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A CO-OPERATIVE SELECTION PROCESS FOR A PEER LEARNING COMMUNITY

with help from applicants and members of the Bath Facilitator Styles Programme

We are the initiators and primary facilitators of the Bath Facilitator Styles programme, a two year diploma course in humanistic psychology co-sponsored by the Centre for the Study of Organizational Change and Development at the University of Bath, and the Institute for the Development of Human Potential. This programme is intended to develop as a full peer learning community to explore and develop skills in the basic modalities of humanistic psychology. As a learning community, it is a radical education venture based on the principles of self directed learning and mutual peer support, thus affirming our fundamental human capacities for autonomy and mutuality. The philosophy and ideas which inform this kind of education can be found in the writings of people like Reich, Rogers, Holt, Neill, and more recently John Heron.

Our programme is based on a learning contract which sets out clearly those things to which the course is committed in advance, including statements about objectives, method, content, assessment, the role of facilitators, and selection. The contract includes this statement about method:

This course aims to set up a peer learning community, in which facilitators and participants together identify individual and group learning needs, design a relevant programme to meet these needs, and design ways of assessing individual learning and the course as a whole. Thus decisions about content and method will be increasingly carried out jointly by the course as a community. Certain aspects of the course are pre-determined and non-negotiable, being part of the prior commitment of the facilitators or required

by the IDHP committee; they include the overall course objectives, much of the content of the first year, and the assessment methods. Those aspects to which this course is committed in advance are described in this document, which thus states the course contract, commitment to which is a condition of enrolment on the course.

Another fundamental aspect of the programme is the approach to assessment:

The course is committed in advance to the principle of self, peer, and facilitator assessment, with peer and facilitator assessment being used to refine and develop self assessment.

And so we were concerned that the first "act" of the learning community, the process that really brought it into being, should be congruent with the processes of self directed learning and peer support written into the contract. It seemed to us that we could not start a peer learning community with a unilateral selection process. And so we wrote into the contract:

As far as is possible, participants will be selected by a process of self, peer, and facilitator selection of applicants. At a minimum, criteria for selection will be determined through discussion with applicants. There will be a selection meeting in July 1981, which all applicants should attend.

We wrote that statement about nine months before the programme was due to start: we were emotionally and intellectually committed to this full peer process. But we had no idea how we might actually go about it (although one of us had read an account of such a process in Torbert, 1976): and we had no idea how many people would apply to join the programme, although we were clear that the minimum number we would be happy with was 12, and the maximum 18.

We were quite clear that we did not want to interview people as they applied for the programme, although we were happy to meet with people and talk about our ideas with them. Some people came to see us, almost still expecting that we would

"interview" them and have lots of questions to ask, and were quite surprised when we didn't. Others would ask how we intended to manage the selection process, and we had to say that we didn't know. While we had committed ourselves to it, and saw it as symbolically very important, we didn't really know how to actually do it. And this was OK. As the numbers of people applying to join the programme rose, so we first had enough to run it, then over our maximum number, and in the end to 32 firm applications. It became clear to us that our selection process had to be a real one, and that we really did not have space for all the applicants. We had to find a way to put our commitment into practice.

There were two aspects of design decisions - first, what are the principles on which we will plan the design, and second, what are the details - particularly the arithmetical details of selecting just 18 people out of 32 with no ties or other unnecessary awkwardnesses. Our attitude to the design was, "here is a task to be done together. It is difficult and painful, and we must be careful not to make unnecessary anxiety. But in the end we have to get on with it, go through the pain of it."

In principle, our design for the selection process centred round the notion of making a **claim** for a place. It seemed to us that selection processes are usually about whether people are "good enough" - clever enough, skilful enough, sexy enough, bossy enough, and so on, but that we were more interested as to whether the programme we were offering met the needs of the people who were applying to join. We thought that the notion of a claim meant that different people could base their claim on quite different criteria, and yet it would still be possible for people to make choices as to who had the greater claim. And so our first design principle was that we should find a way to get people to be clear about and express the basis and strength of their claim.

