

Sensitivity Education

STEPHEN M. COREY *
ELINOR K. COREY

• *What is sensitivity education all about?*

Sensitivity education helps people become more *aware* of, more *sensitive* to, what happens as they react to one another, especially in face-to-face situations. It helps men and women and boys and girls perceive what they do to one another, and to themselves, in the give and take of face-to-face communication.

When sensitivity education is successful, more of these interaction events, hopefully, are taken into account. People get in closer touch with themselves and with the others they live and work with.

• *Is there a difference between sensitivity education and sensitivity training?*

Not much, if any. Many school people seem to dislike the implications of the word "training" and associate it with less important activities.

The expression sensitivity education suggests two things that sensitivity training may not. First, the setting for sensitivity education is more apt to be in formal institutions of education—schools or colleges. Second, attempts to increase sensitivity represent a continuous and pervasive emphasis rather than being intensive and focal as is usually the case in sensitivity training.

• *Isn't there great variation in what is done and called sensitivity education?*

Yes, the procedures vary greatly. No one seems to have arrived at the final answer as to how increased sensitivity can best be brought about. The central purpose of all sensitivity education, though, is to help people become more aware of what happens when there is face-to-face interaction. This is the case even when other expressions are used, such as encounter groups or T-groups.

• *Should high priority be placed on including more sensitivity education in the schools?*

It is hard to imagine anything more important at the present time than the improvement of human relations, and that is what successful sensitivity education furthers. Our material wealth is unbelievable but we often seem to be in the Dark Ages in our human relationships. The evidence of our inability to sense, and subsequently to do enough about, the horrible and terrifying effects people have on one another is heartbreaking. Sensitivity education is needed in large amounts and throughout our lifetime.

* Stephen M. Corey, Professor of Education (Emeritus), Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City; and Elinor K. Corey

● *Why is the term "laboratory" used so often in discussions of sensitivity education or sensitivity training?*

The word "laboratory" calls attention to the fact that sensitivity education is most apt to be furthered in a setting in which people are actively reacting to one another rather than by reading about such interactions and discussing what has been read. This means a laboratory rather than an academic setting. Historically, all aspects of human relations training have tended to be academic. It was believed that if relevant information was learned and certain slogans were accepted and repeated, human relations sensitivity as an aspect of improved human relations would almost automatically take place.

● *What is the most important single thing a teacher might do to further sensitivity in the classroom?*

The first essential step is to try to create a classroom climate that encourages boys and girls to report and discuss the way they are feeling about themselves and one another and their teacher. Usually these expressions of feelings are discouraged and punished.

● *When did sensitivity education in the sense of this discussion get started?*

Unusual individual teachers have for a long time helped boys and girls become more aware of themselves and of one another. As a so-called "movement," however, the National Training Laboratory in Group Development got under way more than 20 years ago and its influence has been great. This Laboratory, along with the numerous training activities developed later at Esalen in northern California, are often cited as being most influential in the spread of sensitivity education or training ideas and practices.

● *Many people talk about sensitivity training as if it were a kind of therapy. Is it?*

Most of the meaningful interactions between two or more people probably have therapeutic potential. This is most apt to be true if the interactions are relatively frank and their effects are reported and considered

immediately and thoughtfully. There may be some difference in therapeutic implications between sensitivity education undertaken primarily to enable people to work together better and that undertaken primarily to further their personal development.

The National Training Laboratory started out with emphasis on the former. Esalen activities have more to do with personal growth and are probably more consistently therapeutic.

● *What is the reason for the rather recent surge of interest in sensitivity education?*

There are probably many reasons. One is that many people who have had some of it report that they were benefited. Another important reason, undoubtedly, is our serious and increasing concern and worry about the quality of modern human life—our worry about the effect of the total environment, including other people, on the quality of human existence.

● *Does sensitivity education require a group context?*

In the sense in which the words are used here, yes. In order for human relations events to occur, so that there can be practice in perceiving them, people must actively interact. This requires at least two people, face-to-face. The worth of these interactions for sensitivity education is greatly enhanced if the members of the group within which they take place try to observe certain ground rules.

● *What are some of these sensitivity education ground rules?*

One calls attention to the desirability of reporting frankly the feelings and thoughts that the interactions provoke. And they must be reported in the "here and now," so to speak, because doing so greatly helps the group members understand interrelationships among human interaction events. Another ground rule discourages long explanations and references to personal biography. Confrontation is favored. Politeness and evasiveness and sparring are discouraged. The point to most of these rules, whether they are explicit or implicit, is that they further the honest reporting and discussing of human

relations events *as they take place*. Only when they are so reported are they available for study, and only when their context has been shared can they be helpfully examined and understood.

● *Is sensitivity education beneficial to very young children?*

There is no lower or upper age limit for some form of sensitivity education. Children in nursery schools have been helped to become more aware of the effects of their interpersonal behavior on other children and on themselves. They can be helped to keep in closer touch with the way they feel about and perceive what other people do to them and what they do to other people.

● *Most sensitivity training seems to be quite intensive, like a course or subject. Is this the case for sensitivity education?*

Sensitivity education or training can either be intensive and focal or continuous and undertaken to implement some larger purpose. All school experience should represent continuous sensitivity education in the sense that it exploits opportunities to further constructive human relationships. Doing so is the central purpose for sensitivity education. Any "subject matter" will be better learned in a classroom that is a good laboratory for human relations. To try to teach arithmetic or chemistry or whatever to groups of children and pay no attention to the effects they are having on one another and their feelings about their teacher is to be blind to important influences on learning.

● *Why do discussions of sensitivity education so often get heated?*

Sensitivity education has much to do with the emotions and increased candor in their expression. This troubles many people because the culture most of us have learned almost forces us to inhibit or disguise our feelings. People who have benefited from sensitivity education are apt to be more candid. This stirs things up.

● *Are not some people violently opposed to the whole idea of sensitivity training or sensitivity education?*

They certainly are. We have not yet learned to deal with human relationships in general very objectively. Claims for sensitivity education often get pretty wild as do the objections. The kind of candor that characterizes sensitivity training groups threatens many people. Some have reported particular sensitivity training experiences as devastating, and these reports circulate and get exaggerated. When anyone is relatively unaware of his emotions, and of those of others, he is apt to believe that the emotions are not very important. Anyone who is grown up, some critics say, should be able to handle his emotions. Education to this end wastes time.

● *Do people who advocate sensitivity education have common values or a common life style?*

They would appear to be a pretty heterogeneous lot from the point of view of life style. A majority, though, seem to be much concerned with getting as much pleasure as is possible from the "here and now" and from human relationships in general. This, when and if it is recognized, arouses conflict with what many of us have been taught to believe about the inevitability and wholesome disciplinary value of suffering and pain and the postponement of pleasure and the hazards in its quest.

● *What might be a good way to learn more about sensitivity education?*

Try to get in a sensitivity education or sensitivity training group with other knowledgeable and responsible people. Try in your everyday work to increase your perceptions of the effects people are having on one another. You probably would be surprised at the cues you have overlooked. Try to make more visible to your pupils or students what they are doing to one another as they interact in class. Forget, for a while, any evaluation of these effects. Just try to see them and check their correctness. Try, too, to make more visible the effects you have on the young people and the effect they have on you. This could be a good start toward sensitivity education. □

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