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ABSTRACT
        The ultimate goal of a learning group is to help
learners achieve their goals and objectives and to help them learn to
live in a rapidly changing and evolving society. Within the context
of social change, the author examines how internal dynamics can be
used to aid a teacher in developing an effective learning group.
Drawing from psychology, sociology, and adult education, the paper
deals with the structure and definition of learning groups; the
interests, motivations, expectations, and aspirations of each
individual; the development of a conducive atmosphere; group size and
composition; group identity; social control; group standards; human
relations skills; role definition; communication patterns; goals;
methods; and group evaluation. The role of the teacher evolves from
that of the traditional educator to one of facilitator who must
understand the dynamics of collective behavior and its impact on the
individual. Several checkpoints for the facilitator to be aware of
are: group size; diverse capabilities within a group; mutual
involvement of facilitator and student; group solidarity; maintenance
of standards related to subject competency; detection of problems;
student responsibility for learning; cooperation; effective
interdependent communication; coordination of needs, goals and
methods; and the mechanics of group evaluation. A bibliography is
provided. (JB)

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HELPING A LEARNING GROUP MATURE

Educators, philosophers and social scientists have in recent years
written extensively about the rate and intensity of social change.
Some books like Allen Toffler's Future Shock and Allen Greenberg's
Greening of America have been immediate best sellers. Other
commentaries have been less dramatic and in some cases they have
gone relatively unnoticed. The fact that pervasiveness of change
continues to permeate our daily lives is no longer a new idea.

As educators we are, however constantly faced with the need to help
our students understand the world in which they live. There is a
growing consensus that individual educators and educational institutions
must help students become continuous learners as one means of helping
them cope with the everpresent changes in society.

One proposal on how educators can meet this challenge has been
advanced by Carl Rogers in his book Freedom to Learn. Rogers
advocates the transformation of classrooms or groups of students
into a "community of learners". In his scheme of education the
teacher becomes a facilitator of learning rather than the traditional
dispenser of knowledge.

He eloquently described the process when he said; "So now with some
    relief I turn to an activity, a purpose, which really warms me--
    the facilitation of learning. When I have been able to transform
    a group--and here I mean all the members of a group, myself
    included--into a community of learners, then the excitement has
    been almost beyond belief. To free curiosity; to permit indivi-
    duals to go charging off in new directions dictated by their own
    interests; to unleash curiosity; to open everything to questioning
    and exploration; to recognize that everything is in process of
    change--here is an experience I can never forget. I cannot
    always achieve it in groups with which I am associated but when
    it is partially or largely achieved then it becomes a never-to-
    be-forgotten group experience. Out of such a context arise true
    students, real learners, creative scientists and scholars and
    practitioners, the kind of individuals who can live in a delicate
    but ever-changing balance between what is presently known and
    the flowing, moving, altering, problems and facts of the
    future." (p. 105)

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Most proponents of this approach to education, including Rogers, discuss at length the attitudes and attributes of the facilitator, ways in which the facilitator relates to the individual student, and the climate necessary for learning groups. Very little attention is devoted to the fact that most facilitators interact with their learners in a group setting. The group is one of the most significant factors involved in the teaching-learning process. To be truly effective facilitators one must consider the impact of the group upon the individual learner.

Because advocates of the Rogerian approach have given attention to group interaction, teachers who accept the role of a facilitator are faced with designing their own patterns of dealing with a learning group. It is the purpose of this paper to explore how the concept of internal dynamics can be used to aid a facilitator in his/her classroom practices. Conceptually the content has been selected from the following disciplines; Psychology, Sociology and Adult Education.

Learning Groups

The primary objective of a learning group is to facilitate the learning of specific skills or the acquisition of new ideas or the accomplishment of a learning task. At the same time it provides the learners an opportunity to interact with each other and with the facilitator so the content becomes more personal and meaningful to them. As an additional benefit the members will grow and better understand themselves and others.

A learning group is not a static entity but is constantly in motion. The interaction involving the learners and the facilitator is constantly undergoing change and revision (Dutton and Seamen, P. 33). The group forces present are either active or latent even though they may be untapped or uncontrolled. The astute teacher will use these forces to create conditions that are conducive to learning. (Olmstead, p. 12)

Johnson and Bany (p. 39-40) make the point that a "formally organized classroom group is an entity which continually seeks to develop and maintain itself". They stress that teachers must deal with the individual student as an individual and the collective behaviors of the group. Furthermore, teachers need to understand the dynamics of collective behavior, the effects of individuals on the group and the effect of the group on individuals. J. Roby Kidd (p. 136) says in his new book that in a learning group there are three sources of relationships: the relationship between the student

and the teacher, between the student and other students and between
the student and the subject matter of the course.

