examples. She wants to use experience, not books, as the background and is concerned that the results be intelligible to the average teacher.

An administrator in the group continually refers to the place of the leader in group process.

A director of teacher education in a small college is concerned with preexisting groups and their influence on group process.

The two members of the class most instrumental in acceptance of the topic of group structure by the class continually try to bring discussion back to structure.

A third member who opposed this orientation takes every opportunity to stress function and the danger of bogging down in a sterile and static approach.

One man is concerned with psychological bases.

A woman is concerned with sociological bases.

One member plays the role of purpose-questioner; Where are we going? What does this mean?
Another tries to act as conciliator and to bring opposing points into synthesis.

**Record of Vocalization Tells Story**

The committee concerned with the vocalization of group members made the following report after having spent much time in perfecting an objective device to measure amounts of group time consumed by various members:

In this experiment the committee attempted to chart the amount of vocalization of each member of the group. Employing graph paper and a watch, the recorder drew a jagged line (horizontal) beside the speaker's name in the corresponding time unit in which the member happened to be speaking. Solid vertical lines were used to connect the remarks of succeeding speakers, the speakers being arranged on the vertical axis of the graph. Slanting lines showed the length of silent periods by the degree of slant, while perpendicular lines denoted quick questions or responses.

In the completed work we had a graphic picture of the group meeting which correlated with the word picture projected by the running notes.

The tabulation of results was merely a summary of the number of minutes and seconds each member had spoken. From that we drew the total amount of time each individual had spoken plus the percentage of total group time each had consumed.

A glance at the table in the next column shows that our of twenty-five persons present nine did not participate vocally, and of the sixteen who did participate, two persons used more group time than all the other fourteen participants together. Significantly, both of these very vocal members were "status persons," members of the faculty, and one of the two was chairman of the meeting.

We could not, of course, from this graph ascertain who is over-participating vocally or who is under-participating. Individual members have varying contributions to bring to varying topics. However, a series of graphs representing a number of meetings might point out any malignant trend toward either extreme.

**Statistical Tabulation of Vocal Participation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of Contributor speaking</th>
<th>Amount of time used</th>
<th>Percent of total time used</th>
<th>Percent of lines in report of previous meeting*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chairman</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10 30</td>
<td>7.0 10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second faculty member</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6 50</td>
<td>5.3 5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8 0</td>
<td>4.5 0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5 10</td>
<td>4.0 13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5 10</td>
<td>3.8 12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.0 0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4 30</td>
<td>3.0 1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2 20</td>
<td>1.5 0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2 10</td>
<td>1.4 0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 30</td>
<td>1.0 0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 30</td>
<td>1.0 0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0 30</td>
<td>0.3 0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0 30</td>
<td>0.3 0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0 20</td>
<td>0.2 0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O to W (9 students)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0.0 0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Members absent at second meeting but present at first:

- X .................................. 9.6
- Y .................................. 3.3
- Z .................................. 3.9

*Of 333 lines reported in the running notes of the meeting prior to the one where the more accurate statistical record was kept, the last column indicates the percentage of lines attributed to each member. This record was highly subjective, but similarities to the more objective record are of interest. Members O to W were represented in the earlier meeting by vocalization on the part of S (1.5%) and T (1.5%) only.

1Not chairman at the earlier meeting.
2Chairman for one-third of earlier session.
3Presented somewhat lengthy report of subcommittee.
4Chairman for two-thirds of meeting.
Group Thought Patterns Are Examined

The report issued to the class on the third analysis is rather complete and self-explanatory:

The success factor in group endeavor is a powerful force in cementing groupness and motivating continuing group activity. Groups which have met for the purpose of dealing with common problems are often evaluated by their members by such comments as: “We’re not getting anywhere,” or “We’re really doing things.”

These evaluations are of fundamental importance. While dissatisfactions concerning group progress may be voiced consciously by the leadership to facilitate a group’s structuring itself during its formative period, these dissatisfactions continued over too long a period of time inevitably lead to disintegration of structure.

A basic operating principle for the “problem-action” type of group is: The group members must feel a sense of forward movement. The desired sense of forward movement has to do with two aspects of the group’s thought process—direction and tempo.

The necessity that all members of the group clearly perceive group purpose need hardly be elaborated. Not so evident is the fact that it is possible to proceed in a given direction at too fast or too slow a rate. Tempo not in keeping with varying requirements of subjects of discussion and composition of groups may be a basic hindrance to the group members’ sense of forward movement.

Based on the above premises, an attempt was made to evolve a diagnostic device which, in some manner, would graphically portray the pattern of forward movement in the discussions of the class. The first step was to determine the possible spread of direction and tempo which might be identified in the discussions. It was seen that contributions made during a discussion might be one of three types: (1) pertinent to the subject being discussed and sensitive to the tempo of group thinking; (2) pertinent to the subject being discussed but pushing ahead too fast or trudging along too slowly—showing lack of sensitivity to the tempo of group thinking; (3) off the subject—introduction of a new topic.

The device was then constructed in the form of a running graph to be plotted as the discussion proceeded. Three horizontal lines represented the three types of contribution listed above. Double vertical lines were used to represent change in subject of discussion. Each comment made was plotted on the appropriate horizontal line, numbered in order, and the same number, with the comment itself, was recorded below the graph in the space provided. Contributions made by the discussion leader were starred (*). The first comment to the right of each double vertical line gave the key to the new group subject.

Below is presented an illustrative portion worked out during one group discussion. The reader will detect the extent to which forward movement was achieved.

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* 1. Let's define what we mean by a “pre-structured” group.
  2. We should classify all types of groups and contrast them.
  3. A “pre-structured” group assigns ready-made roles to its members.
  * 4. What part do status persons play?

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5. Some structure is necessary. Fluid groups don't get anywhere.
6. Fluid groups may, eventually. Our concept of nebulous groups describes pure wandering.
7. Now we are wandering. Maybe we should start farther back and decide what purposes group action can serve.
8. I can't see purposes apart from particular types of groups. What types of groups have we identified so far?
9. We have covered that ground more than once. Do we have to begin every discussion in the Garden of Eden? We are now talking about groups with conscious purposes.
10. By purposes do we mean group goals or socio-psychological development of participants, or both?
11. I don't think we will really understand what we are doing until we observe some groups first hand.
12. First of all, we have to know what to observe.
13. We set out to discuss "pre-structured" groups. Can we orient around a description of some such group and then analyze it?

Direct Experience Makes the Difference

The above devices, and many others not presented in this report, having evolved from this group now were evaluated by the group through discussions and questionnaires. It is interesting to note that while all techniques used were thought to have merit, there was no agreement as to which ones were most valuable. Certainly, the group had improved in ability to work together as evidenced by interesting, creative productivity and increased friendly extraclass contacts.

Exactly how this had been accomplished was not at once apparent. It is probably true that the fact of dealing directly with process made the difference to a far greater degree than did any specific analysis technique employed.

The class experience resulted in a few generalizations concerning which most class members had not been previously aware:

While process is no substitute for worthwhile group objectives, efficient process is necessary to the definition, movement toward, and realization of objectives.

Efficient process is dependent upon broad understandings of socio-psychological dynamics.

One way a group may promote these understandings on the part of all participants is to identify and deal directly with process as process through group introspection based on experimental techniques.

It was the expressed hope of the evaluation committees that these hard-won generalizations might guide the class members toward further group process know-how and also make a contribution to others discovering process in group work.