Conclusion

This introductory paper has outlined the nature of experiential learning and raised some basic issues about its nature and utility. The papers which follow elaborate upon some of these issues and explore the personal meaning of particular learning experiences.

References

Heron, John (1975): Six Category Intervention Analysis. Guildford, Surrey: Human Potential Research Project (mimeo)

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H.L. Gray

THE PAIN OF LEARNING

Little children seem to enjoy learning though they often experience frustration at their lack of success. Adults tend to be more cautious and selective about what they learn and to avoid that which they find too difficult. The consequences of learning are pleasurable, for the most part, but the process of learning involves effort and effort is frequently accompanied by some form of pain or discomfort which seems not to get less with age for many people.

In normal usage, the word "learning" refers to a cerebral or intellectual process of remembering and recalling. We tend to associate learning with school and certain specified subject areas. We may recall that there was also physical learning in games and sport but most of us will forget that the most important learning had little to do with the classroom or sports field; the more important and all embracing learning was the process of "growing up", an essentially emotional process in which physical and intellectual development were parts.

It is strange that the word 'learning' has become almost com-
-pletely dissociated from the experience of its complex reality

and has become a thin single dimension, often measuring "being taught". The idea that learning is the consequence of what others do to us is strong and pervasive. For most of us, "learning" means responding to what others decide and we seldom think of learning as self-determined, self-directed and self-evaluated. We also forget that learning is the whole process of living in its exploration of new things and adjustments to new circumstances.

But however 'open' we are to our life experiences, we develop a healthy protective conservatism. We build and create on the **past.**

I don't think avoidance is a pain for the client though it is an exasperation for the counsellor. You cannot do much with avoidance and it brings little more than discomfort until it becomes flight when there comes the underlying ache of knowing that one is living a lie and a pretence that requires effort to keep up. In practice avoidance may mean periods of temporary respite but in the end it becomes denial or else an owning up when help may not be as readily available as one would wish.

There is a strange pain that comes with acknowledgement and acceptance. As the old concept of self begins to flow away and the new awareness movies in to replace it there is a period of expectancy before completion. I remember once a physical fight with a client in group therapy. We wrestled and not unexpectedly he won and had me on the floor, kneeling over me. "Who won?" I said. "You did", he replied. It took several moments for the truth to dawn on him - he had been so used to seeing himself as a loser that he never recognised when he won. There is a pain in having to admit new responsibilities and take fuller responsibility for oneself. That is the pain that often leads to repression.

In some ways I am not happy about the word "pain". Sometimes ache or discomfort seem better words but whatever word we use, there is no progress, no growth and therefore no learning without it. Challenge is necessary for growth, conflict of some sort seems to be the condition in which challenge and stimulation meet response. Success in tackling them draws on our energies and forces us to move outside the comfort and safety of our present position. To pretend that learning can be painless is a deceit but to accept that it cannot occur without pain means that learning can proceed space.

We construe the world in terms of our evaluated experiences; so that new experiences have to be assessed against the old. We consciously and positively respond when we find there is no threat to our established order, but when we perceive that our preferred and established world is likely to change, we resist often very fiercely.

A degree of conservatism is absolutely essential to our personal stability. Anyone who always blows with the wind is unlikely to survive because he has no emotional base for making evaluations. We cannot believe everything we are told or accept every opinion as valid, certainly not as valid for us. Hence to respond to change influences in a positive way means that we must be highly reflective. If we simply resist change, the effect is distinctive because we build nothing up that is an adequate response to the challenge; simply resisting is an excessive drain on our energies.

People who are easily influenced by others or by circumstances, who give in quickly to challenges and who blindly follow fashions are living at a superficial level and are likely to be easily dissatisfied and perhaps deeply disturbed. Few changes bring little emotional reward. For a change to be emotionally effective and hence internalised it must be hard fought for. No worthwhile change happens without struggle and there are no useful challenges without confrontation.

