

# *An Experiment in Training Teachers for Discussion Group Leadership*

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This article relates how a carefully planned one-day program of training was designed so as to help persons with little experience in leading discussion groups face such a specific leadership assignment. The authors indicate that positive results may be achieved even in such a brief period of time.

ONE OF the typical uses of group work in curriculum development is to identify problems of general concern. For many people, including teachers, leadership of this kind of discussion group requires skills for which they have had little training or experience. It is true that many of them feel relatively safe in leading discussions which are pre-structured and supported by the rules of parliamentary procedure and by the existence of definite agenda, but they often feel insecure when the group itself sets the pattern of deliberation.

What kinds of problems do teachers face as they lead discussion groups made up of their peers? How can teachers who are inexperienced in this kind of leadership be helped to acquire the skills necessary to cope with these problems? How can the effectiveness of a training program designed to develop these skills be evaluated?

This article reports an experiment in building understanding and security among twelve teachers in the West Orange, New Jersey, Public Schools who were faced with the problem of leading group discussions. Training of the

teachers proceeded on the hypothesis that a carefully planned one-day program of training designed for persons with little discussion-leadership experience demonstrably improves the performance and increases the assurance of these persons when they are placed in the position of discussion leader.

## **The Setting**

The West Orange Central Curriculum Committee includes nineteen local teachers and administrators and five staff members of the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation, Teachers College, Columbia University. A group of teachers interested in the improvement of reading asked the Central Curriculum Committee to assist it in planning a half-day conference on reading problems.

The Reading Group stated the purposes of the conference as follows: (a) to increase acquaintanceship among teachers, (b) to explain the present reading program from kindergarten through twelfth grade, and (c) to identify problems in the teaching of reading which are common throughout the school system. The Reading Group as-

signed several<sup>1</sup> of its forty members to make specific plans for a half-day program. These plans called for a half-day conference on school time, which included an assembly of the entire professional staff of 208 for explanation by a five-member panel of the reading program as it presently exists, discussion groups for defining reading problems, and refreshments to be served by a junior high school parent-teacher organization.

The planning committee gave much attention to securing topics around which discussion groups were to be organized. Representatives on the Central Curriculum Committee talked with teachers in their buildings to determine broad problem areas in the teaching of reading which the teachers would like to discuss. The planning committee categorized the stated problems and arranged them in an inventory form to which all faculty members were requested to respond. Faculty members chose their discussion topics from the sixteen problem areas in the inventory. Examples of these problem areas were: "Helping children attack and recognize new words" and "The place of oral reading in the program." Twelve discussion groups, which included twelve to twenty-two members each, were organized in terms of faculty members' choices.

On the same inventory form, the faculty indicated the names of fellow teachers who they thought would make good leaders and recorders for the groups. The planning committee decided that if teachers were given an opportunity to nominate their peers for

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leadership positions, they would tend to identify persons who were potentially successful leaders.<sup>2</sup> Teachers whose names were most frequently mentioned as likely discussion leaders and other teachers who were nominated as recorders were invited to assume these responsibilities. Twelve of fourteen nominees—ten women and two men—accepted the leadership assignments. These twelve persons were released from teaching duties for the entire school day immediately preceding the day of the conference. At that time a training session in discussion leadership techniques was conducted by three staff members of the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute.

#### **Preparation for the Training Session**

Prior to the training day, a group of West Orange and Institute personnel cooperated in making a tape recording which illustrated some of the problems leaders face in discussion group meetings. Problems which were considered typical were developed in episodes as follows: (1) Beginning a Meeting, (2) Building the Agenda, (3) Dealing with the Excessive Talker, (4) Handling Conflict, (5) Keeping Things Moving,

<sup>1</sup>Margaret McSweeney, Mildred Moyer, Glena Murphy, Eleanor Noyes, Grace Redman, Beatrice Schauwecker, and Janet Sokolay.

<sup>2</sup>See R. J. Wherry and D. H. Fryer, "Popularity Contests or Leadership Criteria?" *Personnel Psychology* II (1949), 147-149.

(6) Keeping on the Beam, (7) The Dominating Leader, and (8) Closing the Meeting. Each episode illustrated one or more ways in which the leader might deal with the problem. As such, these episodes were intended merely to stimulate discussion and role-playing and not to give the "right" answers.