Internal Dynamics of Learning Groups

The concept of group dynamics from sociology can provide a
cognitive framework for helping facilitators to improve the
quality of their instructional leadership. In discussing group
action Beal, Bohlen and Randabaugh stress that each person in a
group is uniquely different from every other person. He brings
to the group his own interests, drives, motivations, expectations
and aspirations. The definite values, attitudes, habits, feelings,
and beliefs of each person must be considered. Furthermore, they
say: "These things, which have applied largely to himself, he now
also applies to the group members and to the group as a whole. (p.40)"
This interaction between the members of the group causes certain
new forces or dynamics to arise which sociologists call internal
dynamics. They are an important factor in the life of the group
as the members work together to achieve the group's objectives.
By giving attention to these forces the facilitator can expedite
the learning process.

One hypothesis suggests that group interaction develops through a
growth and maturation pattern similar to that of individuals.
Given the proper conditions, a group can grow into a mature and
productive group which "makes progress toward its goals with a
maximum of efficiency and a minimum of wasted time and effort".
(Haiman, pp. 103-104)

Characteristics possessed by mature groups can serve as a frame-
work to help facilitators analyze their own learning group. Such
an analysis will lead to better insights into a learning group's
strengths and weaknesses and provide the facilitator and learners
a basis on which to improve the learning climate in their group.
(Haiman, p. 106)

A mature learning group can be defined as a self-directed, self-
controlled body in which each learner carries his part of the
responsibilities for meeting the group's goals. A group that
makes progress toward its group and individual goals with a maximum
of efficiency and a minimum of wasted effort and time will not
only be more mature but will foster excellence in learning.
Furthermore, a mature group will demonstrate a concern for the
growth and development of each individual learner.

Any discussion of internal dynamics of learning groups can not,
by the very nature of the concept, be exhaustive. The combination
of the uniqueness of the individual learners, the uniqueness of the
facilitator and the specific learning situation leads to a proliferation
of forces. Not all of these forces are operative at one time. Some
are latent or dormant and later arise to have a significant impact
on the learning group. An alert facilitator will draw upon his
knowledge of group dynamics and adapt his actions to each specific
learning situation. To aid a facilitator in planning his strategy
for working with a learning group only the most significant internal
dynamics or forces affecting a learning group will be discussed.
A series of check points to serve as a guide in planning will be
identified. These points can also serve as a criteria for evaluating
the status of an existing learning group.[1]

Atmosphere

The atmosphere of a learning group includes both the psychological
and physical climate that sets the prevailing mood, tone, and feelings
within the group. The physical arrangement of the room--the seating
pattern, lighting, ventilation, acoustics, use of adult sized
facilities, drabness or brightness of the room--all have a significant
influence on the climate for learning. Not only does it directly
affect the amount and kind of learning taking place, it also affects
the prevailing feelings of the students toward their fellow students,
the facilitator and the subject matter being taught.

The psychological atmosphere, although not easily measured or determined,
is a critical factor. In learning groups where a friendly, warm, per-
missive, flexible atmosphere exists more learning takes place and the
learners are most content and satisfied with their learning experience.

A facilitator who gives attention to both the physical and psychological
atmosphere of his group will facilitate faster and more effective
learning. This is the starting point for facilitators as they plan
their learning group strategy.

Check points for your learning group:

1. An atmosphere of psychological freedom enabling the expression
    of all feelings and viewpoints is maintained.

2. The physical arrangements--seating patterns, lighting, ventilation,
    acoustics, etc.--contribute to a good learning atmosphere.

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[1] See How Mature is Your Learning Group by Jerry Parsons and Darlene
    Warren in Continuing Education Vol. 7 No. 3 July 1974.

Group Size

The size of the group is a variable that can have a profound effect upon success of the concept of facilitation of learning. A basic premise is that interaction must take place between the learners and the facilitator. As the size of the group increases, the opportunity for interaction decreases and the interaction patterns become more complicated.

A facilitator, by the skillful use of various teaching techniques, can compensate for the size of the group. From a practical standpoint, most adult educators will be faced with classes that are too large. A definitive class size can not be established; however, when there are more than twenty learners this writer has found extreme difficulty in using the facilitation of learning strategy.

