EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING WITH ADULTS

by

Harry Gray

As a term, 'experiential learning' seems to have a multitude of meanings, not all of them compatible; but to me it refers to a process of learning by reflection on the immediate past within a group and sometimes by an individual in a tutorial or counselling situation. Most of the time I work with groups of people whose purpose is to learn about something specific but complex. As I use it, the method is based on the T-Group or Encounter Group concept and draws on the skills of Rogerian and Gestalt counselling - a hybrid which works for me but may cause purists to frown. I have occasionally used T.A. techniques where they have seemed helpful but the process as a whole has also been described to me as 'doing philosophy' and as such seen as influenced by Wittgenstein by my students who have a philosophy background. At any rate, from a psychological view point it falls centrally within the area of Humanistic Philosophy.

Although much of my work is concerned with helping students to understand organisations better in a number of different ways (Gray, 1976), I have used experiential method in a number of other learning situations over the last twenty years. In fact the very first time I used the method to facilitate learning was when I was lecturing mature students in teacher training in English and I was coming to terms with the reality of adult learning. It was at this time that I became aware of the importance not of teaching but of helping people to learn; this was a major and critical shift in my understanding of the learning process. Subsequently, I have used the method to help students to understand organisational behaviour in its many forms, to learn leadership skills, counselling, in personal development groups and, for organisational problem solving, the identification of training needs, management development, teacher training and literary appreciation.

The essence of the approach is to help the student to reflect on their

own recent experience (where relevant, relating it to past life experience) by trying to understand how understanding occurs and in what intellectual frameworks and language. Each individual has their own way of understanding events and ascribing meaning to them and shared understanding comes only as a consequence of individual understanding. The teacher acts as a facilitator in the reflexive and reflective process by turning questions and statements back on the student for them to explain for themself. In the group, other members help in the process of concentrating on personal meanings and collective understanding becomes possible (i.e. shared meaning) when the individual no longer tries to speak for others. Most of my classes would be of three hours duration for a period of ten or twelve weeks; or a residential period of over twenty hours. Only very occasionally would I use a single session of three hours and that would be for demonstration purposes.

I discovered I could use the method in the first instance with a class of adult students who had a great deal of life experience but not very much formal academic training. The occasion was a poetry lesson with some poems by Philip Larkin. My previous approach had been to talk them through the main points, asking questions and giving 'correct' answers according to my personal schedule for poetry appreciation. This method, however, always put them at a disadvantage and placed me in a superior position; it turned the enjoyment of poetry into a sort of quiz game with some high scorers and many low scorers. And it meant the poetry lesson was in danger of becoming an ego trip for me. It also meant I had to fudge parts of the poem I didn't understand; it was my interpretation of the poem they were learning not their own. But when I let them read the poem and talk about it themselves, without prompting from me, I found they were able to work with the text in a much more profound and meaningful way. I realised that didactic teaching gets in the way of student learning, it does not facilitate it. Asking for clarification about the meaning they gave the poem was a much more helpful and rewarding method of teaching and it led to student ownership of learning.

If teaching poetry could be successful in this way, it seemed likely that learning about other things could be facilitated in the same manner. Students would have a greater personal sense of achievement, would experience ownership of what they had done, and would be empowered to follow up learning on their own with greater confidence. Of course, the issue of authority in knowledge is raised and there is the question that some would ask about where the standards and criteria of evaluation are if all learning is personal. But of course, the experiential method is the best way of tackling the problem of authority because it deals most effectively with the question of objectivity and subjectivity. Objectivity cannot be determined without knowing what the relevant subjective experiences are; students must examine closely what they experience and only then can they be objective about what others experience. I am assuming here, of

course, that learning is a total experience, holistic rather than partial.

My major use of experiential learning has been in areas of personal development - of managers, teachers, social workers, clergymen, for the most part. The purpose has been to improve professional performance through improving the quality of personal insight. A manager, teacher etc. who understands themself better will perform better in their job; that is the basic rationale for experiential 'training' which in this context is simply a more closely focused term than education. One would have thought that members of the caring professions would welcome the opportunity for learning by personal reflection, but this is unfortunately not always so and there are a number of problems or blocks to learning that some people experience. Increasing knowledge of oneself through personal reflection can be a very painful process for some people and is always accompanied by some discomfort for everyone. (Gray, 1982).

I have already mentioned the first of these problems though in a somewhat different context - the problem of authority. Adults can be exceedingly troubled by questions of authority. On the one hand they want to reject authority figures and false gods while on the other they want assurance, particularly about correctness and things being 'right'. Related to this is a concern for the credentials of the teacher - to know that they are properly qualified and experienced to teach. School teachers are probably the most credential conscious students and are very sensitive about the **quantity** of teaching experience 'in schools' their lecturers have. "Have you ever actually taught in a school?" is often a first question. (This demand for credentials seems to be accepted even by many therapists and trainers in the Humanistic Psychology tradition; they often designate themselves as 'trained with - . . .'. Is this not more than just an indicatio of their technique?)

