

Brian Thorne

GROUP TRAINING for CHRISTIAN STUDENTS

In 1971 and again in 1972 I was invited by the Baptist Students Federation to devise and conduct a seminar in 'Group Dynamics' as an option for those students participating in their annual week-end training conference. Behind this decision was an awareness that the church was increasingly going to need to work through small groups of people - either groups of people in the same sphere of action who came together to strengthen each other, or selected because they are living in the same place. In student terms the 'cell' structure is becoming the most widely adopted form of organisation. Many students will be involved in such group structures and will find themselves in a position of leadership within them. This being so, it is important for them to learn how a group operates, how to bring it to the stage of mutual trust that will make it effective, how to be sensitive to the motives and fears which govern the way its members behave and how to be aware of the members' needs.

The seminar which I designed took the form of: i) a ninety minute opening session consisting of a talk on the nature of group work and the culturally conditioned suppression of feeling, followed by a group discussion; ii) a ninety minute session of set piece role-plays and discussion of the outcome; iii) a ninety minute session of sensitivity (encounter group) exercises, both verbal and non-verbal; iv) three ninety minute so-called training group sessions.

The statement of aims owed much to the formulations of the Tavistock Institute and the trainer style which I adopted in the training group on these occasions also owed something to the Tavistock model insofar as I refrained from introducing personal feelings and data and confined myself primarily to clarifying and summarising functions. On the other hand I seldom made interpretations and consciously attempted to convey and to model the non-judgemental acceptance of group members usually associated with the Rogerian approach - the style with which I am normally most comfortable. This hybrid facilitator style seemed in the event to be well suited to

a group whose members had already spent some time in each other's company (although most were unknown to each other before the conference) and who only had four and a half 'group hours' at their disposal.

Twenty students, ten men and ten women, took part in these seminars - ten in each year. Both groups demonstrated a high level of commitment to the work of the seminar and made what seemed to me at the time to be impressive progress in an often difficult setting - there were other conference functions to be attended, much general socialising with the other conference members and a heavy involvement with the corporate worship of the local Baptist church on the Sunday.

As this was the first occasion on which I had acted as facilitator to an all-Christian group I felt it worthwhile to attempt some sort of evaluative follow-up. I decided to adopt a phenomenological approach and devised a questionnaire largely based on the kind of survey which Carl Rogers describes in *Encounter Groups*, (Harper and Row, 1970, p. 127.). The merit of this approach is that it enables respondents to give a personal account of what the experience has meant to them and offers the opportunity both for a 'stream of consciousness' response and for the more structured checking of statements.

In the event eighteen of the twenty students responded to my request for feedback (which came some six weeks after the seminar in each case). Three did not use the questionnaire at all but wrote letters instead and one made use of the 'stream of consciousness' section only. Fourteen students therefore used the check lists to some extent and it is their responses which I shall examine first.

The first section of the questionnaire sought to elicit feelings about the seminar experience as a whole. Eight students considered that the seminar had made a considerable temporary difference to their behaviour and that they were still conscious six weeks, or in some cases some months, later of positive changes in behaviour which were directly attributable to the seminar experience. Three replied that they were not aware of any perceptible change in behaviour but, of these, two claimed that there had been attitudinal shifts which they suspected were influencing behaviour in ways of which they were not aware. Two maintained that they were behaving differently with parents, (one dramatically so), two that they were behaving differently with friends and one claimed to have changed her behaviour with her university tutor.

The second section asked for feelings about the training group experience. It was clear that for most of the respondents this had been the highlight of the seminar. Three had found certain aspects frustrating and one confessed to some annoyance but all who used the check list were highly positive in their overall assessment. Five found the group more helpful than unhelpful, seven saw it as constructive in its results and seven rated it as a deeply meaningful, positive experience.

The session of encounter group exercises did not commend itself so highly to the participants. Four felt the exercises were confusing and two found them uninteresting.

On the other hand three found them somewhat helpful, five felt they were constructive and definitely helpful and one man was quite bowled over by the session - he found it exhilarating and releasing, powerful and positive.

The fourth section sought to explore growth in the awareness of feelings both in oneself and others. Again, the responses were overwhelmingly positive. Eight students claimed growth in both self and other awareness and four others felt that they were more self-aware. Six claimed that increased awareness had resulted in greater openness in the sharing of feelings with others.

The final section attempted to investigate developments in Christian thought and action. Encouragingly, many of the respondents objected to this section: they felt it difficult if not impossible to divorce their Christianity from their humanity and considered therefore that the section was superfluous. Nevertheless eight maintained that the seminar had made them consider 'new directions' for their Christian commitment and three felt it had made a very positive contribution to their Christian thinking and behaviour. Only two felt that the influence of the seminar had been almost nil in this respect.

Interesting as these figures are, the 'stream of consciousness' responses and the letters that students wrote are even more revealing. Below are some extracts. I have divided them into two parts - firstly those remarks which have a bearing on personal and interpersonal awareness in relation to various events in the seminar and, secondly those comments which are specifically concerned with the participants' Christian commitment, belief and behaviour.

Extracts (1)

'I knew before I went that it is most often interpersonal fear which dominates a group situation, it is fear that is the greatest barrier to real communication. Your sessions taught me how we can attempt to breach such barriers and establish trust.'