A second design decision was that we would work with small groups and make the selection process over a number of "rounds". We decided that it was far too much to expect a large group of strangers to work together making rational decisions about a stressful topic, but that small groups of five or six should be able to work effectively given an outline structure. And we

wanted to phase the selection process over a number of "rounds" so that we could look at and discuss the emerging composition of the group as a whole, and take steps so that it was not unintentionally lopsided. In the end, after playing about with our arithmetic, we realised that if we worked in six groups over three rounds with each group selecting one person with the highest claim, we would select 18 people; and that if we randomly changed the groups for each round, we would deal with any problems of unfair imbalance in the selection groups.

Our original intent was to conduct the final round not in small groups but in an open "fishbowl". We thought that it would be important to pay particular attention at this stage to the "balance" of the group as a whole, and that it would be important to be able to have an overall view of who was still making a claim. So we thought about asking all those still making a claim to meet in the middle of the room with one of us as facilitator to decide in turn which among them had the highest claims to the remaining places. After a lot of discussion we decided not to do it this way, partly because that process looked so very stressful, almost gladiatorial, and partly because as the number of applicants kept rising during the last few days before the selection meeting, we realised that at this stage we would still have more than half the group still making a claim.

Given these design decisions, we wrote to the applicants as follows:

Dear

Facilitator Styles Programme

We are looking forward to seeing you at the collaborative selection meeting, which will be held on July 2 from 2.00pm to about 5.00pm in the Arts Barn at the University (see attached map). In this letter we are setting out in broad terms the format we plan for this session, so that you can come knowing what to expect.

This will be a genuine selection meeting, since at this date we have 27 applications for the 18 places on the programme - 18 participants being in our view the maximum number that can work as a face to face group.

The selection process for this programme is collaborative for a number of reasons. First, it symbolises the collaborative nature of the programme; it would be incongruent to launch a learning community with a unilateral selection of those who will join it. Second, it is important that you as potential participants have some choice about and knowledge of the people you are committing yourself to work with

for two years. And third, we feel strongly that the criteria and process of selection should be made open, rather than left covert and mystified as is so often the case.

So we see that our rôle as the primary facilitators of the programme is to provide a framework, a design for this session, which will enable this collaborative process to take place as openly and as rationally as possible. We want to emphasise that we do not see it as a process for evaluating individual competence, or as judging personality or skill, or "growth", or anything like that. Our object in selection is to identify which of you as applicants has the greatest claim to a place on the programme, and to ensure that the group is well balanced with regard to age and sex. If we can keep our eye on the notion of claim to a place we should be able to avoid unnecessary distress about selection, while recognising that it is an anxious process of choosing some people and rejecting others.

At the meeting on July 9, after introductions and generally getting to feel a bit easy with one another, we will spend some time exploring the criteria on which people might base a claim (recognising that different people are likely to make very different kinds of claim), and talking about the kind of group composition we prefer. Following this we will work in pairs to give each person a chance to develop their claim as clearly and as fully as possible. The actual selection will take place over three rounds in six small groups, in each round the groups deciding which of their number has the greatest claim to a place. We will change the make up of the small groups in each round, and check the emerging composition of the overall group between each round. Following the selection process we will need to allow time for those not selected to express their feelings and maybe to think about alternatives now open to them. And we plan to end the afternoon with expression of resentments and appreciations of the whole process.

We will assume that you are coming unless we hear from you to the contrary, so please let us know if you do not intend to come. If you cannot come but still wish to make a claim to a place, please make sure you let us have your claim in writing, on tape, or in any other form, before the meeting.

