



Sensitivity Training: A Report

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IN AUGUST 1968, Gilbert Wilson, Chairman, Division of Instruction, School of Education, Boston University, encouraged Phyllis Devine, Elementary Education, and Stuart Marshall, Administration and Supervision, to proceed with plans to provide sensitivity training in the Block II program for juniors preparing to become elementary school teachers. Block II was, and still is, a one-semester, nine-hour block of time that represents an integration of the Psychology of Learning, the Philosophy of Education, and Elementary Education. Sensitivity training was introduced as a dimension of applied psychology.

The author found himself faced with the problem of finding trainers for some 220 juniors, or 20 groups of from 10 to 12 members each, rather than for the 25 to 30 students originally considered in the spring of 1968. To renege would have meant losing an exceptional opportunity to test the claims of the proponents as well as those of the opponents of sensitivity training. To accept, however, would mean that some untested trainers would have to be used with results that might not be very satisfactory for the students, the trainers, or the reputation of the program. Realizing that he might be showing more courage than judgment, the author accepted the challenge, and on September 20 the training began.

There were 20 groups meeting for one two-hour session each week for 12 weeks. Ten of the groups met on Monday mornings, and 10 on Friday mornings. The trainers were graduate students selected from three areas of graduate education. Some had been or were trainers for groups in the introductory course in administration, some had completed that course and had shown potential as trainers, some were from the Human Relations Center, but most were from Malcolm Knowles' Adult Education program in the Department of Administration and Supervision.

All the trainers were told, irrespective of experience, that above all they were to prevent the experience from being traumatic for anyone. They were told that to be over-protective or oversupportive because of concern for the students was preferred to accusations of callousness because someone had been hurt and either emotionally or physically left the group.

Goals of Training

The goals of the training experiences were identified under three categories: personal and interpersonal, group processes, and

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application to personal living and to teaching behavior in the classroom. They have remained relatively unchanged since that time. The personal and interpersonal growth and development goals were stated thus:

1. *To learn to see others as resources for learning rather than as objects of conflict and irritation.* This goal is seen as being fundamental for the realization of all the other goals included in this category. The behaviors necessary for establishing trust and communication are to be examined as well as the differences between accepting and believing what a member says or does, and the effects of win-lose, right-wrong situations on personal growth.

2. *To learn to see one's own behavior as others see it.* The emphasis is in creating a recognition, an awareness, that only through communication with others and feedback from others can a person know about his behavior and its effectiveness as perceived by others.

3. *To learn to see the behavior of others as they see it themselves.* Attention is focused upon the necessity for each person to test the validity of his perceptions of another's behavior, both verbal and nonverbal, and to become aware of the problems a person encounters when he acts and reacts to perceptions and assumptions that are invalid.

4. *To learn to identify and cope with one's own defenses.* The purpose is to create an awareness that for each person there usually are topics, feelings, ideas, attitudes, or situations that are difficult to accept, to talk about, or to listen to. He should realize that if he does not recognize such factors and learn to cope successfully with them, these defenses will remain obstacles to more effective communication and behavior.

5. *To learn to give and to accept feedback.* Feedback has to be given constructively, without putting the recipient on the defensive. Feedback has to be accepted as valuable data for thought and growth rather than as criticism that engenders defensiveness.

6. *To learn to identify the task and*

group building-maintenance roles that are essential for group development.

7. *To learn to identify the roles one now uses, to learn to experiment with new roles, and to learn how to evaluate their degrees of effectiveness.*

In the second category of goals, group processes, the limited time allotment has forced most of the attention to be focused upon the development of trust, the treatment of authority problems, issues of membership, and the role of an observer as a technique for group development.

Realization of the third category of goals, application, has been attempted through continued reference of personal behavior in the group to the effectiveness of similar behavior in everyday situations outside the group and to the behavior as a teacher in a classroom.

Emphasis Upon the Here and Now

Attainment of most of the goals is attempted through a strong concentration of trainers and group members upon here-and-now behavior: the data generated at this time and in this setting. Granted, the first meetings of the groups are characterized by there-and-then references until the members are enabled to recognize and function with here-and-now data, but no personal background data are permitted that could serve as the basis for therapy. Insofar as is possible, neither psychiatry nor psychological analysis is permitted. Indeed, the most prevalent problem faced by the trainer in a beginning group is that of convincing the students that the experience is neither of the two. There are referral services available for anyone appearing to be psychologically in need of them, not only for these groups but also for the groups in other programs. In six years of experience with some 250 undergraduate and graduate groups, the problem has never become so serious as to warrant more than a suggestion that help be obtained. There are very few fires if the trainer does not light them or let group members light them!

Attendance for the juniors has not been compulsory. However, they are expected to attend at least two meetings. If, at the end of that time, they have not attended or if they have decided that the experience is not for them, they have a conference with the trainer. If they are adamant in their reluctance to continue, they then go to Phyllis Devine to explore alternative activities. Some of the activities selected in lieu of sensitivity training have included work with the culturally deprived in Boston, serving as teacher aides in neighborhood schools, and working on research projects of their own choice.

