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ABSTRACT

Teaching adults in the higher education context can be frustrating because higher education is often not flexible enough to provide an environment conducive to self-directed learning. Also, both faculty and students must adjust their learning and teaching preferences to an experiential, problem-exploring style that has often been contradicted by years of conditioning about instruction through passive learning and note taking. Reevaluation counseling (RC) can be used effectively in higher adult education to examine and work through internalized norms to improve learning. In RC, people take turns acting as counselors to one another, providing loving attention, listening well, and using various methods to contradict the past distress so that the participants can discharge feelings from the past, reevaluate the situation, and think and act clearly at the present time. In higher education, RC can be used to overcome the following internalized norms that interfere with adult learning: isolation, hierarchical rankism, and overemphasis on technical rather than holistic learning. Techniques that are particularly effective in the higher education setting are the following: emphasizing peer counseling and collaboration; balancing negative critique with validation and position thinking; dealing with distress of denying it; and developing a safe atmosphere for fostering clear thinking. (MN)

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Working with Adult Learners in Higher Education:
Going Against Internalized Norms

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Working with Adult Learners in Higher Education:

Going Against Internalized Norms

Working with adult students in higher education settings can be both rewarding and frustrating. Rewarding because of Knowles' basic assumptions about how and why adults learn: that adults need to be independent and self-directed, that they are interested in learning from their experience, that they learn best when education is based on practical life problems, and that they want to apply new knowledge and skills immediately to these problems (Knowles, 1980). Frustrating because the higher education context is often not flexible enough to provide an environment conducive to such learning, and because both faculty and students must adjust their learning and teaching preferences to an experiential, problem-exploring style that has often been contradicted by years of conditioning about instruction through passive lectures and note-taking.

The barriers to good adult learning in the higher education setting hold true even when the program has been conceived and run by and for adult educators! Bauer (1985), in a study of a non-traditional doctoral program in adult education at Teachers College, discovered that learners find it difficult to be truly self-directed even though they are already adult education professionals. Institutional and program constraints impede self-directedness: registration requirements, time constraints on the grading of student work, certification examination requirements, deadlines, and the usual hurdles posed by the fact that students

are only physically on campus once a month. Finally, faculty must adjust to teaching peers and to providing a different level of dialogue and feedback in a cycle that resembles distance learning more than the traditional weekly classroom cycle.

As a professor in this Teachers College doctoral program, this author has also encountered another set of constraints to good adult education practice in the higher education setting: internalized norms within both faculty and students about who they are and how they should act in their respective roles. These norms usually block effective learning and engage both sides in a ritual of competition for recognition based in the belief that achievement can only be gained through individual, isolated efforts.

This paper examines ways in which Re-Evaluation Counseling (RC) can be used in higher adult education to effectively examine and work through internalized norms to improve learning. Following a brief discussion of RC, the author examines some of these internalized norms and highlights some RC techniques being used to work through them. The paper concludes with a discussion of how RC fits with an adult education framework.

Re-Evaluation Counseling

Re-Evaluation Counseling, as described on counseling publications, is a process by which people can free themselves of past distresses created by early "hurts" which have not been healed by the natural process of emotional discharge, e.g., through crying, trembling, raging, laughing, or yawning.

Discharge is often discouraged because an adult has learned this is taboo in society, leaving the "hurt" embedded and interfering with what would otherwise be the basic loving, cooperative, intelligent, zestful nature of human beings.

Some of these hurts reinforce oppressive social norms which the individual learns to internalize and accept without questioning. For example, a little girl might fall off her bicycle, hurting herself and damaging the bicycle. Instead of lovingly letting her cry, an adult might scold her because the bicycle was expensive and will cost money to fix. This could be a real distress for an adult with low income or from a background of poor or working class parents who suffers low self-esteem from negative aspects of classism. Or the adult could fall into a sexism trap and tell her that just proves that girls should not ride bicycles. If the child were a person-of-color, she might be further denigrated on this basis, not because it matters, but because the circumstances remind the adult of similar hurts he or she suffered that prompt an inappropriate response.

In RC people take turns acting as counselors to one another, providing loving attention, listening well, and using various methods to contradict the distress so that the person can discharge feelings from the past, re-evaluate the situation, and think and act clearly in present time. RC emphasizes the fact that we are all intelligent, defining intelligence in terms of our ability to respond flexibly and uniquely to new situations rather than with rigid patterns from the past.

RC thus provides a safe, supportive environment in which

individuals can examine internalized social norms. The individual is helped to see that he or she has learned attitudes, feelings and behavior that reinforce these norms and can just as well un-learn them. Behavior is reinforced by patterns of information and emotional reactions from the past that work toward holding a person in pattern. Quite frequently, the person reacts to internalized oppression by inflicting on others the same patterns of distress by which they have been victimized.

