

## *Dynamics of Instructional Groups*

**Failure of the agent or leader to understand group interactions will directly affect potential success of learning experiences**

LINNEA B. HOLLAND

AS WORKERS engaged in educational activities, Extension personnel and other adult educators are all conversant, to some degree at least, with the field of group dynamics. We are, therefore, aware that certain roles and tasks are often assumed by individual members of small groups. We also realize that a number of these roles *must* be assumed if group goals are to be achieved and if the group as a whole is to have a satisfying experience. Included are such tasks as initiating, contributing, summarizing, integrating, gate-keeping, compromising, opinion seeking, and opinion giving—all of which are vital for group maintenance and the eventual achievement of group goals. At times, certain group members have assumed roles which block group action—they act as dominators or pleaders of special interest.

Sometimes overlooked, however, is the fact that group forces are at work in many teaching/learning situations as well as in other group formations. Failure on the part of the instructor, whether agent or leader, to understand the group interactions involved will directly affect the potential success of the learning experience. We need to realize that instructional groups are subject to many of the same principles which affect the productivity of other types of groups. This paper will explore some of the characteristics and dynamics of groups formed for the purpose of teaching and learning. The discussion will have particular application to circumstances that may exist when new participants join an established group, to newly formed groups, and to a variety of other situations.

It should be kept in mind that these ideas have particular rele-

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LINNEA B. HOLLAND is Extension Educationist, Division of Extension Research and Training, Federal Extension Service, Washington, D.C.

vance in situations where group members may have something less than a clear and precise grasp of what they wish to learn and something less than an overpowering motivation to obtain the information. Such is often the situation in which Extension personnel and other adult educators function. And it should be noted that these ideas apply to group learning situations involving professional staff as well as lay clientele.

Although instructional groups are common to all levels of learning, including that of adult education, they differ from other groups in a number of ways. They are usually artificial in that the members are not drawn together solely by "attractiveness" or "prestige" factors of group goals. Instead they come together for purposes of acquiring new information or new skills. Although other groups may "learn" as an incidental part of on-going activities, this is not their main purpose. As a result, the learner may find himself in a rather unnatural situation. If he is new to Extension clientele, other members of the group as well as the leader may be a stranger to him (if not as an acquaintance, as a participant in a learning situation); even if members of the instructional group are already acquainted with one another and with the leader (which is the more usual state of affairs in Cooperative Extension work), the situation is still artificial to the extent that the goals, the procedures by which they will be achieved, and the subject content may have been specified in advance by an "outside" authority. The learner must then be able to gear his own needs, goals, and attitudes to the pre-planned, prescribed situation in which he finds himself. This holds whether learners are lay people or professionals.

It is the instructor's responsibility to understand group forces which may develop and to organize them in such a way as to make their influence a positive and, if possible, a beneficial factor. In order to maximize learning potential, there are certain minimum things which an instructor needs to know about his group.

#### GROUP STRUCTURE

The instructor, first of all, must be aware of the four types of structure which develop in most groups. According to the National Society for the Study of Education,<sup>1</sup> these are as follows: (1) problem-solving and work relationships; (2) authority relationships; (3) social-acceptance relationships; and (4) social-influence relation-

<sup>1</sup> Gale E. Jensen, "The Sociopsychological Structure of the Instructional Group," in *The Dynamics of Instructional Groups*, 59th Yearbook, Part II, National Society for the Study of Education (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 92-94.

ships (sometimes referred to as the power relationships or power structure).

Although the first of these four dimensions (problem-solving and work relationships) is the most crucial to effective learning, it is dependent on the quality of the other three dimensions. If social or authority relationships, for instance, have an adverse effect on motivation or participation, the right kind of problem-solving relationships cannot be established.

The authority relationship has an immediate and strong influence on the kind and amount of participation which emerges from the group. A number of studies have shown clearly that different motivational responses can be produced by changing the pattern of authority.<sup>2</sup> The potential despotism of the teacher/leader can become a threat to the effective functioning of the group, and although very often the instructor *unconsciously* sets the pattern of authority relationships, this can nevertheless inhibit participation and prevent decision making—if learners do not feel free to make suggestions.

The autonomy of adults is of great importance. This fact places a special responsibility on the instructor of adults. He must be careful not to violate the status and recognition which his “students” enjoy in their own respective circles of occupation and society. “He must not use his authority in a coercive or arbitrary manner should adults disagree with proposed learning goals or instructional procedures. This is another point at which the use of authority on the part of the instructor may block the whole learning process or dissipate a favorable learning situation.”<sup>3</sup>

The recognition of adult autonomy implies other changes in procedure for the instructor, whether in formal course work or informal Extension educational endeavors. Adults, for example, must be free to leave an instructional group if they feel that the learning experience does not contribute to their personal needs or to the problems present in their own life situations. They must also be allowed to disagree with the instructor when and if his statements appear contrary to their own previous experiences or empirical con-

<sup>2</sup> See study by Lewin, Lippitt, and White on experimental manipulation of group atmosphere, as cited in Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander (eds.), *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory* (Evanston: Row, Peterson and Company, second edition, 1960), pp. 27-29. For summaries of studies on authoritarianism and its effect on learning, see N. L. Gage (ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1963), pp. 474-77. In the same volume, research by Witall on social-emotional climate is discussed in some detail (see pp. 267-68).

