Klaus Lumma

'Problem Solving in a Counselling Group'

an Educreational (1) Experiment at The Aachen College of Social Work.

This experiment started in January 1975 at The Aachen College of Social Work, when I was asked to teach 20 students who were on the way to become client-centred therapists and counsellors.

The subject was 'Problem Solving in a Counselling Group' and the aim of the course was to give the students training for group-counselling, a tool that is flexible enough to be altered according to the experience and creativity of the groupleader.

The students themselves should later be able to teach the whole thing to client-groups in order to introduce them into a strategy of self-help and at the same time to keep them away from becoming emotionally ill by avoiding problems or conflicts. I for my part thought that the whole course was only worthwhile being run, - *if the method was easy enough for everybody - not only academics - to be understood,*

- if it gave the opportunity of self-help in small communities,

- if it attracted everybody so much that they be able to make sound encounter experiences and finally

- if it was allowed to make use of the learning principle 'Be aware of what is going on within you and within your fellow-men.'

I tried to find an educreational way of coping with this subject.

The students were attracted by the course from the start as they could bring in their own problems, have them solved to some extent and at the same time learn something which they could use in their future profession.

I had six sessions of three hours each and it happened that the whole group was able to make use of the Orgonomic Functionalism Principle

   Attraction -   Fusion -   Liberation

The funny thing was that the period of attraction was the longest one and liberation always followed fusion immediately.

I will now describe the six encounter sessions of the course in order to make clear how Educreation can make learning and teaching very easy and at the same time promote Growth Work.

1st Session

The topic of this session was 'communication'.

The students who came were highly motivated as they knew that there would be no test after the course, and that they would not get any certificate.

I thought that it might be helpful to create a warm atmosphere in order to give them the chance not only to be attracted by the course but also by each other as persons.

At first we arranged a little game that gave everybody the chance to speak to whom he liked and about what he liked.

If he didn't know what to speak about he could make use of the question 'Who am I'? and 'What do I expect of this course'? After an hour's talk we sat together in a circle and I could feel the first fusion of this group when everybody without being asked was ready to speak about himself and his expectations. After that I asked them if they were ready to make a clear contract with each other about the way we wanted to communicate in this course. We worked out what everybody wanted to learn and after that we arranged a little rough timetable that looked like this:

2nd Session: *How do I have to speak to make the other listen to me?*

3rd Session: *How can I listen more easily to what others tell me?*

4th Session: *To give feedback and accept it.*

5th Session: *How can I cope with conflicts?*

6th Session: *Feedback on the course.*

After having arranged the timetable I proposed five 'rules' of communication for the time we were together. These rules I had derived from Ruth Cohn's system of Theme-centred Interaction. (2) I had found them very helpful in other situations already.

Our communication-contract was:

Rule 1: We will try to speak most about *ourselves,* not so much about others and not so much about what we've learnt from books. This means: Let everybody try to be responsible for himself, let him be his own chairman.

Rule 2: We will speak about what really interests us. If we are not 'with it', we allow ourselves not to be with it, but then we will speak about the phenomenon: 'What keeps me from being *with* the *group?'*

Rule 3: We will try to say what we *really* want to say, not what is expected of us. If there is nothing to say we are quiet and avoid small-talk.

Rule 4: We won't analyse anybody. We don't want to play psychoanalysts but we will give sound feedback on the behaviour of our fellow students.

Rule 5: We will give our consultant-teacher permission to control us if we have difficulties with holding this communication-contract.

2nd Session:

How do I have to speak to make the other listen to me?

We worked in small groups of 5 students and found that it was easier for us to listen to somebody if he spoke about what was going on within himself, if he sent an 'I-message' instead of a 'You-message' and if he used 'The Language of Acceptance' (3) when starting a conversation.

In order to make everybody clear what was going on within himself *here and now* I proposed a little meditation that went such: I asked everybody to close his eyes and then I said: 'Imagine our group being at work. Who is speaking all the time and what are we speaking about? Now watch it: In a few seconds something will happen in the group that will disturb you. What is it? If you've found it, tell it to your group in your imagination and realise how each member reacts to what you say. Now open your eyes and please tell us about your experience; Do send 'I-messages'.'