With best wishes

Peter Reason

Elizabeth Adeline

So what actually happened? We met as planned - with us amazingly anxious about whether the process would actually work, and at the same time deeply committed to making it work. People came on time, and we invited them to sit down with a small group and begin to get to know each other. We came together in a circle, and went round presenting basic information about names, where we came from, and how people felt. Many people said they felt anxious, "buzzy", but excited. We then presented our proposed structure for the selection process, repeating what we had put in our letter, and suggested that unless lots of people were dreadfully uncomfortable with it, we should go ahead and try it out: we were clear about wanting to avoid a muddly discussion about how to proceed. And people were willing to go along with our design (at least, no one voiced an objection!).

So we moved on to discuss the notion of a claim to a place. We pointed out again the difference between a claim and an evaluation of a person. We talked about the practical aspects of making a claim - did people have the time, the money; did the course fit their life without excess strain? We raised the question of whether the course fitted their needs, pointing out that it is a broad based experiential course, that it is not "therapy". We pointed out again that different **sorts** of claim might be made, depending on the person's needs. We asked on the negative side if the applicant was too individually distressed to join a peer group. And we tried to point out that there might be a difference between a genuine high claim put forward in a low key manner and an "overwrought" or "over assertive" claim.

We then went on to share as clearly as possible our own biases. We wanted to work with a balanced group with regard to age and sex; with people who could see how the programme would fit into their lives, and with people who wanted to do something with it. We were not happy about having people who join group after group and never seem to transfer anything to their everyday lives. And we were biased in favour of people who had applied early.

After some discussion of all this, we invited people to pair up with someone they didn't know, and to spend ten minutes each in a co-counselling fashion developing their own personal basis for making a claim to a place.

We then began the actual selection process. We invited the applicants to mill around and to form six equal-sized groups. We then suggested that each person briefly state their claim, and then remain silent while the rest of their group discussed negative and positive points; and when everyone's claim had been presented and discussed, they should make a decision - which could be based on consensus, some method of voting, or on chance. We suggested that 40 minutes should be enough.

(In each round one of us joined in with the groups to represent one applicant who was unable to attend the meeting.)

And so it went. People presented their claims, and these were discussed - the discussion was at times quite protracted. When the 40 minutes was up, none of the groups had selected. There was a feeling of - how do we decide? But after a while, several different decision processes emerged, people were chosen, and came to the flip chart and symbolically "signed up". The first round confirmed our feeling that co-operative selection was possible, we could do it, and we could do it on a completely equal basis.

The second round was similar. After a break, people milled again and formed new groups, each one containing one person selected on the first round. This time, with some experience of the approach, and with one person already chosen we could act as facilitator, the process seemed easier and quicker. And at the end, we looked at the composition of the group, and it seemed to be working out reasonably well.

So the first round was getting to grips with the process, and the second round was pretty painless. In the third round, curious things began to happen. We milled again and formed new groups, this time with two people already selected in each. But we found that some of these groups had only one person in them still making a claim, while others had three - because some people had withdrawn their claim, having decided that, after all, the course was not for them, or having found that they couldn't attend a lot of the meetings, or having decided that other people really were submitting claims which they thought much stronger. By the end, five people had withdrawn their claim. So we had to reform the groups so

each had two people still making a claim. And at this time some people were feeling a bit desperate, having put forward their claim twice already, with increasing feeling each time. Two groups could not decide, and were reformed for a second go. And people were fairly exhausted. Choosing between two people, both making strong claims, was much more difficult than choosing one out of six.

But, as we realised later, another peculiar change had happened; while the first selection round was totally co-operative, and the second round nearly so, in the third round, because more people in each group had been selected or had withdrawn, the selection process turned into a unilateral one in which those already selected (and those who had withdrawn to some extent) had the power to select.

So, fairly exhausted by this stage, we gathered into a final circle for a round of resentments and appreciations. And generally we all resented having to choose, not being able to include everyone, that selection is always a distressing business reminding us of early experiences of not being chosen. Specifically we resented the way the last round had become competitive and unilateral. And of course some people bitterly resented not being chosen.

And we appreciated the learning that had come from the process about how we present ourselves and how we assess others; we appreciated the openness of the process, we appreciated that we had been able to reach a decision, and we appreciated the risk taking of everyone involved. And so we closed.