In counselling and psychotherapy we are usually concerned with changes of some magnitude and significance for the client at a point where normal emotional development has become impeded. A client is usually aware of the emotional nature of his problem though he cannot discover the specific blockage. As therapy proceeds, the counsellor perceives increasing resistance as he approaches the area of concern and here is usually found the greatest resistance and strongest denial on the part of the client.

There are various ways in which resistance to learning in the therapeutic situation occurs and they are all painful in some measure. But they all reflect the normal problem of learning and associated discomfort or pain. As I have indicated, all learning represents a challenge to previous learning, either by contradicting what we already know or by expanding it in an acceptable way. The more we learn, the more there is to learn and the more demanding the activity becomes. To have to change one's view is at best a regret and sometimes a trauma because the point

of learning is also the point of possible failure. By failure I mean that step beyond which we already have knowledge or competence and more into the unknown. That is why learning is both exciting and frightening. When people (children or adults) are pushed beyond their first step into increasing areas of risk, they face possible failure they may d withdraw fr

possible failure they may get hurt and withdraw from the fight. Most of us give up not because we cannot do something but because we find we are unable eventually to face the implications.

In therapy, the gap between success and failure is huge. The client has moved into a morass well beyond the situation where he could cope well into one where he is lost. He may recognise that he is lost and be able to communicate such with his counsellor so that they can plan a way back to secure ground. But quite often he has created a false world to explain away his being lost and the counsellor can only with difficulty make contact and then try to bring him back. Frequently there are emotional battles between therapist and client - the emotional wrestling that marks the cathartic process of therapy.

I do not believe that all learning is characterised by major crises but certainly significant stages of learning are marked by crises of some sort. Some learning occurs vicariously in that other group members may empathise with a colleague who is working through a problem. Crises are emotionally very demanding on both the client and the counsellor and hence as much a learning experience for the one as the other. Working with a client means moving into new areas, previously no-go areas and this demands much risk-taking though the training of the counsellor ensures that the risks are always containable. Indeed, one cannot engage in therapy or counselling without entry into areas of emotional risk.

In my experience the most substantial blocks to learning and hence the areas of greatest pain are intellectual. I see torrents of words as a defence against feelings, especially when the words are about feelings but feelings kept at the intellectual level. It is difficult to break through words with words but the pain for a client to realise that words on which he relies so much are an avoidance is perhaps the greatest pain of all. Hiding behind words is like shutting your eyes and thinking no one can see you.

The pain of denial must be the next most common pain. To deny the "truth" about oneself and to discover that one's facade has been seen for what it is, is a very public humiliation. Most therapy is concerned with the discovery of the self and in our society true selves are incredibly overlaid with one's own or social expectations. It is not just that discovery is painful; acceptance may also be almost an admission of guilt. Discovering one's true personality, for example, may be to move from an area of social security to social exposure. Finding that one is homosexual is not enough, one must additionally cope with the social consequences. Pain is added to pain.

Anne

REFLECTIONS ON A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

This account of a particularly important learning experience - certainly a piece of experiential learning - is written in a style similar to Virginia Axeline's Dibs - In Search of Self *(Penguin). It recounts "Anne's" reactions to holidaying briefly with her counsellor and family. The holiday location was a large house in the country with a large fruit and vegetable garden, a dozen hens and a couple of horses.*

It was like being in a different sort of playroom. This was a bigger one, with more people in it, and I stayed for longer. It had lots of space, different shapes and sizes, variations of light and shade, brightness and darkness; and the shapes and the shades kept changing.

And now the playroom has gone: there are tears in its place. So many tears. They keep welling up again and again. It seems to be a spring that never dries up, a spring of much accumulated unhappiness.

The playroom has hens in it, hungry nattering hens, and tomatoes, and beans, and blackberries, and elderberries, and a cat. There was grass there and flowers and trees and birds, and buzzing flies, and flies that bit, and nettles that stung. There were bookshops there, lots of them, and trains, and pubs with children and a slide and a climbing frame and drinks, and there were cows and sheep and horses, and views of rolling countryside and steep