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ABSTRACT

In this paper, several issues related to the problem of transfer of training are set forth. The technique of frame analysis, developed by Erving Goffman, is presented as a way of bringing coherence to the formulation of problems related to transfer of training. Key concepts in Goffman's argument are explained, showing how those concepts pertain to training. An extended discussion of a sample training activity shows how frame analysis can help structure the activity for maximum transferability. Several implications of frame analysis for the conduct and structure of training are explored, and questions for further investigation are presented. (Author)

THE FRAMES OF TRAINING

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THE FRAMES OF TRAINING

Introduction

The work that led to the preparation of this paper was prompted by my experiences as a trainer in the Rural Education Program of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. As a trainer, I became doubtful of my ability to describe the relationship between what trainees do during training sessions and how trainees apply what they have learned to their everyday work.

Common sense told me that training was in some way an opportunity for trainees to practice skills they would need later in their jobs. But experience showed that this common sense view was incomplete. I found that often trainees would devote substantial effort to problems of primary importance to them then and there. It was as if the training session itself had become the world to which training was supposed to refer. The assumption that trainees were looking ahead to application of skills in real life settings failed to explain the full range of trainee behavior during training sessions. I had to conclude that while training was in part a rehearsal for activities to be carried on later, it was not totally so. I began to search for a framework that would allow me to describe

the different "distances" between the world of training and the world where skills learned in training are applied.

Another of my assumptions was that given motivated trainees, and given training activities designed to meet trainees' stated learning needs at an appropriate level, trainees would successfully apply their skills in their work. What I found, however, was that it was impossible to predict specific variations in the contexts within which skills were supposed to be applied, and that unexpected variations seemed to account for those cases in which skills were unsuccessfully applied. I concluded that trainees needed to spend considerable time preparing to deal with the unexpected, and I began to wonder if there were a way to describe how people formulate the contexts in which they see themselves operating, so that trainees could be prepared to deal with as many contexts as possible.

Finally, I was intrigued with the relationship between the context of a given training activity and the process of the same activity. Traditionally, process has been used as a means of tailoring content to the needs of a specific group of trainees. But I wanted to know whether the process of an activity did not also relate to the two matters I have mentioned above: (a) the relation of the training activity to the arena where training was to be applied, and (b) the preparation of trainees to deal with multiple contexts.

I found I was making very little headway thinking about these things because I lacked both terminology and a "syntax" that would order terms. In short I wanted a "language" that would allow me to talk about transfer of training in terms of: (a) the arenas to which training refers, (b) the contexts in which training is applied, and (c) the ways training processes could be varied to take advantage of a better understanding of (a) and (b).

In this paper, I describe a language which helps me discuss the issues outlined above. It is taken from sociologist Erving Goffman's Frame Analysis[1], a book I would recommend as indispensable for anyone desiring to understand the basic units of human interaction.

I do not claim that the approach taken here is the only approach, or that I have solved all--or indeed any--of the problems that stimulated this undertaking. What I do claim is that Goffman's technique of frame analysis provides one useful way to formulate problems related to the transfer of learning.

Finally, I need to justify for the reader my use of the term "language" as that which I sought to enable me to formulate the problems under discussion. I could as easily have said "framework," "structure," "conceptual basis," or some similar coinage. I chose "language" because that term suggests not only the appropriate words I needed for a terminology, but also because language suggests syntax, the rules for ordering the terms. I have borrowed

extensively from Goffman's own language, and it might strike the reader that I have made indiscriminate use of jargon. I have done this because I could not come up with a better terminology. Goffman's unique terminology is rich in connotations (as I shall point out in the text), providing resonance and depth to his ideas. I felt that to abandon that depth would rob his ideas of much of their substance.

I. CONCEPTS AND TERMS

In what follows, I shall first explore a method of analyzing what happens in training so that issues involved in the transfer of training may be more clearly understood. I will do this by beginning this section with an explanation of major concepts in Goffman's technique of frame analysis, showing how those concepts pertain to various aspects of the training situation. In the next section, I shall provide one extended example of what frame analysis tells us about the conditions for transferring training. Following that, I shall suggest several ways a trainer might utilize an understanding of frames. In the final section I shall enumerate questions I think are worth further investigation.

