

Sensitivity Education: Problems and Promise

Arthur W. Combs

THE overwhelming problems of our time are human problems. Their solutions depend upon effective human understanding and interaction. If America's schools do not produce sensitive, compassionate, caring persons equipped to meet these problems, they will have failed all of us, students, parents, the nation itself. One promising movement aimed at achieving these ends is *sensitivity education*.

In the midst of our current preoccupation with objective, mechanistic, cognitive, computerized education, it is good to know there are some who are deeply concerned with the human questions. The present curriculum scene is a depressing one for the humanist, and it is, therefore, reassuring to know that some persons are actively experimenting with humanizing innovations. Sensitivity education may not provide us final answers, but out of experiments with it will come new perspectives which cannot help but advance our understanding of the human aspects of curriculum development.

Even if its potentialities for sensitizing students to themselves and to each other were not reason enough for experimenting with sensitivity education, the contributions it can make to the learning process itself would demand our serious attention. Sensitive awareness to self, to others, and to the outside world of ideas and events is the base line from which personal discovery of meaning begins. Billions of dollars and billions of man-hours are currently being expended in attempts to reform education. Unhappily, much of this effort is foredoomed to be wasted because it concentrates on the wrong problem.

Learning, psychologists tell us, always consists of two parts: exposure to new experience or information, on the one hand, and the discovery of its personal meaning for the learner, on the other. Teachers have long been expert in providing information. This is the thing we know how to do best. With modern technology we are now able to provide information faster and more furiously than ever before. Unfortunately, this is not the place where education is sick. Our major failures do not arise from lack

of information. They come from the other half of the equation—our inability to help students discover the personal meaning of the information we so extravagantly provide them.

Personal Meaning

The meaning half of the learning equation is the human half. It lies inside the learner and so is only indirectly open to external manipulators. We know a great deal about providing information. We know very little about the dynamics of helping learners discover personal meaning. We have, therefore, concentrated our efforts at educational reform on the things we already know how to do. As a consequence, the principle of overkill has come to education and we are in danger of drowning in a sea of information.

We are accustomed to overproduction in America, and such extravagant waste might be tolerated if it were not true that “what you make on the bananas you lose on the oranges!” We have seen how overproduction has fouled up our environment. It is doing the same for education. Our preoccupation with the information half of the learning equation has dehumanized our schools, alienated our youth, and produced a system irrelevant for most students.

The human side of learning cannot forever be swept under the rug with impunity. It will continue to plague us and frustrate our efforts whether we recognize its existence or not. The laws of learning cannot be suspended because they are inconvenient to consider. It is time we devoted ourselves and our treasure to the human side of the learning equation as an antidote to the terrible dehumanizing forces we have set loose in the past ten years. One small contribution in this direction is sensitivity education. It deserves our respect and encouragement.

Professional workers are great faddists, and educators are no exception. New movements in any of the professions begin with enthusiastic experimentation among their proponents. As a consequence they blossom out in dozens of variations, each staunchly defended by its adherents. So, the current scene in sensitivity training finds people operating at every conceivable variation under many different names. It appears, for example, under such names as discussion groups, T-groups, confrontations, sensitivity groups, and encounter groups. These also run for varying lengths of time from occasionally, to an hour or two a week, to 24-hour marathons, to weekends or retreats of varying lengths. They vary also in philosophy and practice, from nondirective to directive involving just talk or varying forms of controlled or permissive interaction, from sensitivity games to encounter in the nude.

Innovation Involves Risk

With any new movement there is likely to be a need to examine the question as a pure case. Innovation always involves some risk. Inevitably, this experimentation includes some pretty far-out activities which seem reprehensible, dangerous, or immoral to more inhibited observers who may respond by rejecting the entire movement. This is unfortunate; it is also predictable.

Critical observers of beginning movements are very likely to deal with them in shades of black and white. Enthusiastic proponents are sure they have come into possession of all-embracing solutions, while antagonists see the movement as irresponsible, dangerous, or evil. This, too, is probably inevitable. Thinking men need to see matters in clearer perspective and to avoid creating such yes no dichotomies. Earl Kelley once said, "Whenever you find an idea that can be stated as a dichotomy, it is almost certain that both extremes are wrong!" Currently, there is much confusion in discussing sensitivity education. The term is a kind of umbrella. So many different kinds of philosophies, practices, and arrangements are subsumed under this heading that one cannot be "for it" or "agin it." To form a rational judgment about a given group, it is necessary to know who is in it, who is running it, with what philosophy, with what experience and training, for what purpose, under what circumstances.

In time we shall know better how to judge these matters. In the heat of the present excitement it will often be necessary to proceed without all of the data we might otherwise like to have. Meanwhile, the pressing need incumbent upon all of us to deal with the human side of learning requires the widest possible responsible experimentation with the promising leads provided us by sensitivity education. There is not the slightest doubt that these approaches have immensely important contributions to make to educational theory and practice, and we need to exploit them to the full as quickly as possible.

The need for innovation in humanizing education is very great. But human beings are precious and cannot be wantonly expended. It is, therefore, necessary that those who experiment with sensitivity and encounter carry out such experiments responsibly. As a psychotherapist I have had the unhappy experience of having to "pick up the pieces" with clients who suffered bad trips from inept sensitivity encounters. Education is no haphazard process.

The things teachers do must be predicated upon a reasonable expectation of positive results. At the very least, this demands of those exploring sensitivity education: (a) an understanding of the goals and purposes of education, (b) a selection of methods of working clearly consistent with those purposes, (c) a reasonable expectation of positive results, (d) the provision of adequate safeguards against negative effects, and (e) a compassionate acceptance of responsibility for the welfare of all concerned in whatever processes are instituted.

At this point it is clear that sensitivity education has promise. It is also clear that it has problems. In time we shall know more clearly about its promise and will clear up its problems. One way to speed that happy day is through the kind of dialogue provided in this issue of *Educational Leadership*.

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