The Development of Interaction as an Approach to Training

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"TRAINING is not for knowing more but for behaving differently" (1). So many papers and books have been written about training that another one cannot expect to make any real contribution. If anything can be said in defense of this paper, it is that I have found the style of training discussed satisfactory in training workers in British and Australian dependencies in the South Pacific area, and these workers were similar in category and function to community health aides in the United States.

The philosophy underlying this approach to training emphasizes that the subjective perception of the situation forms the active influence not only on learning but also on subsequent behavior relative to the tasks discussed. Facts become important to the trainee only as they are experienced or discerned as having meaning and application within the world of the trainee. Information presented outside of the matrix of subjective meaning or emotional experiences has little reality and, unless reinforced externally, may soon be forgotten.

There are vast training organizations, in particular the Army and the airline companies,

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who would not agree with this philosophy. They follow programed learning with highly satisfactory results. There is, however, a subtle difference between training a comparatively unskilled person to operate a radar detection device and training a similarly unskilled person to interpret health services to potential consumers in such a way that the potential consumer becomes a regular user of health services. The difference is that one trainee has to deal with a highly predictable electronic mechanism while the other has to interact with a highly unpredictable member of the human race. To one trainee a breakdown indicates a relay to a standby unit, while to the other a breakdown in relationships may mean loss of service to a family, or even to a whole community, if the interpersonal situation is serious.

These two approaches, programed learning and what I will call "interaction development," are not alternative methods of training for any given situation. They differ in philosophy and methodology, and they differ also in their areas of effective application.

This paper pursues the method of interaction development as a training model suitable for people whose skills are in cultural understanding and communication, rather than in technology, and whose purpose within the health team is to interpret and to educate—to lead persons in the client system to understand and to use the professional services available to them

and to lead the professional to understand the culture, expectations, and reactions of the client system.

Training Basis and Relationships

A training program is generally based on an organizational problem, need, or purpose requiring skill or knowledge beyond that presently available. Such a problem or need is normally defined by the organization. When the institution exists to provide services to a particular community, as is true of most health agencies, one might ask if the needs and purposes of the service—as seen by the consumers of the service—should also have some weight in defining training requirements. Moore (2) has submitted a model for involving community members in the selection of indigenous personnel for family planning clinics, but I am unaware of any suggestion in the literature that community members might express their interest in the way people might best be trained to serve them.

A third group whose needs and purposes might conceivably be given some consideration in the training program are the trainees themselves. Having been chosen for training indicates that some judgment has been made concerning their capacities (they are worth training) and their lack of preparation (they do not have the required skills or knowledge).

Most persons smile sagely at the outdated tabula rasa concept, yet much training is conducted on the basic assumption that the trainee has nothing to say about his or her training, nor indeed should they. There is a fourth figure in this milieu whose influence is only recently recognized. "The attitude of the professional trainer, his style, background, and ideology, will be a decisive element in overcoming the communication barrier which can exist between professionals and nonprofessionals" (3, 4).

We might therefore conceptualize the situation as a triangle. Each group has needs and problems presumably related by the training process, if in no other way. The institution or agency exists because of the presumed needs of the community, and the trainees exist because of the needs of the agency, but they also maintain a relationship with the agency which presumably provides some satisfaction to their own

needs. All situations, when service agencies seek to train people for involvement with their client community, take on some of the complexity represented in this triangle of relationships.
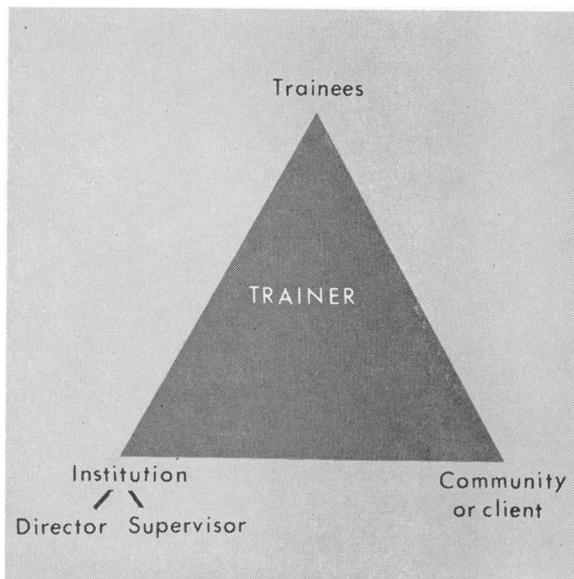
Action Stages of the Training Program