The term "frame" is related to the effort in cognitive psychology to "recognize the crucial role of context and meaning in cognitive activity."[2] In another context,

the Swedish educator Ulf Lundgren speaks of frame factors as "factors that limit and to a certain extent determine the teaching process."[3]

In both cases, the term "frame" is used to specify enclosure, and that the thing enclosing (the frame) tells how to interpret what is enclosed--exactly as in the more common usage "framing a picture." Goffman claims that all social events are similarly enclosed. Specifically, he asserts that there are "principles of organization that govern (social) events." To these principles, he gives the term "frame." A frame is an organizing principle governing our involvement in social events; it provides the basis for our behavior by allowing us to answer the question, "What is it that's going on here?"[4]

When we are engaged in an activity, say driving a car, our engagement is said to be "primary." We are doing, so to speak, what we are doing. We are said to be governed by a primary framework. In the course of this paper, I may have occasion to refer to "real, literal activity," and when I do, it is to this primary framework that I am referring. I am not making any assertions about "essential reality," about which frame analysis has nothing to say. "Real, literal activity" refers to a level of engagement, specifically to the primary level.

There are two other levels of engagement needing explanation. If we take the same activity, driving a car, and transform it by putting the driver behind the wheel of a driving simulator, we call the transformation a "keying." Goffman describes keying as "a set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something else patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else."[5] Goffman's explanation of the distinction between a primary framework and a keying bears quoting:

> Actions framed entirely in terms of a primary framework are said to be real or actual, to be really or actually or literally occurring. A keying of these actions performed, say, onstage provides us with something that is not literal or real or actually occurring. Nonetheless, we would say that the staging of these activities was really or actually occurring.[6]

This description of keying is not meant to suggest that keyed activity suffers some deficiency in reality. Clearly, it is as real as anything else; but the level of engagement is different in that keyed activity is always undertaken with reference to some primary framework. The reference provides, as it were, the key to the primary framework. When a musician rehearses a piece of music, he is keying an anticipated performance; when a group of trainees roleplays a technique they intend to use in a back-home situation, the role-playing is a keying.

Returning to our example of driving a car, let us imagine that I am behaving in such a way as to make you believe that I am driving a car, when in fact I am not. Though at this point the example is somewhat farfetched, it puts across the possibility of my intentionally falsifying a primary framework. Such a transformation of a primary framework Goffman calls fabrication--

> ...the intentional effort of one or more individuals to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on. A nefarious design is involved, a plot or treacherous plan leading--when realized--to a falsification of some part of the world.[7]

The amount of effort that people invest in fabrications may be appreciated by considering what happens when the fabrication is punctured: when those being duped find out they were indeed being duped. Their entire orientation to their situation is radically altered, not infrequently provoking violence. Thus (using the driving example) your definition to the situation may change from "He is driving a car" to "He wanted me to think he was driving a car," and the change calls for entirely different patterns of behavior.

Fabrication is involved in training when one or more group members have "hidden agendas," and often trainers expend much effort attempting to tease out hidden agendas. Such efforts are frequently viewed as attempts to discredit a participant's statement about what he wants others to believe he is thinking or feeling. Stress

occurs in training at the very points at which a participant's fabrication is called into question. The behavior of a person who is "fabricating" alters radically, though not always visibly, when the fabrication is discredited. The person may break out in tears ("flood out," in Goffman's phraseology), or may retreat into another fabrication, that of seeming to agree that his fabrication was discovered.

The property of a primary framework, by virtue of which it can be transformed through a keying or a fabrication, is its "vulnerability." Vulnerability is an especially apt term to refer to the changing readings we give to situations because it connotes the fragility of our hold on situations. A primary framework is, in fact, vulnerable to a great number of transformations: I can practice making you believe I am driving a car (keying a fabrication) or I can make you believe I am practicing (fabricating a keying). This possibility of multiple frames is termed "lami ation," and the word suggests that while each frame can be identified separately, they function together in specifying the reading of the situation.

An unclear understanding of laminations can give way to substantial confusion, and an example of this in training occurs when you are training a group to become trainers. If, during training you engage trainer-trainees in practicing behaviors they will later be expected to give others practice in, you are keying a

keying. By clarifying the layered nature of this situation, training groups can maintain a working consensus about what is going on.

