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A group or its leader as planner

Sometimes the learner chooses a group, or the instructor or leader in a group, to plan his learning efforts. He wants the leader or other members of the group to make most of the decisions about what and how he should learn during each learning episode.

In many groups, one individual does the bulk of the planning, and may also present most of the subject matter. He or she may be called a teacher, instructor, professor, leader, resource person, trainer, helper, program planner, planning committee chairman, group worker, therapist, scoutmaster, or minister. He may emerge naturally as the leader or major resource person in the group, or he may be assigned this task as a definite responsibility. If it is a definite assignment for him, he may be paid or a volunteer, his responsibility for leading learning groups may be full-time or part-time, and he may be professionally trained or relatively inexperienced.

During most meetings of the group, the leader or some other member will decide what content should be presented. He will present that content, choose a film or speaker or other technique for presenting it, or suggest a topic for discussion. Unless the learner happens to be on the planning committee for the group, he will rarely be responsible for these decisions about content and learning activities. He may occasionally make a suggestion or have a turn at planning or leading one session, but certainly will not be responsible for the majority of the decisions throughout the total series of group sessions.

Some additional learning episodes may occur outside the group sessions. Here the learner may assume more responsibility for deciding what to practice or read, and how to proceed. Often, however, he will follow the suggestions of the leader or someone else in the group when choosing his reading and practice exercises. If the leader of a parent education group asks everyone to read a certain chapter for the next meeting, for example, most learners will do so.

A wide range of groups may be open to learners, especially in a large city. Some groups will contain only four or five members, others several hundred. Some groups provide credit toward a certificate or degree, but most do not. Some groups emphasize discussions, others rely on lectures or films, and still others emphasize experiential learning through role-playing or a discussion of feelings. Some groups meet once a

month for 10 months, but others are compressed into a conference format, which includes one-day institutes, weekend workshops, three-day meetings of a professional association or research field, and six-week short courses. The subject matter available in groups, meetings, and conferences is even more varied than the format: effective reading, sewing, sports, investing, human relationships, the United Nations, new teaching methods, recent research in adult education, infant care, foreign languages, woodworking, and psychology, to name just a few.

In a certain group, some members may be relying on the group (or its leader) as their planner, and others may not. For example, one person might use the group as merely one learning activity within a much larger *self-planned* project. Almost one-quarter of the learners described in *Learning Without a Teacher* (Tough, 1967) used a group as one small part of their total learning strategy. In some learning groups, it is also possible to find someone who is not conducting a learning project at all. For him, the desire to gain and retain certain knowledge and skill is not an especially important reason for attending the group.

An enormous amount of literature and research has dealt with learning in groups. Social psychologists have described group processes and other aspects of groups in general. The vast research literature on teaching methods describes learning in classrooms or in other group programs provided by educational institutions, as does much of the literature in adult education. In addition, much has been written on group discussion, and on how to lead a discussion group. More recent is the increasing amount of literature regarding encounter groups and other group techniques of the human potential movement. There is no need to summarize these bodies of literature here, because they are readily available to the reader.

Attractive Characteristics of Learning Groups

Relying on a group as planner is fairly common. In our 1970 survey, for instance, the average person conducted one group learning project during the preceding year. What reasons do learners have for turning the responsibility for planning over to a group or a group leader? In short, what are the attractive characteristics of learning in a group?

1. Learning in a group, with the planning done by the leader or other group members, may be a highly efficient route for a given learning project. This is especially likely if several other learners want the same knowledge and skill (and thus make the formation of a group quite feasible), or if the knowledge and skill and level of an available group happen to fit the particular learner's needs.
2. The learner can have access to an expert instructor at much less cost than private sessions would entail. He can also see a relevant film, hear an outstanding