As an example, the episode involving "The Dominating Leader" can be reported here because of its brevity:

NARRATOR: Frequently a group is confronted with a situation which stops it from taking any action, and may even cause it to break up. Can you detect what is happening in the following group discussion? The leader is speaking.

LEADER: I feel very strongly that a comprehensive achievement test in reading will reveal where our weaknesses exist in teachers and teaching.

VOICE A: A reading test may reveal that, but I would worry about making that the starting point for a study of reading in our schools.

LEADER: Your statement doesn't show where it should be. We *must* have a starting point.

VOICE B: How about starting with a survey of what the teachers consider to be their problems in the teaching of reading?

LEADER: That wouldn't get us anywhere. I doubt that teachers can really sense their problems.

VOICE C: Perhaps our supervisors could give us some clues as to where our problems are.

VOICE D: I think that if we were...

LEADER (*interrupting*): But look—our supervisors are not able to get around enough to really know what the problems are. They are so involved in

other kinds of activities that I think their opinions are... (Fade.)

NARRATOR: What's the matter here? How would you feel as a group member? What would the group members say or do as this discussion goes on? Was there a good discussion pattern?

### Design for the Training Day

The design for the training day included a brief statement by a representative of the superintendent of schools concerning the importance of preparation for discussion leadership and the general plan of the conference on reading; a warm-up or get-acquainted period for the teachers and the Institute personnel who were acting as consultants; explanation and general discussion by the Institute staff members of the kinds of episodes on the training tape; play-back of episodes one by one with discussion by the entire group of the problems raised in each episode; role-playing by members of the group when the value of such practice seemed apparent; written evaluation of the morning session; informal discussion during coffee and lunch periods; report of the morning evaluation and planning for the afternoon session; and an end-of-the-day summary which involved statements from members of the group on ways of behaving in discussion group situations to which they were now committed. The training session closed with written evaluations by the group. All of the meeting was tape-recorded so that the consultants could study group members' reactions to the training tape.

### Evaluation of the Training Session

The contribution of the training program to these teachers and to the effec-

tiveness of the discussion groups which they led in the Reading Conference was assessed in three ways: by asking the teachers on the day of their training experience to evaluate the day's activities; by asking them the day after the reading conference to re-evaluate the worth of the training program; and by requesting all faculty members to express their opinions of the group discussions led by these teachers.

The twelve teachers wrote evaluations for the morning and the afternoon portions of the one-day training session. The Institute staff prepared the questionnaires. The morning's evaluation form included the following: (1) Please give your over-all reaction to this morning's session. (2) How did this morning's meeting correspond with what you expected? (3) What is your reaction to the portion of this morning's meeting in which the plan for the day was introduced? (4) How effective do you think the use of the tape recording has been? (5) Suggest any problems of "discussion leadership" which have not been considered and which you think should be taken up this afternoon. (6) What would you like to see happen this afternoon? Responses to the first four items were given an appropriate description relative to the question asked. For example, in question one the five levels were:

- 5—"Very Successful"
- 4—"Rather Successful"
- 3—"So-so"
- 2—"Rather Unsuccessful"
- 1—"Very Unsuccessful"

For each of these questions the evaluator was also asked to give the major reason for his rating.

The average of the teachers' reactions to question one was 4.8. It was apparent from their reactions to question two that their expectations of the training session were somewhat different from what actually took place. The average was 3.9 and the range was 1 through 5. The average evaluation of the introduction to the day's meeting (question three) was 4.7. All of the teachers reacted with the highest rating to the use of the tape recording (question four). The responses pertaining to the use of time in the afternoon indicated that the group wished to continue its morning pattern. A few additional problems for consideration were mentioned.

Items on the afternoon evaluation form were: (1) Over-all reaction to the afternoon's meeting. (2) How did the role-playing in today's meeting seem? (3) Did the summary of the reactions to the morning's session help improve the afternoon's meeting? (4) A reaction to each episode on the tape as to its helpfulness and an expression of which problems presented on the tape the teachers felt most capable of handling. (5) Over-all reaction to the whole day's training session.

The average over-all reaction to the afternoon session was 4.3, a reduction from the morning's average which several persons attributed to fatigue. Role-playing received an average of 3.8. Helpfulness of the summary of the morning's reactions was rated 3.9. The four most helpful episodes on the tape in order of rank were: Beginning a Meeting, The Dominating Leader, Building the Agenda, and Keeping on the Beam. Those skills about which people said they felt most confident

were: Beginning a Meeting, Closing a Meeting, and Building the Agenda, in that order. The following three were ranked equally: Keeping Things Moving, Keeping on the Beam, The Dominating Leader. The average of the teachers' ratings for the whole day's training session was 4.5.