Internalized Norms That Impede Learning

Some of the more common internalized norms that interfere with effective adult learning in the higher education setting -- whether that learning be in the students or in the faculty -- include isolation, hierarchical rankism, and an overemphasis on technical rather than holistic learning.

These themes are reflected in a discussion among a group of technical and scientific people in RC who identified situations in which people are expected to work and succeed alone. Technicians are made to feel their work excludes feelings or closeness with others in the workplace. If they gather together for social reasons, they pretend it is for technical reasons. In many cases they feel they cannot ask questions, and that they should guard their research so that others do not "scoop" them. Technicians receive little training in interpersonal skills with "a general focus on quantitative, factual, thing-related questions to the exclusion, or at least downgrading, of all personal, people-related questions and topics" (Kline, 1976, p. 7).

While the above norms are looked at with respect to scientists and technicians, a greater respect for the "hard" rather than "soft" sciences means that many other professions emulate the culture and training of scientists. Since the University prepares people to work in this culture, much classroom and laboratory preparation inculcates the same values and systems.

Isolation is pervasive in our individualistic society, focused on the achievement of the one against the many through competition for the few top, highly rewarded positions in society. Marsick (1985) found that isolation was also a key issue among RC counselors working in the peace movement. It manifests in the fact that both students and faculty are encouraged to work alone, that kudos go to the intellectual who can best find fault with the work of other intellectuals, that the system keeps people too busy with their own endeavors to even think of taking time to work with others, and that the work of the star is often regarded more highly than collaborative efforts. Achievement is often measured individually through examinations and papers even though adult educators often do emphasize participation in classroom discussion and projects. Finally, the lonely, agonizing road of writing a dissertation becomes a rite of passage, indoctrinating students to the kind of thinking and behavior expected of them as future professors or technicians even when the students are practitioners for whom collaborative work is the norm.

Isolation goes hand in hand with rankism. Dice (Colleague, 1977) described typical hierarchical rankism in a university

biology laboratory:

Most science laboratories are set up along the lines of an un-liberated nuclear family where there's a male (father) who is the boss and has full power and final say over everything. Then there's someone like a research associate (mother) who is in a secondary position, but who is also powerful, especially when the boss is away. Students are at all different levels in a hierarchy similar to different-aged children. The typical lab has much competition and very little support (p. 7).

Davidson (1978) further elaborates on rankism and elitism in the university hierarchy, describing the clear status hierarchy from presidents and deans through different gradations of professors through different levels of students. The support staff also have their hierarchy. People are kept at their level until they earn the right to move to another level. This is supported by a powerful informal system of oppressive behavior. In such a system, the old British "divide and conquer" principle generally operates, reinforcing other forms of oppression such as classism, racism, sexism and adultism.

Finally, much classroom education emphasizes technical content to the exclusion of affective dimensions of understanding and a holistic consideration of the individual. Naylor (1980) critiques the "narrowing and institutionalization of learning" in Western societies, pointing to "a compartmentalized way of looking at information and handing it to people" (p. 45).

Yet, many of the blocks to learning stem from the affective domain through feelings of low self-esteem that even the highest achievers often have toward themselves as learners. When classroom instruction is confined to "facts" to the exclusion of their meaning, learners cannot always assimilate the content. Even worse, because they may be reminded of past experiences in which they were denigrated for their inability to learn, they may not be able to listen clearly to the new information.

People of working or lower class background have an even greater struggle since they must break through greater barriers to speaking up in class, believing they have something worthwhile to say, trusting their thinking, and overcoming barriers such as financial and time constraints. Moreover, it may be assumed that they are of low ability if they cannot do an assignment when the reasons may lie in different kinds of life experiences. For example, Remy describes a student who said he could not write an assigned paper on how capitalism affects family relationships. Instead of dismissing this as capricious, the teacher probed his experience and learned he was a foster child. His experience was then used as a learning activity, with the teacher drawing the connection between the personal context and the nature of capitalism in the United States. (Colleague, 1977. p. 6).

Some RC Techniques Used in Higher Education

Re-Evaluation Counselors in higher education have been experimenting with several approaches to counteract internalized norms such as those discussed above. They emphasize peerness and

collaboration, balance negative critique with validation and positive thinking, deal with distress instead of denying it, and develop a safe atmosphere for fostering clear thinking.

Peerness is a fundamental tenet of RC. Therefore, many of the tools used reflect it, as in giving one another equal time or listening non-judgementally with the expectation that others are intelligent. One specific way in which peerness is developed is through recognizing that each person brings unique strengths and individual qualities to the group. To counteract competition and a judgemental atmosphere detrimental to collaboration, for example, Lipsky (Colleague, 1977) begins graduate seminars

". . . by insisting that the students share their names in a forceful and bold tone, tell a little about themselves, share something about themselves which has nothing to do with being a student, and mention a strength that they bring to the class" (p. 8).