So far we have described the process as we saw it - and we were not actually involved in selecting and being selected. So how did the applicants view the event? Piecing together comments made at the time and also from letters, we can get the following picture. (Most of the people selected made written comments, we had three letters from people not selected, and one person wrote before the meeting to tell us she was not coming because "I don't feel happy about this method of selection and do not wish to participate"; we have also received comments on the draft of this paper which we sent to all those who attended for further comments.

continued on page 135

I guessed this was to simulate the baby's head against the mother's pelvic bone. Whilst practising this I experienced some fear and panic, my breathing changed from deep to short panting breaths, and finally my head arched back and all was quiet. By now we were about to pass through the Panama Canal. I was passing through my birth canal. The night after we came through the Canal I had a dream in which I said that as it was now my daughter's birthday, it was time to cut the umbilical cord.

We were into the Pacific, sailing down the west coast and now there was to be no more communication between the students. However I tried to tell a friend who knew my daughter that today was her (my) birth day, but was only met with a blank stare. I longed for human warmth, to be held, to be touched. I was experiencing my post-natal stage, being well fed to the point of over feeding, without the necessary loving contact. I was desolate.

Grey days followed as we crossed the Equator and landed in Peru. After a week at Callou, the port for Lima, we continued on to Southern Peru, where I left the boat with four other companions. The next day we all went our separate ways and I was left alone in a strange and dangerous world. I remained in Peru for several weeks venturing across the Andes, travelling down a tributary of the Amazon in a rubber dinghy and into the tropical jungle.

It will take me a long time to assimilate what I experienced on this journey, but what I do sense is that some sort of clearing of the psyche has taken place.

Reason and Adeline
continued from page 112

On the whole, people reacted positively to the idea of co-operative selection, and thought we had made the right choice of method. And most people thought that the actual process had been pretty satisfactory, although there were criticisms which we look at later. And of course, **overall emotional reaction** ranged from the very positive to the very negative. Thus some people wrote saying they "felt good", or "feel satisfied with the way we selected

ourselves". At the same time, nearly everyone acknowledged that it had been "tiring and difficult", "exhausting . . . quite a cliffhanger for me . . . a challenge, not an experience I wish to repeat in a hurry". However, those who found it a difficult process still, on the whole, acknowledged it as appropriate: "The selection meeting for me was an anxiety provoking experience, but knowing how personalised the course is likely to be, I think you chose the most honest method of selection".

Of course, some people found it all quite difficult and unpleasant:

I found the whole process very disagreeable.

I have a lot of respect for your decision to work in this way, though I'm left with the feeling of having survived a gruelling ordeal resulting in a place on a hierarchical ladder. It seems as though somewhere I lost the notion of 'claiming a place' and felt the process became a test of 'worth'.

If we look more specifically at the comments, it is clear that it is the **third round of selection** which comes in for the most criticism:

Had the final groups been different, I might well have not got a place, so at that point it became a lottery . . . those chosen first, and maybe second, were chosen properly, but by the end it was a pure toss up.

I resented the power structure in the third round.

The first round was obviously the most relaxed and 'rational', but after that the inevitable pressures of some being 'in' and others being 'out' meant that criteria other than 'rational claim' came into play . . . and I felt a certain unease about being selected in that atmosphere at the end.

I hated the third group, and when I reflect on this I am also angry that two of the rejectors were not going on the course anyway.

We will look at ways of improving the final selection process below. A number of people commented on the impact of the selection process on the **group** which was finally chosen. Of course, we cannot say for sure, since the course has not actually started at the time of writing, but the comments are worth noting:

It became a lottery, and that was not a good start to the course.

I am not sure if you have as balanced a group as you would like.

I have a whole range of feelings - excitement and fear, to name but two, about the 'ownership' of the course. It isn't yours any more, it's everybody's . . .