<sup>3</sup> Gale E. Jensen, “Socio-Psychological Foundations of Adult Learning,” *Psychology of Adults* (Washington, D.C.: Adult Education Association of the U.S.A., 1963), p. 28.

clusions; each adult will have the authority of experience over even the instructor in certain subject areas. Adults must be allowed freedom to participate in whatever degree they feel able in the group activities. "No disrespect must be shown to adult students who feel that they are unable or not ready to participate in a learning venture."<sup>4</sup>

#### *Need for Social Acceptance*

Social-acceptance relationships also have a direct effect upon a group member's sense of freedom to participate. If he does not perceive or feel that he is accepted and valued by other members of the group, his emotional response may result in restricted participation. The need to be approved is so central to human life that whenever it is denied, some degree of emotional disturbance results and the group member, thus denied, attempts to rectify the situation or to defend himself against further loss.

The main basis for social acceptance within an instructional group should be willingness and ability to perform assigned work roles and to take part in the problem-solving activities. In adult groups, however, interactions often are the result of other factors, and the management or guidance of these interactions becomes highly significant for the instructor.

Jensen believes that because adults are especially sensitive to maintaining and enhancing their social worth and success, they are inclined to make careful assessments of one another before initiating interaction. On the basis of these assessments, some persons may be socially acceptable and eligible for interaction, while others may not. He says that

the effect of these interactions is to reveal which persons are acceptable to one another and to create sub-groups in an instructional situation. . . . If this type of interaction fractionates an instructional group and sets up barriers between its adult members, the probabilities of creating effective problem-solving and task interactions are greatly reduced.<sup>5</sup>

Adults have a deep need to share personal or private perceptions and feelings with one another. In an instructional situation, many occasions arise when there is a need to examine and assess personal reactions to the learning experience through interaction with other members of the group. The person in authority needs to recognize the importance of this type of interaction and to allow for its gratification within the group framework.<sup>6</sup> Unless social accept-

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

ance needs are satisfied, internal group problems will develop which will affect working relationships.

### *Social-Influence Relationships*

In many instructional groups, the leader is unaware of the social-influence, or power, relationships between class members. If these are not recognized or channeled, it is often possible for group members to so influence the behavior of other members that energies are directed toward activities which actually sabotage the attainment of the learning objectives.

Adult students especially have great power to reward and punish each other and, therefore, have considerable influence in the establishment of behavior norms. Such interactions can result in more effective learning, but they can also act in a negative manner and actually reduce the probabilities of attaining the new behavior specified by the instructional goals. For this reason, the instructor of adults must be aware of these kinds of interactions and be prepared to guide them in a manner which will facilitate rather than impede the necessary problem-solving and task functions.

Misunderstanding, anxiety, and opposition are likely to arise in group learning situations. There must be established ways, sometimes even a formal structure, by which these feelings can be brought to attention and resolved. Without such channels they will consolidate into organized resistance and effectively block the learning process.<sup>7</sup>

### THE INTERACTION PROCESS

Prerequisite to the management of the group process is the development of sensitivity to the status of the four structural dimensions previously cited and the realization that in some groups it may be necessary to give as much attention to their management as to the subject-matter content itself.

Certain variables greatly influence the effectiveness of group learning. Some of these can be managed by the instructor, while others may be beyond the teacher's control. One of these appears to be the nature of and relationship between cooperation and competition. Research seems to indicate that learning is favorably affected by cooperation and impaired by intense or excessive competition.<sup>8</sup> However, in this context the existence of one of these con-

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> The effects of cooperation and competition upon group processes as revealed in research studies by Morton Deutsch are presented in detail in Cartwright and Zander, *op. cit.*, pp. 414-48.

cepts in a learning situation is assumed to depend on the exclusion of the other. This premise may be questionable; consequently, this idea may be viewed more realistically and understandably in terms of interaction.