Another method is to emphasize learning from one another. Remy (Colleague, 1977, p. 6), for example, uses discussion groups in which people can safely ask questions of one another to understand material. Remy also asks students to re-explain key points being made and to help her understand points being made by students when she does not fully comprehend them.

The latter illustrates that faculty are also peers and may experience difficulty in understanding. Krishnamurty (Colleague, 1977, p. 36) takes this peerness one step further by openly discussing mistakes and ways in which he plans to rectify them, asking for volunteers to assist him in keeping on track.

RC theory suggests that constructive learning takes place in a balanced atmosphere in which people are not stuck in negative thinking patterns. Negative critical attitudes are often the norm because they are considered evidence of brilliance. Lipsky (Colleague, 1977, p. 8) counteracts this in graduate seminars by asking students to share something they liked in what they have read. Gross (1978) begins seminars by discussing what it means to be critical and asks people to share good, influential ideas or research. He also follows seminar presentations by asking each person to comment on "What I found particularly interesting or exciting about the presentation" (p. 41).

Constructive forums for feedback and evaluation are provided so that criticism does not reinforce "hurts" and a low self-concept. One of these methods is a variation of self-estimation, a technique used in work groups in which a person first assesses his or her own strengths and ways in which this could be improved before others in the group follow suit. In class, Krishnamurty (Colleague, 1977) asks each student to "highlight the 'good features' of the presentation and make a suggestion as to how it might be made even better" (p. 36).

One of RC's strengths is recognition that distress gets in the way of learning, but that it can be discharged if dealt with instead of denied. Barone (1980) applied this thinking to completing his own dissertation by counseling frequently on what he had accomplished or where he was stuck. Frequently these were mini-sessions, short focused periods of about ten minutes.

Dice (Colleague, 1977) incorporated RC techniques in weekly

staff meetings in a university science lab.. Meetings began with "new and goods", positive events to lighten the generally serious tone of science discussions. Research was discussed in a supportive way, including consideration of personal difficulties getting in the way of work. Dice indicates that "Probably more than anything, the component of support for the whole person has made the biggest difference in our working relationships" (p. 7).

Krishnamurty (Colleague, 1977, p. 35) used several techniques to deal with distress. When he sees that distress is keeping attention away from present discussion, he asks students to share a pleasant memory to contradict it. He also starts the class with "new and goods", in "safe" groups of ten or dyads, to keep focused in the present. When students have been invalidated, he asks others to appreciate one another on their specific accomplishments so they do not become sunk in their mistakes. He also works with students who are obviously having difficulty in learning a concept, appreciating them for their strengths and giving them time to talk about what happened to make them think they cannot learn.

Think-and-listens are a useful RC tool in the classroom. Students are given equal time to think out loud about an issue or topic. Others give that person complete, non-judgemental attention during his or her turn. This facilitates creativity.

An Adult Education Framework

RC can be set into an adult education framework by looking at the work of Freire (1973) and Mezirow (1978, 1981). Freire

developed an approach to teaching literacy that went far beyond skill development. The essence of his approach is critical reflectivity, helping people to examine the way in which they have internalized without examination the norms of their world so that they might decide to take individual and social action to change themselves and their environment.

Mezirow draws on Freire and on the critical social theory of Habermas in discussing a type of learning about the self that he calls perspective transformation. He defines this as an

"emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings" (Mezirow, 1981, p. 6, author's original italics).

Through perspective transformation, individuals reconstitute the meaning perspectives by which they order their understanding of themselves and their world. Mezirow defines meaning perspectives as integrated psychological structures with dimensions of thought, will and feeling, which represent the way a person looks at him or herself and relationships. When a person achieves a higher-order meaning perspective, he or she has an "aha" experience which transforms priorities, values and interpretations. The process by which the person transforms a perspective usually involves a connection between one's personal point of view, and the larger social, cultural, political and economic context.

Through counseling, perspective transformation can and does take place. In the safety of the counseling relationship, the individual can reflect critically on patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving without experiencing this as a threat to personal identity. The counselor acts as a mirror to help the client face and flush out painful emotions otherwise denied or avoided, but to see these in connection with internalized norms embedded in society. Every person takes the roles, at times, of both oppressor and oppressed in order to maintain the status quo within whatever social system he or she lives. Every person has learned to take on these roles in order to survive, but every person likewise can examine these roles critically and break out of these patterns that tend to reinforce a lack of personal and social freedom. While the focus in counseling is always on the individual, the person begins to see how his or her own transformation is intimately connected with the transformation of others in society.

The unique contribution that RC makes to understanding faculty-student interaction is the integration of analytic skills with handling of emotions that get in the way of critical reflectivity on internalized norms. It provides a forum for discharging the distress so that people can get in touch with their thinking and act on it. RC creates safety so that people can explore dimensions of themselves and see how they are connected with others in learning. And it fosters a community of peers committed to one another's growth.

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