Criteria for Evaluating Curriculum Materials in Human Relations

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THE GOAL of human relations training is to induce changes in people. We as teachers not only want to change our students' social behavior but also to change the ways our students perceive themselves and other people. We are sometimes willing to wait for weeks or months or even years before the effects of our training can be discerned, but whether we discern those effects through our own observations or through student reports, we teachers want to notice *some* effects *eventually*. Otherwise we are inclined to think that our training is a waste of time.

What materials should we use in a human relations training unit or program? What materials are most likely to be effective? Rather little advice appears to be readily available to the elementary, secondary, or college teacher who would like to select materials for human relations training or who would like to design his or her own materials. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to suggest six criteria for judging the potential effectiveness of instructional materials in human relations. The validity of these criteria is supported directly and indirectly in various sources (1, 3, 4, 6, 7), but most immediately these criteria are based on

If human relations materials are intended to accomplish their purpose, they must meet certain standards. Six criteria for judging their potential effectiveness are suggested here.

the experiences in recent years of the University of Michigan-Flint Teacher Education Program and on formal reports submitted by undergraduate teacher-trainees in that program.

CRITERION 1. *The materials must require the learner to perform a task.*

Our belief is that general lectures on the topic of human relations probably do not effect significant change in most students. Therefore, many if not most human relations materials should incorporate or take the form of an "exercise." Such an "exercise" would be a game or game-like activity; a series of directions that guide the student through an experience that can be reviewed and perhaps replicated later; or a film or reading assignment or other personal statement or event followed by a critique or seminar in which students may relive and react to their experience. In all cases, there

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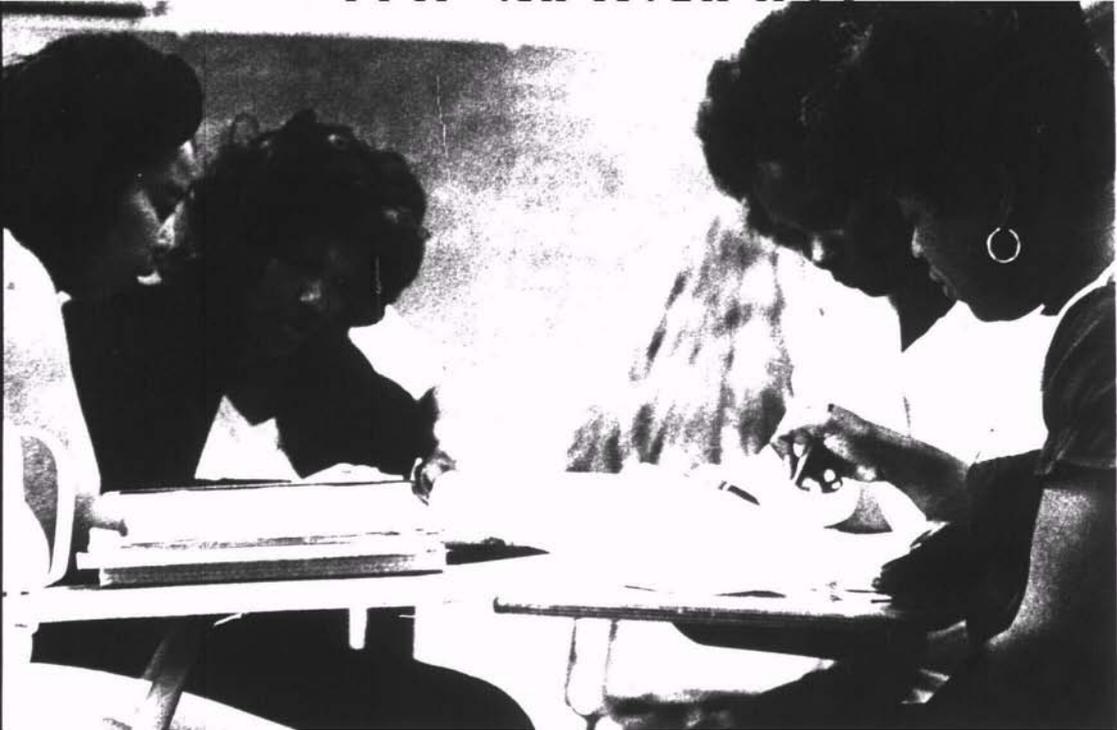
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is something for the student to do, meaning that the student must commit something of him/herself to the exercise with at least a small measure of emotional risk implied in the commitment.