The nature of interaction becomes particularly crucial for the adult learner since he brings to the learning situation a fear of losing status or prestige through a public display of ignorance. The existence of a potential for the arousal of fear, anxiety, and hostility (which cannot be channeled into permissible forms of expression) must be redirected so as to encourage learning by building self-confidence and feelings of personal worth. Even the most capable adult learner can find the learning situation an insecure place if he is threatened by the constant necessity to defend his own ideas and opinions; the preservation of his own autonomy then becomes a goal in itself. Jenkins says it is

no wonder so little learning is retained; it is acquired in an environment loaded with threat. And, as we do in other situations, we tend to discard as rapidly as we can things which we associate with unpleasant experiences. The emotional tone of the learning situation colors the material which is being learned.<sup>9</sup>

### *Atmosphere*

Also of major importance to successful group learning is the idea of atmosphere, sometimes referred to as group climate or group morale. This is determined to a great extent by the leader/instructor, particularly in the early stages of a group's development. Whether a discussion group, an inservice training situation, or a Home Demonstration meeting, an open, permissive, supportive attitude on the part of the leader will create conditions most favorable to learning. Even in a lecture-type situation, a friendly and accepting attitude will result in more questions being asked, or in more requests for detail and clarification. An authoritarian or non-receptive attitude, on the other hand, can discourage participation and, in fact, result in greater withdrawal of individual members.

It is an acknowledged principle that the degree of learning is directly related to the degree of involvement in the learning situation. Self-involvement occurs to the extent that the learner feels accepted, both by leader and by fellow group members. The leader who is successful in developing a permissive and supportive climate

<sup>9</sup> David H. Jenkins, "Conditions Underlying Good Learning," in Marilyn V. Miller (ed.), *On Teaching Adults: An Anthology* (Chicago: Center for the Study of Liberal Education for Adults, 1960), p. 57.

also develops a feeling of acceptance for everyone, a willingness to listen to the remarks of others, and a lack of fear on the part of any individual to publicly state his own opinions. Self-initiated activity occurs more readily; members grow and develop as autonomous persons. There is release of tension; group members feel comfortable; and if they sense that they are accepted, they reach out in counter-acceptance and counter-empathy toward other members. A breakdown in feelings of security will show itself immediately in a restriction of communication. Statements will become more guarded; members will interact less frequently. They will search for acceptable things to say and will avoid communicating anything they think might find disfavor with the leader.

The climate and rapport should be such that no member of the group will feel embarrassed at volunteering, but also will not feel obligated to do so if he is not ready. Maintenance of such an atmosphere should be one of the instructor's prime roles. If an atmosphere of mutual confidence and natural interchange can be established, participation will increase and learning will proceed with ease.

Feedback, or knowledge of results, is a potent reinforcer in learning. Opportunities for providing feedback must be included in the procedures of the instructional group. Individual members need to be kept informed about their progress as learners (especially if they are not able to make immediate and visible application of the information). And the group as a whole also needs appraisal from time to time as to its advancement toward goal achievement and its understanding of the group method as an educational medium. Such feedback can be furnished by individual group members as well as by the instructor if this has previously been agreed upon as a group policy.

### *Group Composition*

The size and composition of a group has a direct bearing on interactions. Discussion, for instance, begins to deteriorate if there are more than thirty in a discussion group. The ideal group size for maximum participation and, therefore, maximum individual learning is one which is large enough to insure interaction between members but small enough so that each individual can participate and contribute.

The quality of learning may also be affected, to some degree, by its composition. Heterogeneous groups are more creative than homogeneous groups in problem-solving situations and produce a

greater variety of alternative solutions.<sup>10</sup> Groupings by ability, personality, backgrounds, previous experience, or educational level can sometimes be profitable if the instructor is aware of such characteristics and understands their effect on the interactions of the instructional group.<sup>11</sup>

#### SUMMARY

There is an ever-increasing fund of knowledge from behavioral science research on the socio-psychological properties of face-to-face groups. As educators, we need to understand the implications of these research findings for the instructional-type groups with which we work. Although the instructional group is somewhat artificial, it is nevertheless subject to some of the same principles which govern the productivity of all other groups.

Interactions among and between student members of these groups directly affect the quality of learning. It becomes the instructor's responsibility to so manage and so guide the interaction process that each member of the group is afforded equal opportunity to achieve the learning objectives without menace to individual autonomy or feelings of social worth.

<sup>10</sup> See discussion of homogeneous vs. heterogeneous grouping in Raymond G. Kuhlen (ed.), *Psychological Backgrounds of Adult Education* (Chicago: Center for the Study of Liberal Education for Adults, 1963), pp. 126-28.

<sup>11</sup> Longest discusses this idea in relation to pre-determined participation. See James W. Longest, "Group Formation for Teaching," in this issue of the *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, pp. 143-51.

OPEN-MINDEDNESS is not empty-headedness. It means having a desire to learn as well as having freedom from prejudice, partisanship and other mind-closing habits. If you have an open mind you are not content to uncover errors: you go a step farther in an attempt to establish true opinion to take their place. And when you come upon something excellent you like it, no matter whose it is.

—from *The Royal Bank of Canada Monthly Letter*  
(November, 1963).

THINGS CANNOT always go your way. Learn to accept in silence the minor aggravations, cultivate taciturnity and consume your own smoke with an extra draught of hard work, so that those about you may not be annoyed with the dust and soot of your complaints.

—from SIR WILLIAM OSLER as quoted in *Forbes*, XCI  
(January 1, 1963), 110.