ABSTRACT
              This "position statement" concerns the relevance and
utility of laboratory training techniques in facilitating group
problem-solving participation. Neither the sensitivity nor T-group
experiences should be assumed a priori to be applicable to
problem-solving activity. The article compares the various group
experiences on five major characteristics: (1) intellectually
conceived goals, (2) goal-determined feedback processes, (3)
development tendencies, (4) leadership requirements, and (5)
consequent effects on members. Attention is given to manifest
differences between laboratory training groups and problem-solving
discussion groups. The thrust of the analysis focuses upon the
cognitive and experiential differences between these types of groups.
Examples of contrasting types and uses of feedback, predictable
trends in developmental sequences, the effects of untrained leaders,
and potential stress on individual members tend to support the
contention that laboratory group activities may not provide an
appropriate model for improving problem-solving skills.
(Author/EE)

T-GROUPS, SENSITIVITY TRAINING AND GROUP PROBLEM SOLVING:
SOME DISTINCTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

This paper is intended as a "position statement" concerning the relevance
and utility of laboratory training techniques in facilitating group problem-
solving participation. The authors take the position that neither sensitivity
or T-group experiences should, a priori, be assumed applicable to problem-
solving activity. The paper compared the various group experiences on five
major characteristics: (1) intellectually conceived goals, (2) goal determined
feedback processes, (3) developmental tendencies, (4) leadership requirements,
and (5) consequent effects on members.

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groups. Examples of contrasting types and uses of feedback, predictable trends
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stress on individual members tend to support the authors' contention that
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T-Groups, Sensitivity Training, and Group Problem Solving: Some

Distinctions and Relationships

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The current popularity of T-groups and encounter groups has fostered considerable interest among scholars of communication as well as members of the general public. The interest of academicians has been reflected in part by explorations into ways in which these kinds of groups might be used in educational settings. For example, Weaver attempted to distinguish between sensitivity training and problem-solving group discussions suggesting that the former might be utilized in courses designed to teach the latter.[1] It does not seem wise to us to merely assume that sensitivity training experiences are applicable to group problem solving. Therefore, our purpose in this paper is to analyze these three kinds of groups in an attempt to determine ways in which they may be distinguished. To do this we shall discuss the goals of the groups, goal determined feedback processes, developmental tendencies, and leadership requirements. Based on this analysis we will discuss the relationship of sensitivity training and T-group experiences to the ability to function effectively in problem solving groups.

Group Goals

Both sensitivity groups and T-groups represent kinds of laboratory methods used in human relations training. Miles has described the laboratory group as a specific kind of human relations training which consists of "intensive group self-study procedures, usually taking place in a residential setting and designed to bring about increased sensitivity and skill in relation to social psychological phenomena occurring in interpersonal, group and organizational situations."[2] In these groups the members "study the behaviors occurring during the process of development from an unstructured beginning to a reasonably stable miniature social system."[3]

According to Bradford, Gibb, and Benne,[4] the goals of the laboratory method include the development of:

1. awareness and sensitivity to emotional reactions and expressions in the individual and others;
2. ability to perceive and to learn from the consequences of actions through attention to one's own feelings and those of others;

3. clarification and development of personal values and goals
consonant with a democratic and scientific approach to problems of
social and personal decisions and action;
4. concepts and theoretical insights which will serve as tools in
linking personal values, goals and intentions to actions consistent with
the requirements of the situation;
5. achievement of behavioral effectiveness in transactions with
one's environment;
6. integration of new ways of behaving with typical ways of behaving
in home settings;
7. learning how to learn.

This list of goals is in general agreement with those found elsewhere in
the literature.[5] Thus, as laboratory methods, sensitivity and T-groups share
common immediate goals for their members. Both focus on the increasing of
awareness and understanding of self and others. However, the ultimate reasons
for acquiring this awareness and understanding differ. In the sensitivity group
awareness is increased for the purpose of fostering psychological health and a
more integrated level of personal functioning while the ultimate goal of the
T-group is the improvement of interpersonal communication skills.[6] Furthermore
it is assumed that T-group participants will use the interpersonal skills
developed in the group in some other group or organizational setting.

