

# "To Get Beyond the Words..."

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THIS is called by a variety of names, sensitivity training, the T-group method, sensitivity education, encounter groups, and many more, and it is coming on like an old-fashioned Fourth of July. The fireworks have just begun in scattered locations, but before this day is done the heavens over our land will have seen a mystical magical show of multicolored pyrotechnics! It is likely that a good many of the participants and even some of the spectators will get burned or at least singed in the process. It is going to be something to see—but you really ought to be in on the action—that is a greater risk, of course—but that is also the name of this game.

What the above-named phenomenon is, is no easier to describe than to name. Yet there are some identifiable elements in the educational use of this technique:

1. *Feelings*—Sensitivity training deals with the "right now" feelings of learners: what their feelings are, the true expression of them, and learning how to cope with them. The inner world of the learner as well as his relationships become subject matter.

2. *Values and Attitudes*—Opportunities for value examination are created or seized, options are compared and contrasted, and deliberate value choices are made and acted upon.

3. *Concerns*—The concerns of learners are treated with the same respect as the concerns of teachers and others. All concerns are legitimate in these programs, not just those related to "school work."

4. *Process*—This kind of education focuses on the processes with which an individual may deal with his feelings, values, attitudes, and concerns.

5. *Self-Actualization*—The common broad goal of these programs is full humanness; not "the educated man," not "normality," but the best that man can become, the fully alive, authentic, "becoming" person.

In summary, sensitivity training as used in the schools legitimatizes the current feelings, values, attitudes, and concerns of learners and helps them develop methods for successfully managing these life forces as they move toward full humanness.

## Sensitivity Training in the Schools

Educators have been very active participants in the encounter group movement. Many thousands of school people have experienced sensitivity training. Most of them have probably undertaken this training as private citizens. However, both pre- and in-service teacher training designs have begun to incorporate sensitivity training as at least one module.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, result of so many educators being in T-groups is that a lot of "turned-on" teachers have re-

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turned from a weekend group and have tried techniques on students that they found meaningful in the lab. These fired-up teachers have often ended up just fired! They are the ones providing the fireworks alluded to earlier.

Creating headlines is not an inevitable result, of course. Many manage to bootleg training devices into the classroom, and some precious few have been successful in getting administration approval for voluntary guidance groups or elective classes built around a "human relations" theme.

One such teacher is Alice Louise Elliott. She "taught" six elective classes made up of from 25 to 40 students with IQ's ranging from 85 to 160, in the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. The classes were a unique blend of General Semantics training and encounter groups. General Semantics has been defined as "the study of the relationships between language and behavior, between words and their consequences." The encounter group format enabled students to acquire an understanding of the principles of General Semantics in an experiential setting. They discussed such questions as, "What are the implications of 'I-thou relationships'?" "Do

people need people? For what? When?" "Is man his choices?"—and the more direct question, "How is it with you at this moment?"

For measurement of results, Elliott relied principally on self-report instruments. She states,

Results show important gains for students in learning to listen, to delay signal responses, and to delay reactions of anger which resulted in less alienation and more empathy with their fellow students, teachers, and parents. They also reported being more honest with themselves and others by learning to communicate better. They increased their sense of humor and decreased their feelings of prejudice. They were more trusting of selves, less phony and artificial, more fully functioning, and more independent in thought and behavior.<sup>1</sup>

Besides the "bootleggers" and a few "Alice Elliott-type" teachers around, there is a second very significant trend which owes a great deal to the sensitivity training move-

<sup>1</sup> Alice Louise Elliott. "Fostering the Self-Actualization of High School Students Through General Semantics Training in Encounter Groups." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, United States International University, May 1969.



*Photos courtesy of the author*

Children and their teacher, seated in a "magic circle," learn through discussion.

ment: affective education curricula. Most of the efforts in this direction have been designed as supplements to the regular school program. They include group development techniques, devices for examining student values and attitudes, techniques for developing self-esteem, and processes for recognizing and coping with one's feelings. Representative of this new emphasis is the work of Bessell and Palomares of the Human Development Training Institute in San Diego. In their elementary school program the children are seated in a "magic circle" and the teacher guides them in discussion of such concepts as "What gives us a good feeling?" and actual experiences in the concept.

Perhaps a brief description of a single activity from Philadelphia's Affective Education Project will give the reader a better feel for the process concerns of workers in this field and also the extent to which they have been able to integrate cognitive, affective, and psychomotor learnings.

