

Evaluation of the 1949 ASCD Convention

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We are sincerely grateful to J. Cecil Parker, associate professor of education, University of California, Berkeley, for compiling and analyzing the evaluation questionnaires of the Association's annual meeting which was held in New York City in February, 1949. Because of this evaluation we are in a better position to analyze, change, and strengthen our future conference plans and procedures. Mr. Parker is chairman of the Orientation Committee for the 1950 convention to be held in Denver next month.

THE POLLSTERS who had such a bad time with voting trends and tendencies would certainly lose more sleep were they to make an analysis of the evaluation questionnaires of the ASCD annual meeting which was held in New York City in February, 1949. We've dug into sampling techniques, opinion-attitude research, content analysis, and crystal balls to no avail. Our one conclusion: the ASCD group has as wide a variety of opinions, attitudes, and reactions about the New York meeting as it is possible to have. We seem to be a "some like it hot, some like it cold" group if these evaluation questionnaires are any guide. However, these reactions are an integral part of group planning and group participation. In spite of the fact that over-all reactions run the gamut of "It's the best meeting I've ever attended" to "Frankly, I was disappointed," there are many clues which indicate how we felt about the meeting and what we want to do about improving the meeting at Denver.

Discussion Groups Most Fruitful

Most of us felt that the discussion groups were the most fruitful kind of

meeting. Approximately seventy-five percent of the participants shared the view that the discussion groups made the conference a "working" meeting. Granted, many expressed frustration: "There was so little time. It took us two days really to get started. Couldn't we have more time for discussion groups?" Others, by far the minority, said, "We talked about the same stuff we were talking about in 1938. I'd rather hear somebody bring us up to date on recent progress in education." Yet the general opinion reported was that the group discussions were the heart of the convention.

When asked to indicate which type of meeting we would like to see increased in time, most of us were sure that we needed more time in discussion groups. Characteristic comments ran like this: "Couldn't we start a day earlier—or extend the conference if necessary. We need more time to work together. If we can just have a little more time for group discussions we'd do a better job."

Toward the other meetings—general sessions, open committee meetings, regional groups—reaction was favorable,

with the exception of the regional groups. Comments such as these were very common: "Our regional meeting was not well attended and little was accomplished there." "I wish I had skipped the regional meeting—but I felt obligated to go." "Frankly, our regional meeting was a flop." Some felt that the trouble was with the regional groups themselves and that, unless there was better organization next year, the regional groups should be abandoned. The time allotment of the various meetings met with general approval, but there was an almost universal plea for more time in discussion groups.

In evaluating the discussion groups, one item—physical arrangements—was considered an outstanding weakness. Indeed, one could count on his fingers the number who failed to check this item as being a distinct weakness. However, unanimity of opinion stopped here.

The majority of the members indicated that the leadership of discussion groups was satisfactory. There were, however, some who felt otherwise, and their comments were expressed thus: "We need to be more careful about selecting leaders. Competence in group leadership together with knowledge of the subject under discussion should determine choice of these key people."

Participation—a Great Strength

Nearly everybody agreed that participation by the members was a great strength. Of course there were some who felt that "the professors held sway with their jargon and never got down to specifics," but the consensus seemed to be expressed by one member: "This is the first convention I've ever at-

tended where I could actively participate instead of drowsing while dull speeches were made. I like the idea of giving everyone a chance to have his say. I felt that I really belonged—instead of being a wall-flower from a hick town."

The Role of Resource Person Was Confused

The role of the resource person needs clarification. Apparently many of the participants agree with the member who said: "We were so concerned that 'resource people' not dominate the group that as a result the group just discussed the problem themselves. We needed help, but wouldn't ask for it. Resource people should not dominate the group, but they should not be made to feel like a 'heel' if they make a comment." Accordingly, there were numerous suggestions regarding the effective use of resource persons. Several resource persons who filled in evaluation slips said: "I felt like an outcast. Never was I accepted or utilized by the group. I feel we need to clarify the role of the expert. Being expert doesn't mean one is autocratic."

Evaluation of Group Processes

Weapons were chosen and conflicts of value flared over "evaluation of group processes within the group." Analysis of the evaluation questionnaires reveals there are two camps in ASCD: the "group process advocates" and the "group process gets in the way defenders." Words of praise for the use of process evaluation were sung by many, while others heaped tons of criticism on the "cult of group dynamics." There is an issue here which we must face—

Where do we go from here? Perhaps a few words from each side will state the issue so that we as a group can reflect on it.