A lot of concern was expressed during the final resent and appreciate round about the **criteria of selection** which were adopted, and in particular to the fact that there seemed to be prejudice against the two applicants who came from industrial jobs: somehow industry was seen as 'bad', and this weighed heavily against their chances of selection - in fact, neither were selected after cliff-hanging debates.

Some people commented on the amount of **assertiveness** needed for this form of selection:

The whole notion of 'pushing oneself' is obnoxious to me.

I felt, as someone reared to put others first, that making a claim in this way was something that I am only just learning to do in my life, and it seemed something of a handicap in the selection procedure to have to have this essential quality - I had hoped to develop this side of me during the course. Did you consciously set out to have assertive people on the course?

One way of helping people who see themselves as less assertive would be by using the letter of application as a basis for making claims:

*Particularly for people like me (mostly women?) who find it very difficult to assert ourselves and that it "goes right against the grain", reading our letters would have been easier and probably fairer. I found it very difficult to keep in mind the idea of making a claim and became more and more overwhelmed by the competitiveness and anxiety in the situation so that although I feel I **was** rightly selected, I didn't feel I did myself justice at all and was almost surprised to find myself chosen in the second round.*

There are two specific criticisms made of the design of the selection process, that we really did not give enough space for the explorations of the emotions that were being stirred up by the process - laying more emphasis on finding ways to remain as rational as possible; and that offering people more ways of loosening up and dealing with feelings through movement would have been helpful. This leads to another important point which is not stressed in the feedback but seems to us important, that what was important about this co-operative process is that you could **learn** from it whether you were selected or not. People mentioned that they learned about and were able to reassess their own need; that they learned about how they presented themselves and how they made claims for themselves; about how they selected and judged other people, and about how to make decisions co-operatively.

Having selected and categorised people's responses in the above few paragraphs, we feel it worth trying to give the flavour of the whole process by quoting extensively from one applicant who was not selected. We are not putting this forward as a "typical" response, but as an example of the kinds of feelings and responses brought forth by the event.

I found the process extremely interesting and rewarding. I entered into it with an open mind and emerged with the belief that it was well worthwhile and a legitimate way of resolving a very difficult problem - that of avoiding feelings of rejection in a selection process. My personal reactions varied during the afternoon and can be summarised thus:

Initially I was at ease, genuinely feeling 'OK' and interested to see what would happen but reasonably confident that I would be included in the course. This confidence increased during the paired "co-counselling" preparation of a claim because I recognised my own desire to be part of the course and felt that the preparation I had received from the various groups and courses attended made me ready to participate; I also felt I had a strong professional claim.

During the first group session I was uneasy at the distress displayed by some claimants in pressing their claim and felt that there might be a strong element of psychotherapeutic need in their desire to be included. I found this difficult to handle because it introduced a different perception of the nature of the course from the one which attracted me so strongly to it. I was, however, happy with the outcome of the process in that the 'chosen' claimant seemed to me to have an overpowering claim professionally and personally. However, he withdrew and the increasing tension within the group in the subsequent revotes (there had to be two) dismayed me.

The second group was more relaxed and I enjoyed the whole process. I was impressed by the positive feedback given to claimants and the honest, loving assessment of their claims. My own claim was weaker in conviction and expression because I had serious doubts about its nature as perceived by my co-claimants and began to realise that their perceptions were probably more realistic than my own. By this I mean that most claims seemed to be expressed in terms of personal emotional need for the group process - something which I feel I can obtain without attending the course. I was not therefore surprised at the feedback which recognised my own hesitancy and I was shown that my need for the course was not nearly so strong as I had believed initially in both emotional and academic senses.

The final group was somewhat farcical in that there was none of the clearly discernible procedure that had existed

in the first two groups and my claim was not able to be presented very coherently because of the intense desire of the other claimant to add to her claim. By this time I had already decided the course was not very important to me - neither emotionally nor professionally. The former need is very well satisfied by co-counselling and the groups we have established in the Polytechnic, the latter I can satisfy through my own reading and my participation in various short courses.