While discussing the growth of the individual through group interaction,
Harnack and Fest's approach to group problem solving focused upon rational
processes surrounding group decision making.[7] Bormann, in comparing the
educational objectives involved in teaching group problem solving with those
of laboratory groups, speculated that laboratory training groups usually
direct more attention toward problems of individual awareness while group
discussion courses focus upon cooperative efforts for solving common problems
through critical reasoning.[8]

The paradigm most often associated with group problem solving procedures
is Dewey's "phases of reflective thinking."[9] Dewey believes that individual
reasoning follows a series of five steps (or phases) after a person experiences
some ambiguity or felt difficulty: (1) suggestions about solutions; (2)
crystallization of a problem statement or question; (3) generating hypotheses
(solutions); (4) elaborating, or reasoning, about one hypothesis; and (5)
testing an elaborated hypothesis. Application of this framework for group
problem solving has taken a variety of forms but is generally known as a
"problem solving patterning"[10] or "problem solving sequence."[11]

Decision making and problem solving processes take place in all forms of
group experiences. The difference between problem solving groups and laboratory
groups is that the former seeks to use methods of reason and logic as a means
of limiting behavior to a specific objective or issue while the latter constructs
an ambiguous setting where various styles of behavior are explored, tested, and
evaluated. Therefore, the goals of problem solving groups necessitate delimiting
group behavior in an attempt to deal with specific issues while laboratory
groups foster elaboration and extension of behavior.

Goal-Determined Feedback

A profitable distinction between problem-solving groups and laboratory groups can also be made in relation to the types of goal-determined feedback that is given. By "goal-determined feedback," we mean feedback directed toward those kinds of behaviors the group defines as acceptable or non-acceptable for its members. In the problem solving group, this usually means concentrating on a specific topic, while in laboratory groups this is dictated by prevailing group norms. Mills contends that group feedback about goal-determined processes (or "goal-seeking" feedback as he labels it) follows a cycle of observation, intervention and observation of the effects of intervention.[12] This feedback cycle creates a condition in which group members are able to learn from each others' interventions about the group's progression toward some goal.

Although goal-determined feedback functions as a learning process for group members, the level of group activity to which feedback is directed can differ both qualitatively and quantitatively according to the group's goals. We can differentiate between two levels of group member involvement on which feedback is given: the "content" level and the "process" level.[13] The content level of a group refers to what is said. Group members engage in giving each other feedback about the verbal content of their interactions. Process level feedback involves sharing perceptions about the ways in which group members are interacting with each other. Discussion about who talks to whom, the distribution of participation, what roles are played and by whom, and the implications of each member's behavior for himself and the group become ways of analyzing and giving feedback on interpersonal dynamics within the group.

The distinction between laboratory groups and group problem solving discussions can be clarified further by distinguishing the kinds of subject matter which become data for the group to process. The subject matter itself rests on the concerns of the members of the group. The most important concern that helps distinguish these groups is concern with content and concern with group process. Rather than considering the laboratory group and the problem solving group discussion as two entirely different phenomena, it might be more useful to conceptualize their relationship along a continuum representing the degree of concerns with these two matters.

In figure 1 the possible kinds of content-process concerns are shown.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The group represented at point 1 in the figure is one in which the primary concern is overwhelmingly with content while concern with group process is minimal. However, there is always some concern with process even if that concern is limited to a concern that the group finish discussing at some point in time. The desire to complete the discussion is a process concern insofar as it effects the extent of the group's interpersonal relationships. A group that has the task of quickly finding an answer for some immediate question or problem would be one type of group that might exhibit an extreme content orientation.

At the other end of the continuum is the group that is completely concerned with process. At this point, dealing with the group's process is the task of the group. The laboratory group would be this type of group. As Cooper and Mangham have put it, in laboratory groups people get together "for the express purpose of studying their own behavior as it occurs when they interact within a small group."[14]

Most problem solving discussion probably falls somewhere between points one and three or four on the continuum. This means that most individuals do not get much practice or experience in dealing with process concerns in discussions in which they engage on an everyday basis. It might be argued that an important reason for the existence and need for something like laboratory groups is that most other groups are not sufficiently concerned with process needs of their members. The laboratory group, by allowing complete concern with process level needs provides the participants practice and opportunity for experimentation with personal behavior so that they can participate more adequately in problem-solving groups showing greater concern for process when appropriate.