Characteristic of the way we frame situations is the possibility that, at any moment, a reframing is possible. Misframing is also possible--when a mistaken notion of the framework occurs with no one having an intention to misrepresent oneself or to deceive. Persons may commit errors in framing, and there is the possibility of breaking frame:

> Given that the frame applied to an activity is expected to enable us to come to terms with all events in that activity (informing and regulating many of them), it is understandable that the unmanageable might occur, an occurrence which cannot be effectively ignored and to which the frame cannot be applied, with resulting bewilderment and chagrin on the part of the participants.[8]

This situation is referred to as "flooding out." At points of flooding out, activity may be either unkeyed--moved further from a primary framework of literal activity--or downkeyed--moved closer to literal activity.

Examples of downkeying occur in training when an activity meant to provide an opportunity for practice becomes for a participant the occasion for literal activity. In a time-management workshop, a trainee who analyzed his or her activities for an average day on the job would be keying time management skills. If,

however, this person analyzed activities taking place that particular day, he or she would be using a primary framework.

In instances where trainees feel threatened, they are most likely to upkey, to feign, for example, that they are not being threatened.

Primary frameworks, keyings, and fabrications are the three frames people use to define what is going on in social situations. These frames may be many-layered, and they operate only as long as they can sustain the events in a situation. When they no longer can do so, the frames change. (A given frame may of course also cause one to filter out elements of a situation that do not fit the interpretation suggested by the frame--to explore the limits of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this paper.)

There is much more to Goffman's treatment of frames and I hope that this cursory introduction will stimulate readers to search out Goffman's text. For the purposes of this paper, it may suffice to say that much of the power of the concept lies in the way it assists us to describe different levels of engagement trainees may have in training and different ways people define situations.

In summary, training has many of the characteristics of keyed activity--that is, it is activity carried on in a special setting with its own set of rules that distinguished it from literal activity. Also, the focus of

much training is on new behaviors that can be carried out in the everyday world of the participant. With these conditionals, we may now state the central thesis of this paper: training is aimed at assisting participants to become skilled in the manipulation of the frames surrounding an activity or behavior that the participant deems desirable. When a person achieves considerable skill at framing the behavior, and at managing complex laminations of the frame, the behavior is said to be "learned." The participant would have a higher probability of successfully engaging in the behavior outside training. Discussion of this thesis will make up the remainder of this paper.

II. AN EXAMPLE

To illustrate the idea that training is aimed at assisting participants to become skilled at frame manipulation, let us look at an example. A trainer, let us imagine, describes the technique of "force field analysis."[9] After having described the technique, participants are instructed to try out the technique using a real example from their own work or home situation. The results are shared among small groups of participants, and finally the full group reassembles to discuss their reactions to the technique of force field analysis and to one another as they perceived others learning to utilize the technique.

In frame terms, participants were first bound by the conventions surrounding the lecture. In a lecture, a literal activity is described using words and gestures--a species of keying. This kind of keying organized the experience to provide participants with a maximum amount of information in as short a time as possible. Then participants shifted the basis of the keying of the activity. They tried out the technique in much the same manner as a musician might try to play a piece of music for the first time. Another keying was involved as participants in small groups reframed the activity and discussed the results of their try-out. Here the activity may be seen as being twice removed from literal activity--a two-layered lamination as they recounted both the results of small-group discussion and their personal reactions to the technique.

As the lecture operated to increase the information flow, the try-out operated to help participants get into a habit of using force field. It might have been that someone became frustrated with the experience: flooded out and keyed down, possibly accusing the trainer of engineering a fabrication--namely, duping the group into thinking that force fielding was a useful technique. On the other hand, complete engrossment in the situation could also result as a participant decided to use the technique then and there to decide whether to leave his or her spouse. The situation would then have been keyed down into real, literal use of the force field analysis.

The small-group experience was also guided by certain conventions that in this case resulted in a double lamination. Participants key their already once keyed activity into talk, which enables the talker to shift rapidly among a sequence of frames, now giving information, now hiding it, now providing reflexive signals (signals that tell us how to take--assign meaning to--what was said).[10]

Many of the same characteristics may be observed at the large group level, where the participants recounted their experiences with force fielding, and with others using force field.

As the individual becomes more skilled at manipulation of framing (in this case, force field analysis), he or she is more and more able to use the technique to see how it could be used in a hypothetical situation and to adapt it to an unexpected situation.