Given that the agency has recognized a particular problem, has analyzed it, has defined the problem adequately, and, in accepting a particular solution or approach, has decided to support a training program for new or existing staff, the action stages of the training program can begin.

Any training effort worth the name will demonstrate three phases or stages.
1. Preparation for the course
2. The actual training process
3. Post-training feedback and review
Each aspect is no more or less important than the other. Each will take time, money, and effort on the part of the trainer, especially time, and will demand its own peculiar skills and competencies.

Preparing for Training

Preparation for a training course can evolve from a crisis within the agency engendered by an influx of new workers or an end-of-fiscal-year nest egg, but most training courses arise from budgetary provision, and therefore long-term planning is possible. Preparing for a training program can be viewed in a segmental fashion, and seven segments are essential.

Clear statements on the problem, training objectives, and staff expectations regarding the course may be difficult to obtain, but they are worth the effort because such statements force consideration of the purpose and impact of the course and occasionally serve to suggest that lower level training may serve to cover upper level incompetence. Adequate discussion between the trainer, decision makers, and administrators in the earliest stages will make life much easier for all concerned throughout the training process.

Arrangements for space, money, and time seem too obvious to mention, yet they are often treated too lightly. Other items needing early attention are travel, accommodations, and such hardware and equipment as the course may demand. Each of these items relates directly to (a) the number of trainees, and (b) the extent and nature of the objectives.

Before translating the objectives into operational training terms, I have found it useful to visit the situation in which the trainees will work, whether institution or field, and to try to gain at firsthand a feeling for the reality of the situation. The only way I know to do this is actually to undertake the job the aides will be doing after training. Know their work situation as an emotional reality, and the training will come alive for the trainer as well as for the trainees.

A fourth step in preparation is to meet the trainees as early as possible, or at least become familiar with their biographies. Unfortunately, selecting candidates for short courses is often a last-minute affair allowing no time for the instructors to gain any understanding of the people with whom they will interact. In longer courses selection is made in advance, and contact is possible either personally or by mail or telephone.

If the instructors can gain some understanding of the trainees' area of interest and general concerns, these can be incorporated in the planning process. Secondly, an indication to the trainees of the major problems and subjects to be dealt with during the course may help to increase acceptance, if not identification, before formal training. A list of other participants usually is highly welcomed, for while trainees may not know more than one other participant,

just one friendly name can serve to reduce tensions and provide a more positive set of expectations for the course.

The instructor or instructors are now in a position to go into detailed planning. I have found the following questions useful.

What needs to be known by the trainees at the end of the course?

In what particular areas is experience needed?

How will we determine the group's resources and experience?

How will we determine the group's interests and their relation to the training process?

What particular competencies or experiences within the staff should be emphasized?

What methodologies are available?

What agency and community resources are desirable and available for this course and how can they best be utilized?

From the answers to these questions prepare direct practical training objectives, devoid of jargon and understandable to people of the educational level of the trainees. In my experience many valuable skills are difficult to describe in functional objective terms (5), particularly in those areas which relate to human interaction and influence. Language often leaves one frustrated with its limitations. However, the fundamental question to be answered is, "What is needed within the training process to enable trainees to function effectively in the new situation?"

At this time arrangements can be made with the agency and with the community—if this is necessary—for practical work, field experiences, and reciprocal visiting. Build into the professional staff and the community a pattern of expectations regarding involvement of the trainees in the ongoing activities of the agency and the community. Acceptance of the idea at this time will bring about an accepting attitude toward the trainees when the visits take place. A checklist is useful, especially just before the trainees arrive.