*So I felt the process had been valuable in allowing me to reassess my needs and to recognise that I was not a strong claimant within the particular parameters being established by the self-selected group. I believe the selection process was humane and effective therefore in selecting a group: my reservation is whether this is the most effective means of selecting a **course**, because your expressed intention is that the course content should be largely negotiable.*

Assessment and Critique

Certainly, given our own feelings about the selection process and the feedback from those who participated in it, we would do the same thing again. We believe we were right to choose that form of selection, and that we were right to offer a structured process within which to make choices. And overall we are very happy with the outcome of the selection.

That being said, we would make some changes: in terms of structure we would certainly change the way the third round was conducted; we would pay more attention to the quality of experience of the emerging selected group; and we would emphasise more the possibilities of learning from the process. And these overall changes would bring about the need for more time, more space to explore and express feelings, and so on. We will explore these issues in more detail.

Clearly the third round was wrong. It was wrong because the emphasis shifted from peer selection to unilateral selection; it was wrong because some people had withdrawn their claims - which we had not foreseen - yet still contributed to the decision

process; it was wrong for some people because of the sense of desperation which had crept in. Interestingly, our original notion of working in a "fishbowl" arrangement with those who were still making a claim to a place, which we rejected as "too gladiatorial", would probably have been a much more appropriate process: we could have worked as facilitators to continue a peer selection process from among those still making a claim (remembering that some people had not been selected but had withdrawn their claim), with some provision for input from those already selected through an "empty chair" arrangement. Certainly this would have taken longer, but we believe it would have been more satisfactory. The problem of having to select a few from a relatively large group actually disappeared for us, but it would be much better to confront this openly than to hide it by splitting into smaller groups at this stage.

Another approach was suggested by one participant after reading the draft:

*The paper does give the flavour of the event for me. I was surprised how a strong feeling of unease came flooding back as I read - a mixture of anticipation, fear and pleasure, and a degree of irresolution and disintegration which is mainly about the third round. I keep returning to the idea which I suggested in earlier comments - that of having three rounds in which everyone presents their claim three times to a different group, and then the selection is made on the total votes - i.e. **everyone** adds up the votes they receive in each round and those with the most votes take first places. I feel this would preserve the feeling of **peer** selection until the end and diminish feelings of "who's in or out" and "now or never" in favour of something more gentle like continuous assessment.*

Secondly, we believe that more attention should have been paid to the group as it was emerging, and to the criteria of selection which were being employed. While we did, after the first two selection rounds, take a rather hurried look at who we had selected, and also check that it was balanced in terms of the obvious criteria of age and sex, we probably didn't explore fully enough at each stage questions like what it felt like to be chosen, how

each person felt about the others in the emerging group, which other people not selected they would like to be in the group, and so on. And it is interesting to debate how much influence those already selected should have on the choices still to be made, and how much this should remain a peer based process among those still making a claim. These issues were not explored.

All this implies that the selection process should be oriented to be seen as much as a learning opportunity as a task to be completed. We had argued from the beginning that the only congruent way to select for a learning community was co-operatively; we could well have argued as well that this "for real" exercise in selection was also a magnificent opportunity for people to learn about themselves on a whole variety of dimensions. The selection process was a learning event in its own right, in which we could have explored issues such as

How do I present myself to others?

How do I evaluate others' claims?

How do we deal with prejudice and projections?

What is the balance between different kinds of claims?

What is the legitimate balance between the assessment of the facilitators, those already selected, and the remaining claimers?

What restimulated distress interferes with my ability to choose rationally?

What is the experience of being part of an emerging group?

How do the facilitators feel about giving away traditional powers?

And so on.

Of course, this would have meant that the selection process would have to be much longer, and that we would have to pay much more attention to the management of distress, to dealing with high and low energy levels, to confronting conflict, and so on.

So our overall evaluation of the process is that it was an excellent first try, and that next time it can be even better.