



# Sensitivity Training and Education: A Critique

CLIFFORD H. EDWARDS \*

**T**HE present popularization of sensitivity training (T-group experiences) and its widespread use by an ever-increasing number of semi-intellectuals and pseudo-professionals have created a need for a closer examination of the field along with its assumptions, practices, and outcomes. Sensitivity training has evolved from an early emphasis on the sociological aspects of group dynamics under the direction of its founders, Leland Bradford, Ronald Lippitt, and Kenneth Benne, to an orientation based more on the psychological.

Recognition of the power of the T-group has led to a high degree of experimentalism. Various applications of the technique have been developed to serve a variety of purposes. The earliest application formulated was designed for organizational development. Here the emphasis was on organizational change rather than personal development of participants. Sociological phenomena were studied while the psychological aspects of group behavior were ignored.

Subsequent to this a second category for sensitivity training became prominent. The major subcategories include encounter groups, marathon labs, and confrontation sessions. These types of training differ significantly from the organizational development application, in that greater stress is placed on the psychological aspects of group dynamics. In the encounter groups, for example, there is a direct exposure of values, beliefs, and feelings. The group is encour-

aged to operate almost exclusively on an affective basis. Uninhibited exposure of emotions is acceptable, while reserve and defensiveness are discouraged. Complete openness and honesty are the sought-after goals. Marathons differ from encounter groups primarily in terms of intensity of the experience. These sessions go "nonstop" and are designed to literally break through the normal defense patterns of participants as quickly as possible and thus move immediately to new levels of open behavior. Confrontation sessions consist of contrived racial encounters where whites and blacks openly confront one another in an attempt to more vividly portray the nature of prejudice and the racial problems which exist. Such confrontations hopefully provide the participants with a more realistic perception of the racial issues and new perspectives in solving them.

More recently a third type of sensitivity training has invaded the field. This kind of training is by far the most experimental and consists primarily of a variety of nonverbal exercises. Techniques range from simple exercises with a minimum of body contact to more intimate associations. The objectives for this type of experience are unclear at best and the supporting theories are of questionable validity. Nevertheless, the technique is in wide use and is increasing in popularity.

\* Clifford H. Edwards, Assistant Professor of Education, Illinois State University, Normal

Each of the approaches described above has been designed for a specific purpose. However, these purposes are presently being obscured by the experimental attitude of many participants. Currently the engagement of numerous quasi-professionals in the sensitivity training process is discrediting the whole field. These enthusiastic amateurs have discovered that only a minimum amount of experience and knowledge is necessary to stimulate initial responding by participants. They consider one or two T-group experiences or a small repertoire of easily learned exercises to be adequate preparation for the role of trainer. However, in every type of sensitivity training, considerable knowledge and sophistication are required to extract positive outcomes and protect individuals who may be adversely affected by such an experience. This fact serves as an indictment against these self-appointed experts and the gross misrepresentation of skills they perpetrate upon the public.

### **Sensitivity Techniques for Schools?**

Support for sensitivity training was first won in industry primarily for the purpose of humanizing the job relationships between various personnel with the hope that greater productivity would result. Subsequently, social and behavioral scientists developed various uses for T-groups. More recently education has indicated an interest in using these techniques for solving its multitude of problems. Each of the types of sensitivity training has received some trial in the schools. However, inappropriate identification of objectives and misapplication of techniques have plagued successful application in the school setting. For example, school co-workers who are involved together in the same sensitivity training group, and are thus unable to participate anonymously, often reveal information which deteriorates any future working relationship between them. The same polarization may also be produced when only part of a school staff is "trained" and the training they get alters their be-

havior sufficiently so that co-workers are alienated by them.

Increased alienation may also be produced between school officials and community members through sensitivity training. For example, insufficient knowledge and experience often render confrontations between school officials and minority groups highly charged and dangerous. Proper management of anxiety levels and degrees of resistance is imperative. The skillful relating of encounter experiences to specific educational problems and issues is also necessary. The trainer not only needs T-group skills but also considerable insight into the educational problems being considered. There is an obvious lack of individuals so prepared.

Nonverbal exercises have also been used to a limited extent in the schools. This usually consists of an unofficial attempt by a teacher to incorporate the "games" he has learned in his own T-group experience into the school curriculum. This is the least rational application of sensitivity training. The educational usefulness of "sensitivity" gained through various forms of quasi-intimate bodily contacts is subject to serious question.

In general, sensitivity training is said to offer several advantages. Foremost among assumed benefits is the sensitizing of an individual to the real feelings, values, and intents of others. Ordinarily, barriers to personal disclosure are developed to protect the tender psyche from attack by real or imagined exterior forces. Being sensitive to the communications of others and able to discern the real from the artificial is an obviously useful skill. However, widespread use of this skill by unsophisticated individuals may be more damaging than helpful. It may, for example, increase rather than decrease the defensiveness of associates. It may also encourage defensive individuals to expose themselves to the "sensitized" person, thinking that they can receive professional assistance from him when in reality they cannot.

A second benefit claimed for sensitivity training is its influence in eliminating defenses and setting the individual free to be himself. Certainly most human beings may

benefit from more openness. Supposedly, greater perceptual acuity and creative expression are made possible for the open individual. Yet we should be careful not to assume from this analysis that all defenses are damaging and should be stripped away. Defenses serve a useful purpose. We use them as a shield to protect ourselves from blunt and possibly harmful confrontations with the environment. Usually, environmental conditions are such that defense development is necessary to maintain a balanced personality.