Conducting the Program

The training process itself begins with the arrival of the trainees at the center or site. They arrive with various quantities of emotional baggage containing expectations, assumptions, and

fears, particularly if the training is viewed as an academic experience. Many persons from low-income groups hold a limited and negative memory of school, which induces apprehension toward a similarly formal situation. This apprehension most often involves both their mental and social capacities. The first few hours, then, are important in reducing tension and establishing acceptance of the training experience as positive.

Learning is focused around three facets or perceptions of those who learn. Perhaps the first of these perceptions is the interest or interests of the trainee. These perceptions will vary within the group, but most people, given a relaxed atmosphere, will be able to nominate some particular interests, even granted the constraints of strangers within the group. Interests can be noted and used throughout the course when appropriate.

Secondly, and closely related to the focus on interests, learning can be based on problems and challenges which have relevance and meaning for the trainees. These problems and challenges may range from interpersonal relationships through the acquisition of skills to the understanding of medical terms and disease conditions. Sometimes trainees suggest the problems, and sometimes the learning process is best handled by ideas from both instructors and trainees.

A third aspect of the learning process is the question of rewards, both immediate and long term. This is a more complex area, for rewards may come from the instructor or authority figure, from the peer group, or from the personal evaluation and assessment structure of the individual. A balance among these sources seems desirable (6).

Long personal introductions which include detailed histories should be avoided initially. Personal histories may be offered spontaneously at a later date. Likewise, I found little but frustration in asking a new group to state its objectives. There is so little reality on which to build, and the experience of having a say in one's own world so unusual, that such objective formulation becomes a mixture of embarrassment and innocuous generalities. Under the title of review and assessment, trainees can provide valuable suggestions later in the course.

Of value in the initial phase is sharing an experience, such as a film, a brief review of the general situation in the agency for which trained staff are required or, on occasion, I have recounted anecdotes from other similar courses. This approach is based in the social interaction concept of shared understanding or common knowledge as the necessary base for communication.

The initial phase can be followed by a closer look at the broad problem, its definition and analysis, and by dividing the class into small groups for consideration of facets of the problem. Quite early in the training experience the entire class should, if possible, become familiar with the physical and social aspects of the proposed area of employment—a visit to the agency and to the community within which they will be working. Discussion with staff and client in an informal setting builds reality and adds essential background to the process of learning to behave differently. Such a visit also provides rich material for further exploration, analysis and definition of the problem, and of the role of the trainees within the work setting.

Another important experience in the learning process is to bring staff and community members into the training setting. Personnel men, supervisors who will take over when the formal training is completed, and vocal community representatives can discuss the reality as they understand it and possibly can be persuaded to listen to the trainees' viewpoint. Interestingly, few professionals recognize that more learning may take place when they listen to a trainee express a viewpoint than when the trainee must listen to an exposition from the professional. When a professional listens to a trainee, two may learn; when a trainee listens to a professional, it is doubtful that either gains much of value.

At about this stage in the training process my experience would indicate the value of sharing objectives. The instructor has been proceeding toward his own carefully prepared objectives. The trainees are now in a position to make suggestions and criticisms regarding objectives and the future experience which they all may share. Such objectives will be partly subjective and partly objective, with the objective factors concerned with knowledge and skills and the subjective factors focused around role definition,

group interaction, and extension of awareness. These are not easily separated, nor have I found it essential to attempt to segregate personal from impersonal objectives. They are integrated in the day-to-day behavior of the human being and should stay that way. Objectives are met in the experience and understanding of the trainees, not, repeat not, in the assessment or the timetable of the instructor.

Major techniques in training are many times directed toward the efficient accumulation of knowledge at the expense of reality. There is a sound place for direct instruction, but also for simulation techniques such as role playing and case studies. As opportunity offers, the instructor may draw out and build on the experience of the trainee, however slim this experience may appear to be. Visits to the community and to the agency can be regular and with increasing involvement of the trainees in their future roles. Association and problem sharing with members of the agency team, particularly with future supervisor or supervisors, have always paid off handsomely.

