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Inquiring Teachers?

John Rowan (July, 1977) describes how two identically planned sessions had very different outcomes; the subject - roles, authority and conflict - involved self-examination and subsequent working-out of role problems in groups. He describes how at one point in the second group "the atmosphere became so highly charged with tension that seven or eight people rushed out of the room and formed a spontaneous group on the lawn, unable to stand it any longer."

I would like to describe a similar experience which happened to me when I was invited to lead two seminars with a group of American teachers who were over in this country to study our educational system. The very general title of *Language and Communication* was given to me by the organising tutor but he allowed me the freedom to choose my own topic. I considered discussing various themes, including the development of language and communication skills in early childhood, the teaching of thinking or the fostering of creativity in children. Finally, however, I decided to explore a subject which I find highly relevant to education - the teacher herself and the ways in which her perceptions, her constructs, implicitly say as much as, or more than, the material which consciously she is presenting to the children in her class. This, of course, is not a new idea. Nash (1973) studied the relationship between teachers' attitudes and pupils' performance, and the concept of the 'self-fulfilling prophecy' is a familiar one in education; Thomson (1975), in a study of the ways in which nursery school teachers perceive their pupils, used Kelly's repertory grid technique as a means of exploring how teachers categorise others and what their expectations of pupils are, and argued that 'the terms in which teachers see their pupils strongly influence the ways in which they behave towards them'. When I suggested this theme to the tutor, he agreed that it would make a stimulating and relevant topic for discussion.

The session was planned. There was to be a brief introduction, a discussion about the self and teaching, a practical exercise in which teachers in pairs elicited one another's constructs, and finally an evaluation of the experience. For the practical exercise, I decided to use Hinkle's laddering technique (Bannister and Fransella, 1977), a procedure for eliciting an individual's constructs and from there moving up through his hierarchical construct system until the superordinate constructs have been reached. I had participated several times in similar sessions and found that they gave me new insights into myself; again, I tried the technique with psychology students who had reported that it gave them a stimulating and, in some cases, illuminating experience. Accordingly, I felf reasonably confident that the session would be a successful one.

When the time came, the teachers (all women) came in, sat in a semi-circle and took out their note books. I introduced the subject, explained why I had chosen it and drew from the teachers their ideas on the issues. For

a time the discussion focussed on the application of behaviour modification in the classroom, and on its limitations; people seemed involved and the class appeared to be going well. However, when I invited them to try 'laddering' for themselves, I ran into trouble. I was aware of some hesitation on the part of the group and therefore asked whether there was anybody who felt that she did not want to take part. One immediately said in a loud and determined voice that she for one would definitely *not* do it. We spent some time then (mistakenly, I think) discussing whether we would or would not do the exercise. The tutor, the only man in the room, intervened to point out that we had come here to discuss language and communication, and that we were, after all, professionals. What he implied by this I am not sure. I replied that we were also all *people* and that in this sense it was easy to justify what we were doing in terms of increasing our self-awareness and empathy with the perspective of others. He launched into a rather long monologue about the nature of the group itself, his concern about the splits within the group and, in short, his wish to carry on in the way in which he had been doing in previous sessions. I began to wonder if I should have come into his class at all. At this point, the entire group, with the exception of the one who did not want to participate, asked if they could do the exercise.

While they did this, I talked to the non-participant; she told me that she had been under analysis for some years she was reluctant to reveal certain aspects of herself and that she found such a situation highly threatening. She felt upset at having, in her words, 'disrupted' the group but she hated hypocrisy and had to speak her mind. As we spoke, I did seem to get through to her, and felt that I had reassured her and dispelled her anxiety.

Feedback from the others in the last few minutes of the session was positive but rather cautious. People were reluctant to describe their constructs or to discuss whether or not they had gained any insights into their way of interpreting the world. I suggested that for the second class on the following day we could either continue on the same theme or examine a specific aspect of the curriculum. The group decided to move from themselves to the safer area of the curriculum. The class finished. Two stayed behind to say that they had found it valuable.

A number of tentative conclusions may be drawn:

1. *A group should be clearly aware of the nature of the activity in which they are to participate. This class came expecting a lecture and discussion on the curriculum and found themselves involved in something quite different.*

2. *One must be sensitive to individuals in a group who may perceive the situation as threatening. They may well construe self-examination as an intrusion.*

3. *One must not expect all groups to respond in the same way to experiential sessions as, say, psychology students or people who are sympathetic to the aims of humanistic psychology. Perhaps such an exercise should only be undertaken after sufficient time*

has passed for a trusting relationship to be built up between facilitator and group.

4. *The notion of 'professionalism' seems to be relevant. Professional status and the role of 'expert in dealing with people' may act as a strong barrier against looking at one's own construct system.*

References

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