The problem solving group discussion operates primarily on the content level in terms of immediate task concerns. Feedback which members are likely to give each other is restricted in terms of analysis of the relationships which occur between members. Moreover, process level feedback might be seen as an unacceptable deviation from the group's objectives. Conversely, the interactions which take place within the laboratory group are a fusion of content and process level involvements. Content level feedback is (or can be) intertwined with process level feedback. This fusion does not always take place or, if it does, it may be sporadic over the length of the group. The fact remains that laboratory groups are constituted to deal with both levels of group involvement on which feedback can be given. This is not necessarily the case for problem solving group discussions.

Developmental Tendencies

At this point, we need to make the distinction between process level feedback and what is generally referred to as the "social-emotional" aspects of a small group. Bales uses the notion of social-emotional group activity to refer to positive and negative reactions of group members toward task-related activity.[15] Therefore, Bales' social-emotional activity has a strong resemblance to content level feedback. For example, group members may get into a rather "heated" debate over tentative solutions to a problem (e.g. exhibiting high frequencies of negative social-emotional activity.) The negative exchanges which transpire are at the content level. It is not until some member(s) bring the implications of the negative transactions into the conscious awareness of the group that process level feedback has taken place. The necessary prerequisite for process level feedback, therefore, is some aspect of group activity that becomes data for analyzing the relationships between group members. Group conflict is one of the more obvious segments of activity which fits this description.

The relative proportions of group time spent in process level feedback cycles for laboratory and problem solving groups are not known. We have speculated that laboratory groups probably engage more frequently in process level feedback than do problem solving groups. We might also speculate that there are certain points in the development of these groups where process level feedback sustains group activity toward some goal.

Bales, for example, has shown that problem solving groups go through a three-stage sequence of development characterized by the group's ability to solve problems of orientation, evaluation and control in relation to a specific task.[16]

Postive and negative social-emotional activity increase steadily over time. In the orientation phase, members attempt to obtain more information about themselves and the group's task. Simultaneously, group members become increasingly ego-involved in their positions toward the task and attempt to defend these positions. Concomitantly, negative communicative content increases more rapidly than positive content. This trend continues through the evaluation stage where deliberation on possible solutions takes place as negative social-emotional content increases over positive. As the group enters the control phase, it moves toward concensus on one solution. At this point, negative social-emotional statements level off and positive statements increase sharply as the group moves toward closure. The point in the control phase where negative statements level out and positive statements increase can denote resolution of conflict over solution alternatives. It is at this point that process level feedback is mostly to take place.

The implications of process level feedback are more evident in the laboratory group. Bennis and Shepard, for example, have noted that T-group type laboratory groups must be able to <u>recognize</u> problems arising from authority and inter-dependence relations between members for those groups to progress toward completion of activities.[17] They suggest that certain group members must emerge to act as catalytic agents for the group. These "independent" members facilitate activities which relate to process level feedback cycles by focusing and maintaining the group's attention on process needs. Bennis and Shepard have also asserted that without such catalytic members, groups do not overcome either authority or inter-dependence problems.

The Group Leader

The leader for a problem solving group discussion may be either a peer or someone whose status is superior to that of the other participants. For a laboratory group the leadershould be a trained facilitator or trainer. According to Lippit and This trainers should have the following characteristics: (1) Professional background in a related discipline such as sociology, psychology, social work, educational psychology, or psychiatry; (2) experience working with groups; (3) self-understanding, which they list as "absolutely essential" for the trainer so that he can prevent his own needs from interfering with the training process and increase his ability to empathize with others in the training process; (4) sufficient personal security to enable him to be relatively non-punitive, warm, accepting, and respectful of others in a wide variety of interpersonal situations; (5) competence at training skills which can be acquired through training about training; and (6) a democratic philosophy that will enable the trainer to encourage learning situations in which persons learn for themselves.[18]

Lippit and This are quick to point out that professional training such as advanced degrees is no assurance of competence. However, they also state that there is no absolute way of assuring in any way that a facilitator will be competent. Unfortunately, the recent surge of popularity of encounter groups, sensitivity groups, and laboratory groups has caused many people to use the latter type of statement to claim that almost anyone who has the least bit of cognitive or experiential background in these areas could be a qualified leader for a laboratory group. It has even been recently suggested that "extensive background in group problem solving through discussion and extensive experience in teaching discussion in the classroom should prepare a person to perform as a

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trainer in a brief laboratory situation."[19] We would maintain that such statements
are not only inaccurate, but that they are also dangerous in that they may induce
unqualified persons to attempt to lead groups and that this might result in
psychological damage to participants.