The students were fascinated by this little game and they realised that after it their perception was much better. When we left the college everybody was eagerly awaiting our next session.

3rd Session:

How can I listen more easily to what others tell me?

I quickly realised that all members now were ready to learn some listening skills that would be helpful for our main topic of problem solving. So I proposed to divide the session into three parts. At this time of the course the group was very close and everybody was eager to learn something new.

Each student took 10 minutes to read Thoman Gordon's chapter on 'Active Listening'. (4) Then we formed small groups of 3, where I joined in, and we practised Carl Rogers' method of 'Controlled Dialogue' with the topic of Active Listening and it went like this: Two students (A+B) discussed the matter with these rules: A said something; before B was allowed to answer he had to repeat what A had said; then A stated: correct or not correct; when it was correct, B was allowed to go on with his comments; if it was not correct, A repeated what he had said. The third member of the group only worked as supervisor who had to keep an eye on the rules of the game.

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After that everybody was ready to do the first problem-solving work with the partner-centred method of Active Listening.

We split up in groups of two and everybody had 30 minutes to speak about a problem his partner listened and only 'mirrored' what he thought the other might feel while speaking about his problem.

There was a lot of crying during this session, and many very close relationships between the two partners working on a problem, and in the end there was a lot of liberating laughter.

It was the first time in this course that everybody realised the common functioning principle of the three-beat rhyth pattern:

      attraction   -   fusion   -   liberation

We did not have enough time with three hours and as everybody was ready to stay longer in order to learn how I had first come into contact with Educreation, I now really felt more like a friend than a teacher and I told them how Paul Ritter and I had made friends and what I had learnt from him about the dynamic quality of relationships and the whole context of Educreation.

4th Session:

To give feedback and accept it.

In order to get used to giving and accepting feedback in a counselling group I introduced a feedback game that had been created in another encounter group and is called 'The Feedback Chair'.

The game went like this:

Anybody in the group who wanted to get a personal feedback on his behaviour took chair in front of the blackboard where everybody could see him. Of course he was a bit tense, nervous, and at the same time anxious to learn what the others had always been thinking about him but never said.

In order not to make the game too hard in the beginning I made use of a Gestalt-Projection-Technique: Nobody was allowed to say: 'You are...' directly to the person on the Feedback Chair, but he had to send an 'I-message' as if he gave himself feedback.

For example: if somebody basically wanted to say to the student on the Feedback Chair 'You give the impression that you hate to be misunderstood', he said: 'I hate to be misunderstood.' (By the way: while I write down this example, I realise that this example also refers to me).

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While feedback was being given, the student on the chair was not allowed to comment, he only had to listen and when he had heard enough he had the right to stop the game and *then* tell us what he accepted and what he did not.

The funny thing we all found out was the fact that part of each message referred to both the receiver and the sender of the message. The close contact and relationship of all group-members made the game unnecessary in the end: everybody had found his own way to give feedback in a way the receiver really was ready to accept. As somebody said: 'This good relationship in our group makes it unnecessary for me to hide behind a false facade.'

5th Session:

How to cope with conflicts.

From my own group-therapywork I had learnt that conflict- management and problem solving in a group would not be successful if there was a sound relationship between all members of the group, if everybody was really ready to accept his fellow-student and identify with his problem. And I felt that this session was a good one to introduce the problem-solving strategy which I had derived from Thomas Gordon's 'six steps of the no-lose method'. (5) Whereas Gordon made use of six steps I found seven helpful. Here they are:

Step 1: One member of the group tells his problem; if he has difficulties the group helps him *identifying* and *defining* the problem by Active Listening. This step also helps to identify those group-members that are attracted by the given problem and who are therefore anxious to solve it.

Step 2: When the problem is identified and defined the subject tells the group where he wants to get to as a person when he has solved it.