T-groups ordinarily make no attempt to determine whether the nature of the individual's environmental conditions makes intervention by sensitivity training appropriate. Nor do they make any attempt to ascertain the nature of personal problems among group members that may be beyond the group's power to deal with properly. These groups generally assume that everyone will benefit from reduced defensiveness. The writer believes that a limited set of defenses is health-producing and is basically normal for the human organism. Also, many "defenses" identified by the T-group are in reality self-integrating preferences which contribute to individual identity. These components constitute the uniqueness of the individual and promote self-fulfillment and independent creative activity.

## **Role of Defenses**

One of the problems with sensitivity training lies in the way psychological defenses are dealt with by the group. Most frequently the individual with the "problem" is openly attacked. Once his weaknesses are exposed, the group converges on him in an attempt to lay the "problem" completely open. The tragedy is that the individual who has built extensive barricades against his tender psyche has done so out of necessity. The therapeutic task is not simply one of tearing away an exterior facade to reveal a healthy personality. It is more accurate to view the barriers as shorings developed to prop up a crumbling personality. Indiscriminate tearing away of these defenses is obviously dan-

gerous. If it seems advisable that a person's defenses be reduced, it is best done under the supervision of a trained professional, not in a T-group composed of inexperienced novices. If a highly competent individual is serving as trainer for the group, disaster may be averted; but, in fact, relatively few groups are so equipped.

In a group composed of emotionally mature adults with a competent trainer, certain benefits can be derived from sensitivity training. However, those presently advocating participation by youngsters in this kind of experience are openly courting trouble. Teenagers are usually in the process of developing their value systems. Admittedly they have rudimentary values which influence how they behave, but these values have not as yet been characterized. Nor do they have carefully defined rationales which support their beliefs and with which their behavior patterns can be defended. This leaves the young person defenseless in the face of the conflict developed in the T-group, especially if the attack is led by persons experienced in this kind of confrontation. These individuals frequently succeed in imposing their will upon the group.

The implication played upon is that values which one cannot defend must be worthless and in need of change. Judgments concerning change are ordinarily made in terms of emotional criteria only. Pressure from the group may thus supply adequate leverage to alter values which are rationally superior to those which the group advocates. In their quest to eliminate defenses, many groups do not adequately distinguish between self-disintegrating defenses and highly integrating values. They assault useful values which they assume to be inappropriate defenses. The major consequence is really one of evolving common values, with the more influential group members supplying the direction.

## **Value Development**

Values are developed to enhance personal adequacy and strengthen social identification. They also lend consistency to

behavior which makes valid expectations possible in interpersonal associations. Ordinarily value formation occurs in a variety of contexts and prepares the individual for satisfying relationships in many social situations.

In the early stages of value development, criticism by the T-group members of home, family, friends, religion, attitudes, and beliefs produces disillusionment and value disintegration, and encourages acceptance of group values. This limits the extent of successful social relationships and in reality is confining and restricting rather than socially enlarging.

Sometimes the development of values through T-groups is championed because it is claimed that the individual is better able in this environment than in the home to develop his own beliefs in an atmosphere of freedom. It has been pointed out, however, that considerable pressure and coercion can be generated in the T-group as it moves toward acceptable common values. This pressure is particularly potent for youngsters because of their need for peer identification. Because of this need, they more readily succumb to the pressures developed by the group to accept common values. In addition, no topic is excluded from possible debate in the T-group setting. Beliefs long accepted as true by the individual are exposed to cursory examination by the group. Such items as old loyalties, family relationships, and religious convictions become subject to change. The person may then suffer disassociation from parents and others as a consequence of his altered beliefs.

Emotionalism is the mode of operation in almost all sensitivity training groups. Intellectualizing is strictly forbidden. The rational components of values are ignored. Even though this atmosphere provides unlimited exposure to emotion, it has questionable validity in terms of value formation. The stability of reason must always be present in this process because values have to be consistent with the reality against which they interact. The teen-ager who has been exposed to sensitivity training and perhaps

persuaded to redefine his value structure still is a member of a family and still is required to interact with other family members. The quality of this association is more likely to deteriorate than be enhanced if values are changed as a consequence of his T-group participation.

In addition to possible interfamilial alienation through discussion of family problems and redefinition of values in sensitivity training, relations in other social contexts can also be jeopardized. It has been pointed out that some participants in T-groups exchange their own personal judgment, values, convictions, and morality for those of the group. Ironically these new values have limited transferability to society at large. Communication skills so gained also have limited usefulness. Intensive training out of a normal social context trains one primarily for association within that group. Outside the group, the individual's style of communication is likely to be ineffective and in some instances even alienative. This is especially true of those groups where the strongest personalities have values divergent from acceptable proprieties or where strong attachments and dependencies are developed.

In summary, sensitivity training may provide useful knowledge and experiences for some people in some situations. It should not, however, be considered as some sort of panacea for solving the various social and educational problems in our society. Too many critical questions are still unanswered regarding its general usefulness.

The present popularization of T-groups has produced far too many groups without proper supervision. This condition constitutes a crisis of considerable proportions. Any application of sensitivity training in education should be supported by a high degree of professionalism in T-group techniques as well as a comprehensive understanding of the educational problems under consideration. Emotionally disturbed individuals and young people with insufficient characterization of values should be screened out of such experiences. □

Copyright © 1970 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.