At this point it might be profitable to return to the figure presented
earlier. The average teacher of speech communication is probably sufficiently
sensitive and sufficiently interpersonally competent to encourage group activities
that are more concerned with process and with emotion than are those which students
usually encounter in their everyday lives. It is suggested above that most
everyday discussions probably would be placed between points one and three or
four on the continuum. The teacher of speech communication could probably
adequately handle group situations in which the concerns are somewhere up around
points five to seven, but without training he would be ill advised to encourage
concern with process and emotion that exceeds that represented by point seven on
the continuum. This means the average person teaching speech communication
should not consider himself qualified to act as facilitator for laboratory groups.
People do have psychotic episodes in these groups, even under the best of leadership.
Admittedly these occurrences are infrequent, but they do occur.

Effects of Laboratory Training on Problem Solving Effectiveness

Several points have been made thus far which indicate that laboratory
training may have positive effects on capacity to function effectively in problem
solving groups. Most problem solving groups need to deal with process concerns
at some point if they are to accomplish their tasks to the satisfaction of their
members. Yet, we have suggested that most people have little experience in their
everyday interactions in groups which deal very much with process concerns.
Therefore, we would expect that if the practice participants in laboratory groups
get in dealing with process concerns can be transferred to everyday problem
solving group situations their problem solving effectiveness will be enhanced.

While this relationship between these two kinds of groups seems obvious,
surprisingly little research has focussed on the effects of laboratory training
on problem solving effectiveness. Tolela assigned 20 groups of five members
each to one of four treatments. These were T-groups with or without theoretical
lectures, and control groups with or without theoretical lectures. She found
that subjects given T-group training became more effective in subsequent problem
solving situations in which she measured effectiveness by "quality of solutions
offered; degree of acceptance each member gave to this group solution; cohesiveness
of each group; degree of status consensus within each group; perceived amount of
conflict within each group; and interaction rate."[20]

Larson and Gratz[21] compared problem solving training with T-group training.
They assigned two groups to problem solving, two to T-groups and used a class
in oral interpretation as a control. They found that the groups improved
significantly on the Watson-Glaser test of Critical Thinking Ability though there
was no difference among the groups in the amount of improvement. Both T-groups
improved significantly in problem solving ability. One problem solving group
also improved significantly while the control group and the other problem solving
group exhibited no significant change. They concluded that norms such as openness
and self-assessment established in the T-groups may enhance potential for
productive problem solving even in the absence of how-to-do-it units on problem
solving.

Pyke and Neely[22] randomly assigned forty volunteer subjects to one of two problem solving skills training groups, one of two sensitivity training groups or to a control group. They found that neither the Eysenck Personality Inventory nor the Firo-B showed any significant treatment effects. They found that those assigned to both the problem solving and sensitivity groups assessed themselves as significantly improved in ability to perform in groups while those in the control group rated themselves lower. They concluded that the skill training group was neither more nor less effective than the sensitivity training approach and conjectured that either method might lead to more effective group performance.

Summary

We have attempted to compare sensitivity groups, T-groups and problem solving groups. Sensitivity and T-groups, as laboratory groups, have a primary goal of enhancing participants' awareness and understanding of themselves and others while problem solving groups focus primarily on issue-oriented structured tasks. The nature of a group's goals plays a major role in determining the type and frequency of feedback which occurs in the group. Laboratory groups are characterized by greater concern with process level feedback while problem solving groups are more concerned with content level feedback. Moreover, it is not accurate to assume that feedback processes occurring in the laboratory group are appropriate for the goals of problem solving groups even though a brief review of literature seems to suggest that laboratory training might be as effective for improving problem solving effectiveness as is direct training in problem solving techniques.

FOOTNOTES

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Figure 1

CONTENT-PROCESS CONCERNS