The group meetings scheduled that first semester, one two-hour session a week for 12 weeks, were not as satisfactory as had been anticipated. Because of the distances that students had to travel from an early morning class to the group meetings and the temptations offered by the coffee shops on the way, the two hours became $1\frac{1}{4}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours. To overcome this deficiency, the second semester schedule provided for only five sessions but each for three hours. At the end of the five weeks, feedback from students and trainers indicated much greater accomplishment and satisfaction than had been realized the first semester.

The success of the first year of sensitivity training was sufficient to encourage continuation in 1969-70. In the spring of 1969, plans were made to schedule the groups for 12 three-hour meetings. In September, however, unforeseen constraints forced a change to 12 two-hour sessions, the same as in the first semester of the year before. And, as in that semester, the time schedule and the large number of groups, 21, caused mixed feelings of success at the end.

The organization for the second semester has been changed considerably and already appears to be superior to any of the previous plans. With only several exceptions, the trainers during the first semester were able and willing to continue. Also, most of these trainers were charter members of the new Training for Trainers program initiated by Malcolm Knowles and the author in September 1969. These persons had obtained much more comprehensive backgrounds in

training, both cognitive and affective, than had members of previous training groups. An additional innovation consisted of having a trainer and co-trainer in each group. Up to this time all but two or three groups had had but one trainer.

The trainer and co-trainer design provides for a team approach to training and for continuity of training when a member of the team has to be absent. The design provides greater opportunities for group and trainer learning, and, in all honesty, it provides greater protection of group members from trainer inadequacies. In order to provide a trainer and co-trainer for each group, it was necessary to divide the juniors into two groups, 135 in each, and offer sensitivity training to one group for a three-hour session each week for six weeks and then offer the same program for the other group the next six weeks.

After each group meeting, the trainers and co-trainers meet with the coordinator (the author) for a $1\frac{1}{2}$ -hour clinical session to discuss progress, problems, policies, interventions, etc. As a result of these meetings during the first semester of 1969-70, several guidelines for trainers were formulated.

1. The trainer must take an active, participatory role at the beginning, first, in identifying and clarifying for the students what sensitivity training is and what it is not. Many of the students fear the experience as one in which they are to be psychologically analyzed, their secrets revealed, their faults identified. Until these fears have been dispelled or neutralized, further learning is difficult at best.

- Second, the trainer must be very active in modeling the behavior of an effective group member by being accepting of individual expressions of feelings and of individual behaviors, and by being very protective and supporting. Despite opinions to the contrary, the primary objective of the trainer has to be that of any leader, to keep his group together in order that learning may take place.

2. Although many educators deplore the dependency upon authority that current educational practices foster among students, the trainer cannot refuse to honor this dependency. He should not endeavor to create independent

students through one grand experience. The trainer can utilize dependency in explaining the processes and in modeling desirable behavior as an authority figure. As anyone learns responsibility by degrees through successful experience, so the students learn independence by degrees through successful experience.

3. As the group progresses, a successful trainer should have fewer roles to implement and so be able to withdraw gradually. Group members should have learned that this is to be expected and to be desired as they become more independent and responsible.

4. The trainer remains a trainer, irrespective of one's interpretation of what is said in number three. There is a question as to whether a trainer can ever become a group member, just as there is a question as to whether a principal of a school can ever become one of the teachers without changing jobs. Too many trainers have been ineffective because they have been more concerned with becoming group members than with fulfilling their responsibilities as trainers. Also, by encouraging groups to accept them as members, trainers provide groups with easy escapes from having to cope with trainers as authority figures.

The results of the sensitivity training program with the juniors have been as difficult to measure as have the results of sensitivity training with other populations. However, one unexpected outcome reported by students refers to the impersonality of large university living. The group experiences have developed interpersonal relationships among group members that have

continued beyond the life of the group meetings. They report that close friendships which were formed before the sensitivity training were not characterized by such openness and trust as those formed since. There have been frequent references to improved communication, acceptance, and understanding through openness, candor, and confrontation with feelings and behaviors.

The consensus among those concerned with the program is that the sensitivity training now offered is too little, not too much. Most of the young people are still wrestling with problems of maturation and self-identity. When a person is confused or ambivalent as to what he is, who he is, or "where his head is at," it takes courage to accept feedback for learning about oneself, even more to promote it, particularly in an educational culture that sponsors concern for the cognitive rather than concern for the affective. The sensitivity training program may be the first experience that these young people have ever had in which they have learned to listen and be listened to with both ear and eye as individuals, devoid of status symbol influences that are so important in the outside world. Regrettably, it may be their only such experience, for, outside the group environment, not only do nice guys not win, nice guys are suspect!

Sensitivity training may not keep the juniors from behaving as too many teachers have always behaved, but perhaps they will not enjoy it so much. □

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