There are several governing factors in training which are worth review. Perhaps the most important is time, for there is never enough of it. Work your trainees, and if the foundations are well laid, they will work themselves out of sheer interest and personal growth. But allow time for maturation, nonstructured time for reading or just sitting, and time for the gestalt of this new experience to form into patterns and categories which provide vital internal rewards which are called motivation (7).

A second important factor is expectation. Keep it high. The core element in expectation is the confidence of the instructor in the trainees. If the basic attitude of the instructor is negative, this will be rapidly conveyed, both verbally and nonverbally, to the students, and the instructor had better learn to appreciate his students, or get out. Confidence is related to expectation. As human beings we cling to our dignity long after most other possessions are stripped away, and health aides often come in with little to protect but their dignity. Recognize this state of mind and build confidence through support and encouragement at every turn. Confidence and a high level of expectation genuinely expressed will achieve miracles (4).

The most dangerous rocks in the training river are the reality factors. It is so easy and tempting for the instructor to indulge in daydreams about conditions of work, attitudes of supervisors and other professionals, the place of the health aide in the health team, and the level of responsibility to be granted. At no stage has the instructor the right or the responsibility to go beyond agency statements on work conditions, unless that instructor also has the authority to support his or her promises. Playing games with reality usually is an indication of inadequate homework on the part of the instructor during the preparation phase.

A final governing factor in training is methodology. One cannot train people in human relations. The best that can be done is to create situations in which they can learn. We have perhaps given too much emphasis to objective knowledge and too little to the situation which makes the knowledge relevant. Training methodology sometimes degenerates into a kind of circus with entertainment or enjoyment of more import than learning. It is easy for instructors to allow their needs for reward and approval to supersede the needs and objectives of the course, and some instructors will go to extreme lengths to achieve personal rewards. The test of an adequate methodology lies in the evaluation of regular feedback when the feedback is measured against the objectives. Learning may produce discomfort as well as criticism of the instructor. Hopefully, the instructor is secure enough to accept criticism and continue with his approach if he is confident that the approach provides a positive learning situation.

After Training

Training has an overall objective, and that is to prepare a group of people to fit into a particular organizational situation or activity. This may be called the organizational fit, and it involves not only the trainees but also the supervisor and other staff to whom the trainees may relate. The real test of a sound instructor comes in this after training stage, especially as it relates to the preparation of the professional to receive the trainees. This is particularly true in the highly professionalized atmosphere of a public health agency.

Despite all that has been said, the supervisor

soon becomes the real instructor of the new staff member. It is the supervisor who holds the rewards, who understands the system, and who can shape and mold the attitudes and work habits of the subordinate. The influence of a good instructor may last 6 months and may either be reinforced and expanded or completely negated by the supervisor. It is a matter of considerable concern that many supervisors not only do not have an understanding of the health aides' role, but they have almost no real appreciation of the role and function of a supervisor.

Both in industry and the Government bureaucracies, the rule has been to regard technical competency as sufficient indication for supervisorial competency. Human relations factors have been virtually overlooked, and as a result little time or money has been allocated to the training of supervisors. One cannot blame the individual supervisor, but it is surely legitimate to question the wisdom and the efficiency of agencies, large and small, which persist in training subordinates with minimal attention to the process of supervision. One answer suggested from my experience is that the involvement of supervisors in the training of subordinates does establish a real understanding of, and insures some support for, the directions and philosophies established during the training period.

It is a rare supervisor who is sufficiently secure to allow his or her subordinate to offer counsel or criticism. Those who have tried it find it has its own peculiar rewards of greater freedom and trust within the team. Ongoing evaluation and assessment of progress takes on a new perspective when the process is a two-way affair. A frank relationship allows for growth and learning at both levels of function and for the development of new skills and competencies.

Where the situation allows, the instructor can find opportunity for growth and learning by holding formal and informal progress meetings with the trainees and their supervisors several times over the first year of their employment.

None of us behaves in isolation. We behave toward objects, situations, or people. Training which is directed toward more efficient human interaction should concern and involve all parties to the proposed interaction situation, so that all may grow together in understanding of the problems and rewards which the new relationships might offer.

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