Check point for your learning group:

1. The size of the group permits frequent interaction of all learners.

Heterogeneity-Homogeneity

Each learner brings a unique contribution to the learning group. He brings his own value system, previous experience, motives, and goals to the group. The recognition and mobilization of the unique resources and contributions of each learner is the high priority responsibility of the facilitator.

In educational circles the concept of homogeneous grouping of students continues to be controversial and unsettled. From a group dynamics standpoint research reported by Shaw (p. 231) tends to support the notion that groups whose members are heterogeneous in regard to personality characteristics will be more effective than if the group is homogeneous in respect to personality.

Helping the members of a learning group understand the differences existing within the group will enable the facilitator to more effectively capitalise on these differences. The experience of this writer has shown that a heterogeneous group will be more likely to generate new understanding of the subject matter and will foster creative thinking. Homogeneous groups, although they present less divergency, may not be as willing to be involved with new ideas, feelings or reactions.

Check point for your learning group:

1. Intelligent use is made of the different capabilities of the individual learners.

Identity or We-Feeling

One of the cardinal principles of adult education is that you start where the learners are so they feel that the learning experience is relevant to their needs. Group dynamics research has shown when members feel the group is theirs, the results are more positive than when the members see the group as the leader's group.

The mutual involvement of the facilitator and the learning group in the planning process will enhance group identity. When the learners are fully involved in all activities of the group they exhibit a strong sense of identity which encourages continued participation.

Check point for your learning group:

1. The learners feel strongly that the group is theirs rather than the facilitator's.

Social Control

All groups, including learning groups, have means by which the members secure conformity or maintain standards of expectations. These sanctions may include recognition, status, and expressions of response or respect such as a smile, compliment, or pat on the back. Negative sanctions such as ridicule, avoidance, and rejection can be used. These means are called social control.

To be an effective learning group, social control must be applied equally and fairly to all members. The extent of social control depends upon the degree of identity the members have with the learning group. The astute facilitator will constantly assess the pattern of social control, his role in it and its effect upon the group.

Check point for your learning group:

1. A high degree of cohesiveness or solidarity is maintained but not to the point of excluding new ideas or stifling individuality.

Group Standards

The level of acceptable performance in a learning group is the mutual responsibility of the facilitator and the learners. It must be recognised that certain standards or expectations are imposed ty external groups. For example, in a formal educational institution there may be certain expectations relating to grading. All A's may not be an acceptable standard.

Group standards serve a vital role in the operation of learning groups. Attention must be given to them if the facilitator is to maintain a high quality of education.

Check point for your learning group:

1. Members identify and maintain acceptable standards related to subject matter competency and interaction practices.

Human Relations Skills

The skills of working and getting along with people are valuable assets in the learning group. These skills are acquired and individual learners can learn to improve their human relations skills. Just because a learner has previously been in a learning group is not an assurance that he is proficient in these skills.

A group of mature individuals learns quickly to work together and needs little direction from the facilitator. On the other hand, in some groups the level of human relations skills requires special attention so that learners can become more proficient in their ability to interact with one another. Learning groups which take seriously the need for improving their human relations skills will be more responsive.

Check points for your learning group:

1. Procedural and emotional problems are faced and modifications in the group are intelligently made.

2. The group detects and adapts to individual members' rhythms of metabolism, fatigue, tension, tempo, emotions, etc.

Definition of Roles

Within all groups there are expectations of all members. When an adult joins a learning group he brings certain expectations to the group. He anticipates that the teacher or facilitator will perform certain roles and that he is expected to respond or act in a specific manner. Furthermore, he has expected roles for the other members of the learning group.

One crucial area that must be resolved, if the learning group is to achieve its goals and objectives, is the difference in role expectations as perceived by the learner and the facilitator. This is particularly true in a setting where a majority of the classrooms are not taught by teachers dedicated to the Rogerian approach to teaching-learning.

A discussion of roles at the outset of the class will help. But it is the experience of this writer that subsequent discussions of role are needed to help the learners to fully understand and feel confortable. Inherent in this approach to teaching-learning is the philosophy that the student is responsible for his own learning.

Check points for your learning group:

1. Members assume responsible for their own learning.

2. A balance between cooperative and competitive behavior of individual members has been established.

3. Members recognize and accept the role of a facilitator of learning in the teaching-learning process.

Communication Patterns

Communications is a process in which a person uses symbols (words, actions, or gestures) to convey to others his ideas, feelings, and beliefs. Dyer in his book, The Sensitive Manipulator, says that 'communication is a means to an end - not an end in itself'. Furthermore, he says that communications can be used to hurt, punish or offend others or it can bind people together, to share love, joy and concern. (p. 33)

Communication patterns exist in the classroom. The facilitator of adult learning groups, under most circumstances, is not concerned about increasing the amount of communications but is involved in helping the learners to improve the quality of their communication.