### ***Delayed Reactions to the Training Program***

The day after the conference, another evaluative instrument was filled out by the teachers who had led discussion groups. (1) Did Friday's (the training day's) sessions help you meet your discussion leadership responsibilities? (2) Did you face problems in your discussion group that we did *not* consider Friday? (3) Rate the episodes on the tape. (4) What would you do, that we didn't do, if you were planning a discussion leadership training session?

All of the discussion leaders indicated that the training session was very helpful as they faced the practical situation. Their comments and the number of people who expressed each of them follow.

We talked about concrete, realistic situations in leadership. (4)

We anticipated problems and prepared ourselves to meet them. (3)

The training gave me a greater feeling of security. (3)

We covered every situation I faced. (2)

Five of the twelve teachers said they met a few problems which had not been covered. The unanticipated problems they found included antagonistic or negative attitudes, the status person who "took over the meeting," and persons who conversed in undertones.

The four most helpful episodes on the tape as teachers ranked them after leading a discussion group were: (1) Beginning a Meeting, (2) Closing the Meeting, (3) Building an Agenda, (4) Keeping Things Moving. As to suggestions which might be useful in training other persons for discussion leadership, six teachers had nothing to suggest. Two proposed that the method of introducing role-playing be improved to make it more acceptable to the group. Additional suggestions were as follows:

We needed more episodes on summarizing.

We needed more on getting the meeting started.

We could have learned to deal with an objector to *all* agenda items.

Morning and afternoon activities should have been varied.

The training program was too long. Small groups, with status people missing, should be used in introducing role-playing.

Re-edit the tape to sharpen some problems and prevent overlapping.

### ***Total Faculty Reactions to the Discussion Groups***

Faculty members were given an opportunity to react to all phases of the conference, and eighty-eight per cent of them did so in writing. Their consensus was that the group discussions adequately served the purpose for which they were intended. Group participants' comments, both oral and written indicated that staff members realized that the leaders had received helpful training. "Good discussion leadership" was a frequent comment.

This one-day training program for discussion leaders appears to have been a valuable and satisfying experience for the participants. In addition it supplied evidence as to the effectiveness of the training design and raised some questions about the advisability of using a similar design in other situations.

The data indicate that the training session helped teachers acquire assurance and certain of the skills necessary for doing an adequate job in the groups they were to lead the next week. The effectiveness of the training program may well depend upon the immediacy of the need for training.

Provision had been made in the training design for a distinction to be drawn between a discussion leader whose principal function is to facilitate the processes of the group and the resource person whose function is to supply specialized information as the group needs it. The recording of the training session showed this distinction to be particularly reassuring to these teachers because they were concerned that they were not experts in the teaching of reading—the topic to be discussed. Therefore, it seems wise that the distinction between the discussion leader and the resource person be made early in the training session.

The use of recorded discussion episodes to raise problems and stimulate discussion was effective in this situation, and with some changes it might prove useful in other training groups. On the basis of its use in this instance it was concluded that episodes developed to run only two or three minutes are too abrupt and do not present enough possible alternatives for meeting group discussion problems. Under

other circumstances the tape recording might be used to focus on problems brought up within the training group rather than to introduce these problems. This use of the tape may depend upon the experience of the group members with discussion leadership. Therefore, the training design might call for a more flexible use of the episodes than was provided in this instance.

The plans for the training day called for the use of role-playing as a means for learning discussion leadership skills through practice. The teacher participants, however, resisted the efforts of the Institute staff members to include role-playing in the day's activities. Nevertheless, at the close of the training day several of the participants indicated a feeling that role-playing would have been profitable. As the Institute staff members later listened to the recordings which were made of the day's proceedings, they were able to detect a number of instances where role-playing might have been acceptably introduced had this perception at the time been clearer. In any event, role-playing would appear to be a useful element in this type of training program, but more attention should be paid to techniques for introducing role-playing.

On the basis of this experiment with a carefully planned one-day program of training designed to help persons with little discussion leadership experience face a specific leadership assignment, it appears that positive results can be achieved in a brief period of time. Refinement of the techniques which were used is undoubtedly necessary. Application of the training design elsewhere is dependent upon the situational factors which have been discussed.

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