Experiential learning thougl 'cognitive' in result works at anc through the affective level o awareness. Surprisingly, thi presents most adults with littl problem with the consequence that there is always a significant number - often a majority - of students who are in sympathy with the method. But for some, the difficulty of reaching the affective level is insuperable and even after ten hours they are unable to recognise the validity of a method concerned with feelings before ideas. Those who find it difficult to recognise their feelings or even acknowledge that they have them as distinct from thoughts turn to intellectualism as a defence; that is, they become embroiled in casuistry in order to deny the emotional side to their experience. But true 'intellectuals' (that is, those who enjoy using their minds) do not find difficulty sinc they can see that the reflectiv process is a rigorous intellectual process with its own well-defined techniques. Indeed, scientists and philosophers often find experiential learning exceptionally congenial. On the other hand the 'cerebral' individual who hides from

acknowledging their feelings is often authoritarian and moralistic but claiming an empathy and altruism other members of the group do not recognise.

Experiential learning is directed towards improving the autonomy of the individual as learner, helping them to stand up for their own opinions and experience and move into risky areas with confidence. It is this that presents most adults with problems even when they espouse the method. Within the group individual autonomy is supported by the group and so in fact becomes mutuality! The problem only becomes acute when the individual is out of the group back at home or at work. Perhaps the implementation stage is the critical one and for it little help can be given in the group itself - each person must go out and adventure alone.

It is sometimes held as a difficulty with the concept of experiental learning that the term 'learning' has a different meaning from the conventional one. People ask the question "What have we learned? What are we supposed to learn?" But there is no quantitative answer because 'What' is only a part of all learning. It is an accident of our educational history that content has been pared off from learning and made the sole constituent. Real learning is a much more complex activity of which process is the much larger part and it is experiential learning that redresses this historic imbalance. For learning is not just 'what' but also and more importantly 'how'; the how embraces the what. One does not ask "What does a tree grow?" but "How does a tree grow?" if one wants to 'know' about trees and growth. Adults find this new truth about learning both exciting and frightening because it confronts them with a whole new value system that runs counter to much received and popular wisdom.

It is the initial reluctance to grasp this alternative meaning to learning that presents many adults with an initial learning problem. Many cannot apply it outside the experiential group because it is hard to relate it to the expectations about learning in ordinary social life which is still about facts and information, data and technical skills perceived as material abstractions. But usually it is not long before the real possibilities of applying experiential learning to the realities of everyday life become apparent. It is always a pleasure to receive positive feedback after a programme that significant personal learning ('growth') has occurred.

A fundamental element in the process of learning experientially is pain (Gray, 1982). Much experiential learning, especially in the early stages, is a matter of unlearning which leads to defensive blockages to resist personal change in both perceptualising and conceptualising. People are unwilling to change their behaviour and begin by seeking confirmation of where they already stand; they want to be confirmed in their current attitudes and behaviour not made to alter them. Even when one wants to change, the required change is always in some measure at odds with what one feels most comfortable with. Yet most adults are

exhilarated by learning experientially and once they have begun to experience the quality of self-awareness that is possible, they become committed to the process and very supportive of one another.

One of the most important reasons for using experiential methods of the kind described here is that people do not learn vicariously. One can, of course, be aided in the process of someone else's learning experience in the same group but being told about it at second hand will not do; you must be there and empathy must be complete. Sometimes a group member will try to avoid the public manifestation of the learning process demanded (i.e. required) by the method but this cannot be done. Everyone must have their turn working with the energies and resources of the group; learning by oneself is not possible in the group. This may be why some people after a group has finished feel that they did not really have a full and satisfying experience even though a great deal of work was done with other group members.

Experiential learning presents most (educational) institutions with a problem. Institutions like to be able to control the learning activities that take place within them and they do this by quantification, comparison and external validation. It is difficult to do this with experiential learning because it is so personal and incapable of being compared from person to person. You cannot put students in rank order or point to the specific skills they have learned; aims and objectives have little meaning in experiential learning programmes because outcomes are not amenable of predetermination of subsequent measurement. The only conventionally recognisable element is the professional and academic standing of the practitioner, the teacher themself. Hence most experiential programmes are advertised under some other guise and the method is introduced by stealth and without publicity. Not surprisingly when it is successful the students are exceedingly committed to it and almost fervent in its support.

Nevertheless experiential learning is here to stay, having reached parts of the educational system other methods cannot reach. It is strong in management development, the New Further Education, the various forms of vocational preparation and even some VIS schemes. But it is not always recognised - which may well be an advantage. For adults it is the natural method for it is the only one that offers the dignity of personal responsibility and supports each learner in the process of becoming confident in themself as the real authority for what they learn. After a course based in experiential method individuals feel more in charge of their own world - and this must surely be the worthiest aim of any form of education.

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