The "group process gang" says: "We have improved our ASCD meetings these last few years because of our attention to our ways of working. I like the idea of pausing to evaluate, of having trained observers and recorders give us an objective view of human relationships and our procedures. Group self-evaluation is both a guide and a stimulus to better group thinking."

On the other side of the fence, the "anti-group process gang" replies: "Let's cut out the over-emphasis on group processes for the sake of process. We aren't getting anywhere with all this talk. You don't use group processes in a vacuum. Let's stop separating process and content. I believe we are overlooking the challenge of leadership in the process and are leading ourselves and others to believe that a 'talkfest' which finds its level little above adolescent 'bull sessions' is a sound procedure for providing educational growth."

These comments are representative of the two points of view concerning the use and abuse of group processes and their evaluation. For those who were experiencing the use of the techniques of group work for the first time, the attention devoted to the role of the observer, leader, and recorder did not seem to be over-emphasis. However, many who have become familiar with the major techniques of group discussion, planning, deciding, and acting agreed that these techniques must be related to a problem—a specific situation.

Perhaps a clue for improving our next convention lies in the suggestion

of several members: "One of the problems we had was that our group had members who had attended the Chicago and Cincinnati meetings. They had a background in group processes. Also, we had new recruits, quite unfamiliar with group processes. The result was a conflict; the oldtimers want to move ahead and the newcomers need orientation to group procedures. So we tried to orient them and got off into process alone. I don't know the answer; maybe it's better orientation sessions."

Problems of Intercommunication

Participants want to know what is going on in other groups. The majority who replied to the questionnaire indicated that they would like to see more intercommunication. There was no consensus as to the means, though the participants favored the use of newscasts, and a summary or panel session in which leaders, recorders, and observers of groups would report what had developed in their groups. Newscasts were favored over general summaries. There were quite a few people who suggested that mimeographed summaries of group discussions given out at the end of each day would satisfy their curiosity as to what the others were doing.

Specific Definitions of Problems Is Crucial

With the exception of a handful of people who registered late, and were thus unable to get into the discussion group which interested them most, everybody replied that the topic under consideration in their group was of importance to them. However, the inventories reveal considerable dissatisfac-

tion with attempts made by their groups to define the problem specifically. It was the opinion of many that the problems were always too nebulous, not well structured, and never specific enough to be "reality based." Frequent were comments like: "It took us two days to find out what we were trying to do. We floundered around, talked past each other, and never could seem to decide what specifics we should attack. I felt disappointed because after two days all we had done was express a bunch of pre-conceived ideas. There was no real interchange of thought. Something should be done to make the problem more specific—to help us get started on one problem, and not have a conversation about hundreds of them."

Suggestions for facilitating the definition of the problem were many and varied. Among those which recurred again and again were the following:

—"Have the leader, recorder, and resource people prepare in advance a mimeographed analysis of the problem area in terms of its reason for being a problem, the varied viewpoints commonly expressed about it, and the essential issues at stake. People want some initial direction."

—"Have a section in the handbook which would list some specific steps or approaches to the clarification and analysis of problems."

—"Have the leader formulate three or so problems and let the group select one."

—"Get a problem census of ASCD members prior to the convention as to specific things they're interested in."

—"Poll the membership to discover pertinent questions after theme and discussion groups are determined."

—"Let's define our terms and get rid of the educational 'gobbledegook.'"

—"Set the problems the first meeting and stick with them. It's better to come to a conclusion about one or two issues than to come to no conclusion about a great many."

—"Use a buzz session to warm up the participants and have them present their problems to the total group."

—"List sub-heads to the main theme on the advance announcement to aid participants in choosing groups."

—"Let the team present the problem."

—"Have an expert in each group state the problem."

An analysis of the suggestions for facilitating better definition of the problem seems to reveal two patterns of thought: (1) the responsibility for defining the problem rests with the leaders, the team, the expert; (2) the responsibility for definition rests with the entire membership and can best be accomplished by some form of poll or problem census of the entire membership prior to the convention. The latter suggestion was voiced more often than the first. The number of replies to this part of the questionnaire indicates real concern in this matter, and as a group we need to give careful attention in planning for the 1950 meeting.