Our experience is that students who passively listen to other people talk about human relations or who passively observe other students engaged in a human relations exercise are often unmoved by the exercise. We suspect the reason to be that such passive students experience no consequences of their behavior because they engage in no task, and therefore they develop no vested interest in the exercise or its aims.

CRITERION 2. *The materials must ensure that the learner experiences consequences from his/her behavior.*

Students who do not see results from their behavior usually do not see a reason for the behavior or for the exercise. What do we mean by consequences? Any one or more of the following may be examples:

1. Expressions of positive or negative feelings from peers, such as: "Thanks"; "Nice job"; "I don't like what you did/said/failed to do . . .", etc.; also smiles and frowns and other nonverbal responses.

2. Achievement of or failure to achieve goals: If the goal is to communicate a message or to persuade an adversary, the effectiveness of task performance should be clearly shown in success or failure.

3. Opening or denial of opportunities: If the student cannot go on to the next step in an exercise or cannot establish a desired relationship and thereby is prevented from doing certain things, the lack of opportunity should be a clear consequence which follows from the lack of success.

CRITERION 3. *The consequences of behavior must be seen by the learner in the context of a larger concept or model of interaction.*

Human relations training aims not only at changing behavior within the training setting but beyond that setting as well, and therefore information about what is happen-

ing to specific individuals in the exercise is not enough. Concepts or models of interaction help not only in diagnosing and evaluating what is happening in the exercise but also help in guiding students to explore new avenues of behavior that they might not have thought about before. Such concepts and models may be arrived at inductively by the students or may be presented by the teacher.

Some concepts are more useful than others. For example, Eric Berne (2) uses the terms "parent," "adult," and "child" to label certain behaviors which are familiar to students and yet novel when labeled by Berne: The idea that a child may speak not only with a "child voice" but with a "parent voice" and an "adult voice" too is both intriguing and powerful. In like manner, Larry Kohlberg's six stages of moral development (5) provide an intriguing way to look at personal decision making. Kohlberg's model may not strike all students as reasonable, but his concepts can stretch their thinking about motivation in human relations.

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The reason for using Berne's model or any other model is that it gives meaning to the specifics of an exercise. Without such a model, students may be left with little bits of unrelated experience which may not seem to be important at all but which may actually, when put together, be highly significant.

CRITERION 4. *The materials should allow the learner to repeat the experience when appropriate.*

I am thinking of an exercise designed to increase a person's direction-giving skills: Two people are seated at a table separated by a solid screen, and one must tell the other, without visual reference, how to duplicate a pattern of figures on the table before him. After their first trial, learners are commonly surprised to find how poorly they give simple directions; the consequences of their direction-giving skills are clear as the two patterns are compared.

Yet if the exercise is not repeated in some manner, the awareness goes for naught, and interpersonal skills which are the object of most human relations training go undeveloped.

CRITERION 5. *The materials must allow all students to protect themselves from undue threat and emotional pain.*

Educators working with human relations exercises are often accused of running sensitivity sessions and T-groups when actually their intent is only to engage students in rather mild forms of interaction skills development. Overstepping the line between human relations training and group therapy is easy for teachers to do; the best judge of when that line has been crossed is the learner who feels discomfort, and the exercise should permit him to protect himself when an experience is coming too close to his threshold of pain.

Confrontation between people and within people can be a useful and powerful teaching tool. For example, an appropriate and desirable student response might be stated, "I don't like this exercise . . . because I have never had to face these kinds of problems before." But beyond a certain threshold, confrontation is counter-productive and even dangerous.

CRITERION 6. *The materials should encourage students to relate their exercise behavior to real world constraints.*

It is necessary but not sufficient to relate specific exercise behaviors to a model; we need to think about the difficulties we have in the real world engaging in the same behaviors which seem to have a proper and rewarded place in the classroom human relations laboratory.

How can a classroom exercise become "real"? One way is to allow the participants to redesign the exercise as they use it. For example, the materials might challenge the students to think about a real world problem

confronting one or more of their group members and help them to devise a means of working with that very problem in the exercise. Another way is to discuss or debrief the exercise in terms of the real world problems facing the students; for example: "What does this (exercise event) mean when you go home tonight, Johnny?"

This final criterion is the most important of all, for without a well established link to the real world, the human relations materials may satisfy the first five criteria and still be a waste of time—like so many "human relations days" and "brotherhood weeks"— because the training is not really training at all but rather an academic pastime.

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