'I had never been in a situation like ours where we were *forced* to combat the fear situation and I hope I'll be more ready to attempt the breakthrough in the future. I'm also less afraid of the label 'T group'.'

'I learned that it is possible to constructively hurt people if an atmosphere of trusting relationships has been created. I could have learned a lot more if I had not been bent on preventing anyone really cracking me.'

'It has made me more sensitive to my own feelings though I'm still not always prepared to face up to them and come to terms with them. It's also made me aware to a greater degree of the feelings of others and has made me see people more as individuals and try to listen and understand their feelings.'

'I hope that I am more sensitive, but I feel that I still too often adopt a patronising attitude. And while I feel I may be more open about myself I am still very determined to keep a large amount very much to myself.'

'In the sensitivity exercises I found the breaking down of the body part very good in enabling me to identify more closely with disabled people and, surprisingly, people of the opposite sex. But most important, I was able to accept myself more as I am.'

'I've found the sensitivity exercises to be extremely thought provoking. They keep popping up in my mind taking on all sorts of dimensions of significance probably because they are the expression of such basic human experiences. I think they more than anything else in the seminar brought home to me the reality of the learning by experience talked about in the initial hand-out to which I'd reacted at first sight with extreme cynicism.'

'I think possibly the seminar experience has now opened the way to a new dimension, a fuller approach to my own and other people's feelings. It's very difficult to express what I mean because obviously it's very personal and very difficult to assess.'

'It was certainly a very full and deep experience. One way in which I think I have changed considerably is in the way I treat certain people. I did have a way, as some have pointed out to me, of sometimes riding roughshod over people, perhaps injuring their feelings in ways I did not realise. The fact that I did this came home to me in a very forceful way over the weekend with the result that I am now a little more considerate in the things I say.'

'It is an uncanny but strangely comforting experience to know that there are other people in the country who know quite a lot about me and about whom I in turn know quite a lot. I sense a new factor, perhaps it could be described as a willingness to relate to people as they are rather than as I wish them to be. It is an openness to people, and possibly the sensitivity exercises had some effect here - that people are people with bodies - physical bodies, with which I can relate.'

'I feel that the sensitivity exercises were potentially frustrating and possibly damaging if they had been taken alone and not as part of a total seminar - especially I feel this about the verbal exercises.'

'The sensitivity exercises made me aware of a certain shyness and a desire to hide my emotions. They made me aware of my embarrassment at acting in any way that let a member of the opposite sex understand my personal feelings. I act in such a way as to oppose any natural reaction of love towards a member of the opposite sex, finding this to be embarrassing.'

'The short term effect was a great reluctance to part from the group. One of the positive long term effects is that I now feel able to communicate with others on a more personal level because I know I can trust them more.'

Extracts (2)

'Is my thinking and behaviour as a Christian really separable from my thinking and behaviour generally? If the seminar has made me more aware of others' fears then ipso facto is this not applicable to me 'as a Christian' anyway? It has made me even more

sceptical about corporate worship, I'm afraid - perhaps even more aware of how difficult it is to really reach people and communicate, but at the same time encouraging in the realisation that the basic barrier, which I see as fear, can be breached and trust established. None of us are, apparently, as frightening as we appear to be. It all added to my faith in the 'love principle' as you might call it.'

'My immediate reaction is to say that any experience I have is all part and parcel of my Christian thinking and behaviour. I hope people are not better Christians if they have been to a T group than if they had not.'

'The effect on my thinking and behaviour as a Christian has been – accept yourself for what you are - need to be completely honest with others and with yourself - need to reject many of the Victorian Christian inhibitions - need for Christians to come more 'alive' - to become more perceptive of the people around them.'

'I now have a clearer broader view of the application of some New Testament words and a renewed belief in getting involved with other selves.'

'I think it convinced me personally that it is only in fact in the context of a knowledge of sins forgiven, of acceptance by Christ, and especially of a knowledge of his love that I can really know the full nature of the love I feel for other people, that I can really know the value of personality, of the individual. As Christianity is basically to do with love - love and knowledge go hand in hand - loving God, loving a person, seems to have a lot to do with knowing them in a very full sense - the training, in increasing in any way our knowledge of ourselves, of others, of the nature of communication, has very valuable possibilities for the Christian.'

'When it comes to assessing the effect on me as a Christian I must confess that I am baffled. I can only think in terms of what I have already mentioned - this greater awareness of people as people. Perhaps my encounter with people is more of a reflection of and a model for my encounter with Christ.'

My behaviour is the more Christian the more fully human it is and the more closely it corresponds to the behaviour of Christ and so in that sense the seminar has helped me to become a better Christian. The seminar has also given me an insight into some of the episodes of Christ's life. It has suggested new emphases on the roles of personal relationships in life. It has opened up new horizons and given me an experience which has enriched my understanding of persons. Besides all that, I enjoyed it!

I am well aware that this kind of study (especially with such small numbers) is often scorned by professional researchers as a mere collection of 'self reports'. I find myself, however, increasingly drawn to Carl Rogers' view that such a study is far more valuable than the traditional 'hard-headed' approach based on doubtful scales of reliability and validity. I believe that the students involved in these seminars attempted to give a deep and honest insight into the nature of the personal experiences which they underwent. I am encouraged and moved by what they say and do not consider it foolish to draw from their reports some confirmation of my own faith both as a Christian and as a group facilitator.