"Students interlock fingers of the right hand with thumbs free, and are told to imagine that they are their thumbs expressing their personalities. They are to meet their partners and write poems about the experience." (Borton then has them write poems and examine other poetry which is concerned with human relationships).

His lesson continues: "Experiment with new ways of meeting the same person's thumb. See how many ways you can develop. Change partners. Do you enjoy any of these other patterns of behavior? Pick one (your original if you like) and try shaking hands the same way. Try talking the same way.

"After class, try acting the same way for a few minutes. If you like this new way of relating, practice it and live it."<sup>2</sup>

### What Research Says About Sensitivity Training

We do not really have data beyond the teacher-student "I like it!" variety. Many competent people, scholars and practitioners, are beginning the search for evidence. It is

<sup>2</sup> Terry Borton. *Reach, Touch, and Teach*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970. pp. 100-101.



Young children and their teacher use group techniques.

my conviction, however, that precise designs and measurement over extended periods of time have not been characteristic of this (or any other) movement in education. Nor should this surprise or dismay us for we are dealing with a rather new emphasis in the profession and we are approaching it with our customary enthusiasm, faith, and sincerity. And that is all right too, just as long as we begin to specify our goals, tighten our designs, and sharpen our instruments, which we are doing.

### What Are the Dangers?

One of the dangers is that there are too many people worrying about the dangers! The persistent concern over psychotic episodes stemming from adult encounter groups has not been warranted on the basis of our experience. That is not to say that the concerns are not realistic when we are dealing with 7- to 17-year-olds. They are, and I for one do not want my own children subjected to *encounter group* experience without my having a great deal to say about the structure of the experience and the leader of the group, and perhaps not even then!



Children must not be put in situations in which they are vulnerable to attack.

On the other hand, the almost out-of-hand rejection of any educational program that purports to deal with the feelings, concerns, and values of learners is absurd. When this climate prevails, as it does in our country, by and large, any sensible, defensible application or modification of either encounter groups (à la Elliott) or the more structured activities described by Terry Borton is immediately suspect in the minds of insecure administrators and "uptight" parents. And that is a tragedy, for it is precisely those kinds of thoughtful applications of sensitivity training that can help us respond to the enormous problems of our schools and society.

This is not to say that we all ought to rush into the pond without testing the water. Any conscientious professional has to be concerned that we do not psychologically damage children by putting them in situations where their defenses are lowered to the extent that they become vulnerable to an unwitting attack by another group member. Protection from this sort of thing is a function of capable leadership and intelligent learning experience design.

### What Can We Expect Now?

So, one of the things we can look for is the development of teacher leadership capable of designing and conducting long-range growth experiences for students of all ages in the affective area. These will probably minimize the encounter group format. Where

encounter groups are used they will no doubt have some cognitive forms as a basic part of their structure, as Elliott has shown.

They will probably also be limited to high school age groups or older, be led by well-trained professionals, the goals and techniques to be used will be explicitly stated in advance, those techniques used will not include body contact activities, and participation will include many opportunities for cognitive consideration of what it all means. Designs will begin with behavioral goals and will provide for all of the elements mentioned earlier, including pupil feelings, values, and concerns. They will also emphasize students' strengths and successes rather than weaknesses. They will provide for trying out new behaviors in a safe setting and for encouragement to follow up those trials with risk-taking ventures in the larger society.

Finally, it seems likely that we can expect a considerable amount of experimentation with "group-building" processes.

In conclusion, let me make a plea for a pluralistic educational system. In every school building in America we need some "turned-on" teachers who have a vision of what man can become and who have the insight, enthusiasm, and competence to help the rest of us examine our work in relation to these humanistic goals. They must have the strength and self-assurance to be iconoclastic, for we have a faltering society and a school system in serious trouble, and we can ill afford to be complacent about our present situation.

Your job and mine is to cherish and protect those who see life through different eyes, who operate from different premises and different value systems. We must sit with them, feel with them, experience with them, get beyond the *words*. For it is the words that hold us back. Words like "sensitivity training," "encounter groups," "feelings and concerns" are frightening to many people—just as are "freedom," "love," and "peace"! The only way we can achieve understanding—and progress—is to get beyond the words to the activities, events, and behaviors the words stand for! □

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