A simple example will illustrate this last point. I can describe to you how a certain person might be swindled by a rug salesman, but I cannot conduct the swindle myself because I do not know enough about the activities of a real rug salesman to convince you that I am one--though if I were highly skilled in the art of convincing, I perhaps could. Nor do I have much of an idea about how to go about sustaining a fabrication, how to change my frame orientation once the ruse appears to be discovered, and so forth. This sample illustrated my ability to key (in English prose) a situation about frames, but did not key a fabrication regarding the selling of rugs.

The reason it is so difficult to carry out learning from a training setting into a real-world setting is that there is no agreement about frame between persons who have been trained and persons who have not. Recently, Assertiveness Training has been enjoying a vogue. When a person learns in an assertiveness workshop how to assert his or her rights, the assertion that he or she will make in the real world will work only when he or she can organize the experience so as to enclose totally the response of the person asserted upon. If the asserted-upon responds in an out-of-frame manner, the asserter either must know immediately how to reframe the situation, or the whole sequence is destroyed.

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF TRAINING

The foregoing has suggested some ways Goffman's ideas of "frame analysis" might help analyze just what occurs during training. Here I would like to describe some ways that a trainer might utilize these ideas in a training setting; that is, how a trainer can advance the goals of a training situation through a consideration of frames.

The first consequence of a frame analysis of training would seem to be that training is more likely to be successful when the trainer organizes activities and experiences in such a manner as to provide trainees with the opportunity to frame an unfamiliar behavior in several

different ways. In the example given above, one way of providing several frames for "force field analysis" was shown. I believe that it is fallacious to assume that if trainees are simply given an opportunity to "do" something, learning will take place. In addition to "doing," trainees must learn how to set up conditions or situations where they can "do," and must learn how to come out of a situation once what they are trying to do has been done. Trainees must learn to "do" under different conditions, and must learn to talk about, reflect upon, pretend to do, practice doing, talk about practicing, talk about pretending, pretend to practice, and so forth, in order to become competent in using any new behavior. Goffman claims that it is characteristic of humans to be quite skilled at behaving coherently in complex frame situations, and it is this characteristic that is the hallmark of competence in any activity.

A second way in which frame analysis might be used is that trainees might employ concepts of frame analysis to clarify situations in which they find themselves engaged. This would appear to be a very useful practice for those engaged in learnings related to the "helping" professions. Frame analysis provides terminology which describes how different people view the same situation differently; it helps us understand the limits, the effects, and the principles governing the possible ways people construe situations, and thus clears up much of the confusion which plagues us when we occasionally sense that we have not really been understood.

When participants in a human relations training session learn the value of open and honest sharing of feelings, they may easily become frustrated at their inability to behave openly and honestly in the "real world." But when they see how the framing conventions operating in the training session govern various interactions, including every possibility of breaking frame (beyond a certain point, in most cases, one is "out of the workshop"),[11] they may also come to see how real world framing conventions likewise govern behavior, and they will be able perhaps to use that knowledge to influence changes of convention with the persons with whom they interact.

Another use of frame analysis is that it seems to help both trainer and trainee understand how certain aspects of training relate to the world outside of training. A clear example of this, it seems to me, was a personal experience which occurred in the context of "warmup" activities in a training session I was conducting. Like many trainers, I was using warmups for the purposes of establishing a relaxed, informal atmosphere and of removing or dissipating feelings of threat. I had, however, been questioned by trainees about why we were wasting time "doing these silly things." Shortly after the training session, I met with a school board in a small school district, where my purpose was to help the board determine whether or not to engage in a complex process of improving school-community relations. I had

some uneasiness about the meeting because I felt that some board members might respond negatively and be threatened by their preconception of what I stood for when promoting improved school-community relations. I observed that just before the meeting started, this school board very quickly took up and solved a small problem involving summer school library hours. This was a problem that was easily solved: indeed the solution appeared to generate a climate of positiveness and accomplishment. It was no surprise to me then, when the board, after lengthy but genial questioning, agreed to participate in the program I was representing. The library problem was the "warmup" for this group and functioned in just the ways I had tried to use "warmups" in training. The effect is that of establishing agreement concerning what is about to happen--a frame that is mutually agreed upon (of course by members sharing similar cultural conventions).

Naturally, as we have seen, it is quite possible for any individual to be maintaining quite a different frame, to be employing a fabrication, for example. Nevertheless, such warmups are used (when fabrications are not involved) to show that similar frames are being agreed to by all participants. It was then clear to me why the warmups I was using in training were regarded with suspicion. The participants were not in agreement with the frame that I was using to surround and define the warmup. Many of the

trainees associated warmup behaviors with artificial, stilted experiences, and consequently felt that my public intentions were a fabrication.