Step 3: Each group member who is attracted by the given problem now proposes a choice of solutions by saying: 'If I were you I would...'

The variety of solutions is listed on the blackboard while the person who has the problem only listens. If he has no new and creative proposal he is not allowed to say anthing during step 3, as the solutions he himself has tried beforehand obviously did not solve the problem because it is still there.

Step 4: Now he gets enough time to evaluate the possible solutions written on the blackboard.

Step 5: He then decides on the best solution.

Step 6: After a decision has been reached he then spells out in detail exactly how it will be implemented. This spelling-out normally gives a great feeling of

liberation. And we have found if the 'client' really does what he has said the problem is often solved.

Step 7: The 'client' makes use of a follow-up evaluation, as not all initial decisions turn out to be good in the long run.

When the students had made use of this strategy they first could not understand why it worked until somebody suggested that the solution of the problem might be the result of the close relationship between the 'client' and the counselling-group; and as anybody could play both roles, client and counsellor, they never experienced feelings of superiority or inferiority.

6th and last Session:

Feedback on the course and how do we go on?

In this session we arranged a recap on the strategy until I was sure that everybody had understood the whole thing. We discussed the whole course again and learnt that to make use of this strategy for problem-solving in a counselling group, the group had basically only to learn three things:

A. To explore my own self and then send 'I-messages'

B. To learn 'Active Listening'

C. To apply the '7 steps' carefully and thoroughly.

The students then gave me feedback by listing things they noticed in me and which they thought a teacher of this method should make use of when teaching a counselling-group: these were that I should -

1. Make sure that nobody is ever repressed, and that no use is ever forced to learn.

2. Stop those people who like to analyse others. Ask them for their own inner reaction on what's going on.

3. If somebody is experiencing strong feelings (crying for example) demonstrate that I accept him.

4. Join in as many group-activities as possible.

5. Give the group a chance to develop sound relationships.

We finally went to a pub and had a good drinking session. The group there decided to go on with this work after the course and arranged a permanent counselling group to get further practice and to have a chance to discuss new problems.

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After this course the subject has continued to be taught at the College in nearly the same way and every time the students and I have learnt something new that enable us to 'grow' a bit.

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References

(1) Educreation means: Education for Creation, Growth and Change. The word has been created by my friend Paul Ritter, author of 'Free Family and Feedback', Journal of Orgonomie Funktionalism and others. (2) Ruth C. Cohn, 'The Theme-centred interactional method', in: The Journal of Group Psychoanalysis and Process. Vol. 2, Nr.2 69/70. (3) see also: Thomas Gordon, How to be an effective Parent and Bridge The Generation Gap, London (William Collins Sons) 1970. (4) Thomas Gordon, p. 64-70. (5) Thomas Gordon.

Prema

Will Grossman
Talks to the Editor

The root of Prema was my interest in co-counselling. I was involved in co-counselling when Harvey Jackins first came over, but found first there wasn't room within the co-counselling thing for any kind of new ideas or experimentation and many of us felt it didn't get far enough. There was the sense that for developing a network of people, co-counselling was a very valuable thing, not using therapists but doing something the people could do by themselves. They could do it in conjuction with therapy or they could do it independently. And there was another thing that influenced me a lot at that time and that was the Enlightenment Intensive with people asking themselves reciprocal questions. The person who introduced Enlightenment Intensive here was Jeff Love. When his wife Wendy came over, when she was doing work with people, she would use different kinds of structures and different kinds of words. Basically they were getting at things that in co-counselling they weren't getting at. For example, one of the things she had me work on was self importance, she thought I was self important and she wanted me to get an understanding of what that was all about. So while working on this question of self importance for seven days, I came to quite a bit of understanding.

When I was in India a lot of my mind was on this, namely what can people do to break through into new spaces, particularly in a network situation and I found myself developing more and more ideas in terms of what people could do. And one of the ideas that really crystallized when I came over here was the feedback circuit which was one of the most important methods in Prema; feedback circuit is basically giving