- speaker, or see an expensive demonstration at low cost, because the total cost is spread over several learners.
3. A learner may choose a group because of the positive emotional benefits. Learning in the company of several others can generate and maintain a high level of enthusiasm and motivation. No one can really understand and share the learner's joy of achievement except those who are currently going through the same learning stages. The learner's realization that some of the other learners are doing better than he is may spur him on.
 4. Between group sessions, because he faces another meeting of the group soon, the learner may be motivated to complete the practice exercises, reading, or other learning episodes that have been suggested. Also, he will be motivated to keep up a certain pace instead of putting off his learning until later. These two types of motivation will be strengthened specifically by (a) the fact that the group meets each week or so; (b) not wanting to displease or disappoint the instructor; (c) the example or reactions of other learners; and (d) a commitment to completing the course or series of sessions, perhaps because of having paid a fee.
 5. The learner may feel better about his learning when he realizes that other learners, too, have problems, difficulties, and frustrations. The slow progress or low level of others may encourage him or cheer him up about his own progress and level. He will no longer feel inferior or inadequate or "just a beginner."
 6. The members of a group can help one another in various ways. In a group, for example, a learner can practice a musical instrument, try role-playing, receive criticism and feedback, receive answers to his questions, and hear reactions to his opinions. Some of the interaction can be in one-to-one situations. It is almost impossible to learn without a few group sessions in certain areas, such as public speaking, understanding group processes and one's own behavior in a group, and becoming an effective group member or leader.
 7. A group provides the maximum range of values, beliefs, attitudes, and views to stimulate the learner to examine and perhaps change his own.
 8. The learner may just assume that learning in a group is the best way, or the only way, to learn. He may have blind faith in its effectiveness: a course may seem to be a magic cure, a guarantee of success.
 9. If the learner is facing a certain problem or responsibility, he may want to learn in the company of others who face a similar situation.
 10. If the learner has firm convictions about the topic, if he feels anxious about it, or if it deals with values or issues, he may want an opportunity to state his own views and to interact with others.
 11. Some people prefer the anonymity of a large group to an intimate one-to-one relationship with an instructor.
 12. The instructor or other group members may provide appropriate resources and facilities for the learner, or arrange for them to be available.

13. Attending any group, not just one designed for learning, can be a pleasant and stimulating experience. A group provides companionship, the stimulation of meeting new people, and the enjoyment of a social situation. Some learners add to their enjoyment by attending with a close friend or relative.
14. The learner may gain some prestige or status by joining a certain group or attending a certain institution.
15. Some entrepreneurs who have developed a unique set of learning activities may guard them closely; consequently, the learner must attend one of their courses or workshops if he wants those learning activities.

Negative Characteristics of Learning in Groups

Although the average adult learner uses a group for one learning project a year, he relies on some other planner for his other seven projects. What are the negative characteristics of groups and group leaders that make the learner hesitate to rely on them?

1. The learner may not be able to find a group nearby with a convenient meeting time and an appropriate starting date.
2. The learner may not want to feel tied down to a set time each week.
3. He may simply want to gain enough knowledge to satisfy his curiosity, or enough skill to handle a specific responsibility, instead of learning a wider body of subject matter.
4. The learner may be unwilling or unable to leave his home for learning, or may hesitate to spend much time and effort traveling to a group. Our 1970 survey found that travel time (and other time spent at planning and arrangements) constitutes about one-eighth of the total time spent at the typical group learning project.
5. The adult's efficiency in learning through a group will rarely be as great as it would if the same instructor were used in a one-to-one situation.
6. Using a group may require a large commitment of money (registration fee) or time before the learner is certain that he wants to spend that much on the particular project or program.
7. Unless he happens to find a group that fits his own goals and level, the learner may find that the content and procedures are not precisely what he wants or needs. Consequently, a large portion of his time during the group session may be wasted. Also, he may want to gain the knowledge and skill at a much faster or slower pace than the group.
8. A group is usually a relatively inefficient way of learning a long sequence of detailed, well-established facts or skills.

9. In a group, only a small fraction of the total time can be spent listening to any one learner, or dealing with his unique concerns, difficulties, and feelings.
10. The learner may not want to let others see his ignorance, errors, or poor performance.
11. The learner may fear that he will encounter an instructor or group leader who is incompetent or insensitive. Custom and habit are more likely to influence an instructor in a group than in a one-to-one situation. In addition, a group leader may not be influenced primarily by the needs and hopes of the learners. Instead, he may be influenced by his perceptions or stereotypes of what a good teacher (professor, instructor, discussion leader) does when in the spotlight, or he may be influenced by his own needs, by tradition, or by the perceived demands of the institution. Too few teachers seek feedback concerning their own behavior and effectiveness at helping learners. When asked to outline their objectives, many teachers describe their own behavior or activities instead of the learners' final knowledge and skill.

A Variety of Formats

Several different formats are found in learning groups. We will now examine nine of these.

A group with an instructor

When we think of a learning group, we often picture 20 or 30 persons meeting in a room with one instructor who is an expert in the knowledge and skill that the people want to learn. He is responsible for planning most meetings of the group and for presenting the subject matter. This is the most effective format for certain learners and certain subjects.

The instructor of a group is, in a sense, the planner of many learning projects. He probably goes through a process similar to that of the planner who operates in a one-to-one situation, as described in the previous chapter.