The Orientation Session—

Source of Many Questions

Roughly seventy-five percent of the participants who replied to the section asking their reaction to the orientation session for those who had special responsibilities in the study groups, wrote something such as: "Had no responsibility in this." "Did not attend—thought it was only for leadership

team." Reactions of those who did attend were mixed as to the value of the orientation session. The majority of participants said that there was a real need for a better definition of the role of the teams. Somehow this was not accomplished, and many people were confused by the session. There were frequent references to the lack of time given to orientation, to inadequate training of leaders, and to the relatively poor attendance.

One participant expressed his reaction thus: "There ought to be a one-day session with leaders, recorders, and observers preceding any general meeting. They need time to try out new ways of working. Our effort at training people to use group processes was too casual, too nebulous, and too short. Then, too—why not have all the participants involved in this session—or at least have another group where they could pick up some know-how on working in groups. Many of those who expressed dissatisfaction with group process just haven't had any experience in group thinking and planning."

Open Committee Meetings

Not Well Attended

People felt that these too often conflicted with other meetings, and that better arrangements should be made for next year. The quality of the committee meetings varied tremendously, and people reacted thus many times: "I understand that the committee meeting I was in was one of the best; they tell me the others weren't so good. I would like to have dropped into more of them but there wasn't time. Their greatest value was the chance to participate in formulating ASCD policy. It gave me a sense

of security in being free to express myself regarding national ASCD problems. I experienced a closer relationship to the working and planning of ASCD activities."

Varied Likes and Dislikes

The identification of trends in this area is practically impossible. The peeves were minor and almost always prefaced with the remark: "Well, this is a minor thing, but I—." Only a few peeves were rather common. These were: (1) the physical arrangements for discussion could have been better; (2) there was a little too much emphasis on process to the detriment of content; (3) too little concentration on specific problems; (4) rehashing of things we've discussed before; (5) too little time for, and too few, social hours.

In view of the impossibility of categorizing the peeves, here is a sampling of nine "peeves" selected at random:

"Being told no study group was available when I had registered late."

"I couldn't be in two places at once."

"Feeling of rush, rush, rush."

"Too much 'processing' and too little real work."

"Too much fear about not being democratic. There is leadership in a democracy, too."

"Group meetings were just a lot of talk."

"High price of food."

"Not enough time to take part in all of the good things of the conference."

"Groups too large—inadequate meeting places."

Now for the "likes." Praise was almost universal. The consensus was that each ASCD meeting is better than the last, and that this conference was far and away the best to date. Here is what we said:

"The planning and organization of the whole meeting—it was swell."

"Meeting people with all kinds of experience."

"The group meetings—they made it a working and practical convention."

"Sharing ideas and experiences with people from all over the country."

"The enthusiasm of the participants. They were alive, inspirational and determined."

"The wonderful speakers such as Mrs. Roosevelt and Mr. Goslin."

"The great possibilities of the democratic procedure. I like working in a democratic group. It's a change from my daily experiences."

"It was a fine chance to meet people—to renew acquaintances—to gain fresh stimulation—to share ideas."

"Everything. It was swell."

"Good judgment in scheduling which permitted wide latitude in sampling New York's night life."

"The friendliness, participation by members, opportunity to participate actively. Opportunity to work on real problems."

"The excellent team leadership."

"The working group set up. Let's keep it on a group process base so we can all participate."

These quotes are but a random sampling but present somewhat accurately the climate of opinion as expressed by the evaluation questionnaire.

What About Next Year?

What changes would make the conference even better? The suggestions in

this area are bewildering both in number and range. Among those which showed a trend of thought shared by many are these:

"Allot more time for the meeting. Let's extend it a day."

"Why not have more teachers present?"

"Arrange more social time so people can get together; e.g., a chance to meet with your group on a social basis."

"Summaries of each group's discussion distributed before we leave."

"Better facilities for group meetings."

"Let's not be so self-conscious about group processes."

"Make provision for discussion groups at various levels of development."

"Breathers between sessions."

"More help for the observers, recorders, newscaster."

"Change nothing. I liked it this way."

"Increase the range of leadership. Let's see some new faces."

"The price of the meals."

"Slow the whole thing down by not trying to tackle so much."

"More specific delineation of problems in advance of conference."

"Some planning by groups in advance of conference."

Such were our reactions. The cooperation of all in returning the evaluation blanks has been exceedingly helpful. The planning committees for the Denver conference have been made aware of many problems and clues that could not otherwise be made available.



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