Another use for frame analytic techniques is to help diagnose interactions among trainees and to help diagnose interactions between trainer and trainee. The trainer may further profit from analyzing various keying techniques, such as lecture, discussion, role play, demonstration and tutorial, to control the extent to which trainees are removed from real, literal activity. The greater the number of laminations, the "safer" the environment for the trainee to try out new behavior. At the same time, understanding frame analysis may help the trainer more quickly determine the point at which an activity suddenly becomes literal and not just a keying for a trainee. By considering the nature of training itself as framed activity, the trainer may be able to manipulate the location, time and logistics of training so that trainees learn maximally generalizable behavior. When the training itself becomes the subject of training, a possibility discovered at the National Training Laboratories, the question of frame analysis is constantly at issue: at every moment, trainees are asked to inquire about what it is that is going on. In other situations, trainers structure situations so that the training session leads, or is meant to lead, to the discovery of the answer to the question about what is going on. In my experience, trainers who claim that it is valuable for trainees to

fumble in the dark until they reach the discovery stage ignore the fact that trainers constantly intervene in the process--even not intervening is a type of intervention, the appropriateness of which in a given situation is a reasonable topic of inquiry.

In fact, while engaged in the steps leading to discovery, trainees are constantly framing and reframing a situation until they find a frame that accounts for all the factors they perceive in a situation. For example, a group utterly bogged down because of conflicting views of a situation will typically have members saying such things as, "Let's look at it this way...," "Why not try a new tack?", and "What's really going on here is...". All of these statements are prefaces to an attempt to frame--define--a situation that for the moment and for the most members of the group is framed in mutually exclusive ways. The point here is not that frame analysis will solve conflicts in a group, but rather that the trainer who waits for the group to solve its own conflicts needs to realize how the situation is framed in order to make a judgment about whether or not to intervene. A trainer can be completely discredited the moment a participant says, "Oh, we're just being set up in an artificial situation to test our ability to reach a decision." At this point, the desire to beat the trainer at his or her own game may outweigh the problem or conflict the group is experiencing.

IV. QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

If the ideas advanced here have value, it would seem worthwhile to continue to examine consciously how the concepts of framing bear upon training. To what extent can we utilize the analysis of frames to describe what goes on in training? Can we locate ways to help participants manipulate frames in ways to increase their learning? Which currently available models of learning will accommodate these ideas? Can we assess and predict the effectiveness of training activities through frame analytic techniques? These and other problems await further investigation.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Erving Goffman, Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

[2]Ulric Neisser, Cognition and Reality (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Co., 1976), p. 58.

[3]Ulf P. Lundgren, Frame Factors and the Teaching Process: A Contribution to Curriculum Theory and Theory on Teaching (Stockholm: Almquist and Wiksell, 1972), p. 27.

[4]Goffman, pp. 10-11.

[5]Goffman, pp. 43-44.

[6]Goffman, p. 47.

[7]Goffman, p. 83.

[8]Goffman, p. 347.

[9]A technique devised first by Kurt Lewin to help people weigh advantages and disadvantages of possible courses of action.

[10]See the final chapter, "The Frame Analysis of Talk," pp. 496-559 in Goffman's book. It is argued that during normal talk, "What is presented by the individual concerning himself and his world is so much an abstraction, a self-defensive argument, a careful selection from a multitude of facts, that the best that can be done with this sort of thing is to say that it is a lay dramatist's scenario employing himself as a character and a somewhat supportable reading of the past..." (p. 558). It is at this point that the frame analysis of training merges with linguistic analysis.

An interesting avenue of research would involve a linguistic analysis of the "character" that trainers develop for themselves to play in training sessions. Analyzing such behavior reveals formalized patterns of speech that are vulnerable to being discredited by trainees. A trainee may thus come to doubt the genuineness of a trainer whom he hears using the same words in different situations to describe his concerns. Suspecting a fabrication, the trainee might well engineer the fabrication of pretending to believe the trainer.

[11]There are of course workshops in which, seemingly, anything goes. It would be interesting to explore the limits of framing in training. Is it possible to validate the hypothesis that training does not take place when frame-breaking possibilities are not themselves framed?

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