A crucial early step is to obtain agreement on the learning objectives. In some groups, the learners come because they want to gain the knowledge and skill that the instructor outlined clearly in the publicity for the course, workshop, or other program. In other groups, the instructor distributes a duplicated sheet of tentative objectives, and then asks the learners to compare their objectives with the sheet; the instructor and the learners can then negotiate some agreement. Another possible role for the instructor is merely to help the learners in the group discover and clarify their own objectives; he will help them learn whatever they wish.

The instructor will then perform several of the functions described in the previous chapter, following many of the same principles. In the group learning situation, the

instructor may try to provide alternative methods of learning for different members of the group. For example, he may occasionally establish three simultaneous discussion groups on three different aspects of the topic. Or he may give the learners a choice of two simultaneous learning activities, such as a film and a speaker. In addition, he may urge the learners to skip the sessions that are not especially relevant to them.

We may expect far too much of an instructor. Diagnosing the needs and problems of all the learners in a group, selecting and managing appropriate learning activities, and generally carrying through the entire process of teaching and helping is almost a superhuman responsibility. Few individuals have the skill, insight, and energy to perform all of these functions for a large learning group. Perhaps we need to experiment with a team of teachers with differentiated functions, or with co-teachers, or with new learning formats that place less responsibility on a single instructor.

Answering questions

Another possible format for a group is to have an expert who speaks only in response to questions asked by the members. Although he is the main source of content during the group session, he does not prepare a speech beforehand.

In my own experience, I can recall only one example of this format. It was a single, two-hour session that occurred during a series of evening sessions for expectant parents at a Chicago hospital. As we entered the lecture hall for this particular session, we realized from the presence and excitement of several nurses that the session would be something special. When the 20 or 30 expectant parents were assembled, a very competent and likable pediatrician entered, told us he would be glad to try answering any question at all that we had, and then settled back to wait for the first question. Because the group had similar concerns and questions, each person found that the majority of the questions and answers were relevant and interesting. All in all, the session, which entailed little time at program-planning beforehand, was very lively and enjoyable.

Discussing identical printed material

In another format, all members of the group read the same printed materials for each meeting and then discuss the subject matter they have read. One or two discussion leaders are responsible for focusing the discussion, but not for presenting any subject matter. The meeting is devoted to clarifying the author's meaning, reacting to his points, discussing the implications, and so on.

This format has become increasingly popular in recent years. A great deal of money and effort has been invested in developing a small number of packaged discussion programs on a variety of topics. Sometimes the materials that everyone reads are portions of certain great books. Other materials deal with world affairs, art, primitive cultures, and child care.

The subject matter resides within the group itself

In some groups, very few printed materials or resource persons are used. Instead, the group focuses on the current feelings and processes within the group itself. The subject matter consists primarily of the feelings, behavior, and statements of the learners themselves during the session. The leader or trainer is not so much a planner as a catalyst, facilitator, and mirror.

Various names are applied to groups that follow this format: T-group, encounter group, sensitivity training group, human relations training group. The rapid expansion of these groups during the past two decades has been one of the most dramatic events in the field of adult learning.

Tapes for encounter groups

In a similar format, a nonhuman resource is substituted for the group leader. This nonhuman resource is a set of prerecorded audiotape instructions for guiding small groups through certain human relations exercises. These tapes make it possible for a small group, without a trained professional leader, to gain the benefits of certain encounter experiences. These experiences are designed to help each member of the group express his real feelings, accept the feelings of others, and understand himself better. Exploratory studies (Berzon & Solomon, 1964) indicated that these "self-directed therapeutic groups" could be effective and safe, and subsequent testing and research have largely confirmed this. One study (Berzon, Reisel, & Davis, 1969) concluded that, for the future, "particular promise seems to exist in the development of custom programs. For instance, there might be a program written specially for children, or for families, or for parties to a negotiation — labor, foreign power, or civil rights. Programs could be developed for any given group of people who have a special problem or concern in common [p. 85]."

Group help for self-planning learning

Another format is not really group-planned learning at all. Instead, several individuals who are conducting self-planned projects meet occasionally to stimulate and help one another. Their projects may fall within the same broad area, or may be quite diverse.

At the meetings of the group, there is no subject matter. Instead, the sessions focus on the self-planned learning project of one member at a time. The purpose is to give him encouragement, stimulation, suggestions, and other help.