Check point for your learning group:

1. A high degree of effective interdependent communication is present.

Goals and Objectives

The goals and objectives of a learning group arise from two primary sources--the learners and the facilitator. It is important to recognize that the educational institution has an influence of the group's goals and objectives; however, this discussion will be directed only toward the goals of the learners and the facilitator.

Adults are usually volunteer learners and as a result have well
defined goals. These goals may represent a considerable divergency.
Knowles says that

> the individual is motivated to engage in learning to the
> extent that he feels a need to learn and perceives a personal
> goal that learning will help to achieve; and he will invest
> his energy in making use of available resources to the extent
> that he perceives them as being relevant to his needs and
> goals. (p. 50-51)

The facilitator must seek out these goals and understand the rationale
behind them. In addition, the learners in the group need to know
and understand each other's goals and objectives.

Often in the Rogerian approach to teaching-learning the goals of the
facilitator are not emphasized. From a practical standpoint the
facilitator, being hired as an expert in a subject matter field, has
certain goals and objectives that must be met if the student is to
be competent in his subject matter area. This cannot be ignored.
The significant point is that both the facilitator and the learners
must understand their needs and goals and mutually agree upon a set
of goals for the learning group.

Check points for your learning group:

1. All members have a clear understanding of the group's short-and
   long-range goals and objectives.

2. An appropriate balance between the group's goals and the individual
   needs is achieved.

3. An appropriate balance between subject matter content and process
   is maintained.

Techniques or Methods

Group techniques or methods are the means which the group uses to move
toward its goals. Facilitators need a thorough understanding and
knowledge of group working techniques to help the members and the
group to have a satisfying learning experience. The learners as well
as the facilitator must share in the understanding of group working
techniques; the more complete their knowledge, the more effective
will be the learning experience.

The selection of techniques is not automatic and furthermore it is
not done randomly. The use of a specific technique depends upon
the facilitator, the group, the situation and the group goals.
All must be considered. The facilitator must be able to identify
appropriate techniques and use them with ease and finesse.

It is important to recognize that the technique or the method is merely a means to achieving the group goals. Periodically some groups must devote time to learning group processes and techniques to be able to function effectively.

One particularly important technique that all learning groups need to comprehend is the process of problem solving. Sound problem solving approaches must be taught and fostered.

Check points for your learning group:

1. Changes to new procedures and processes are made when the situation warrants.

2. Means are consistent with goals or objectives.

3. Sound problem solving is initiated and implemented.

Group Evaluation

Group evaluation is a powerful internal force that has great poetntial to help the individual learners, the facilitators and the total group to achieve greater productivity. Evaluation takes place constantly in learning groups. The challenge is to channel the activity in such a way that it will foster group progress.

A competent facilitator will not rely on one method or one set of evaluative reactions. He will seek to achieve a variety of inputs so as to assess the progress of his group. Both the subject matter content and the group processes will receive attention. Furthermore, opportunities for feedback throughout the learning activity--not just at the end of the experience--will be provided.

The check points identified within this article can provide the facilitator one set of criteria for evaluation. Others will need to be developed to fit specific learning groups.

Check points for you: learning group:

1. The learning group objectively evaluates its own functioning, processes and progress toward its goals and objectives.

Summary

A learning group is a dynamic entity that doesn't begin its life as a fully developed group of learners interacting in relation to a common set of goals and objectives. Just as with any group it must

'create its identity, decide on its direction, its ways of
operating and become a small social system in its own right.'
(MacLennan and Felsenfeld. p. 50-51)

Once a learning group has been established, the members become
interdependent and become aware of each other's feelings, beliefs,
attitudes and needs. The learners feel that the group is their
group and work to maintain it. Dynamic interaction helps make
the learner.

The facilitator who is aware of the forces or internal dynamics
operating in the learning group will be able to expedite the group
formation process and facilitate learning. Although they are not
a panacea, the internal dynamics discussed in this article provide
a basis for understanding learning group processes.

The ultimate goal of a learning group is to help the learner
achieve his goals and objectives and to help him learn to live in
a rapidly changing and evolving society. The facilitator who
creates the climate for such learning to take place is, indeed, helping
people to help themselves and is helping to improve society.

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