An unstructured conference

In an unstructured conference, very little planning occurs beforehand because no sessions are scheduled. Instead of attending preplanned presentations of subject matter, the participants learn through informal discussions in pairs and groups that

form spontaneously. One example of an unstructured conference consisted of about 70 persons interested in student mental health and counseling in colleges and universities.

Despite the rarity of this format, it is a very interesting notion and could perhaps be used much more widely. The basic idea is very simple: bring together 20 or more persons with a similar concern or responsibility. Do not plan any speeches, discussion topics, or scheduled group discussions, but let the participants do as they wish for two or three days.

Some of the learners will spend most of their time in conversations. If a learner wants to find an individual who shares a certain concern, or if he wants to try forming a small group to deal with a specific topic, he can post a notice on the bulletin board. If someone wants to deliver a speech, he can announce its time and place on the bulletin board. Depending on the emotional climate and the area of common concern, learners might gain far more from this format than from a more structured conference.

A large conference or professional meeting

Most professional associations hold an annual meeting, which members attend to hear research reports and other presentations by members of the organization or by outside speakers. Before the meeting, the program is usually planned by a small committee composed of members, subject matter experts, and, occasionally, professional program planners.

This format is common, important, and effective. Many researchers, top executives, and professional persons receive a great deal of stimulation and subject matter at conferences and annual meetings.

Autonomous groups

Autonomous groups are very common and important, but have rarely been studied by researchers and discussed in the literature. Consequently, the rest of this chapter will be devoted to this particular format.

Autonomous Learning Groups

In some small and medium-sized groups that meet frequently, the members themselves plan the group learning sessions. The entire group, or a small committee or even a single member selected by the group, is responsible for planning each session. Instead of relying on an outsider or a set of materials to guide its learning, the group itself accepts the responsibility for planning.

Because their learning activities are not determined by an outside expert or

organization, these learning groups are often called *autonomous*. Some women's groups, hobby groups, historical societies, and book review groups use this format. It is also used by some service clubs, church groups, and small voluntary associations.

These groups vary in their relationships with the outside world. Some are entirely self-contained. To use Kempfer's (1955) phrase, they are "independent and self-governing, with no outside allegiance or relationship [p. 231]." Some use a church or other institution merely as a meeting place, but most meet in homes or restaurants. Some write for program suggestions or reading materials, and some invite speakers or use films occasionally.

Some autonomous groups (depending on one's definition) are affiliated with similar groups or with a larger organization (such as a national or international association, a church, a central clearing house, or a state or provincial organization), although the group's program is not greatly influenced by that organization. In many groups, the relationship with the outside environment will increase, decrease, or otherwise change over the years.

Widespread and diverse

The range and diversity of autonomous learning groups is surprising. Many Bible study groups, investment clubs, current affair groups, Alcoholics Anonymous chapters, book review clubs, local consumer associations, literary and philosophical groups, local historical societies, science clubs, conservation and nature groups, and rock-collecting clubs could be included. Groups also are formed to learn about cross-country motorcycle riding, collecting buttons, and casting soldiers.

Benjamin Franklin kept his Junto alive for 30 years. Van Doren (1938) pointed out that Franklin "seems to have borrowed the scheme of the Junto in part from Cotton Mather, who in Boston had originated neighborhood benefit societies [p. 75]." The Junto members answered a set of questions at each meeting, and raised questions in turn for the others to discuss. Every three months each member was to "produce and read an essay of his own writing, on any subject he pleased [p. 76]."

Describing the period 1826-1840 in the United States, Ewbank (1969) has stated that "lyceums popped up like mushrooms throughout almost every state in the Union, and in a few places abroad [p. 1]." These were voluntary self-education groups in which the members themselves planned their educational programs. Often they took turns presenting a subject in which they were especially interested, or leading a discussion on some current issue. For other meetings they brought in a speaker who was especially knowledgeable on some topic. Ewbank concludes that at present the free university, the community schools, the seminars on race relations, and similar groups reflect the learning patterns that were common in the lyceum movement.

In New Zealand in the late 1920s, James Shelley began experimenting with a "box" scheme for "tutorless groups." This scheme consisted of sending boxes of materials to small groups of learners. Each box contained printed materials, books, and even phonograph records. The members would read the materials before

gathering together to discuss them, and no human instructor was required.

A similar scheme of assistance for discussion groups in the Australian state of Victoria received an important impetus in 1947, when the Council of Adult Education was established in Melbourne. The council now provides boxes of materials for more than 400 discussion groups in Melbourne and in the rural parts of the state. The groups meet in private homes, usually monthly or fortnightly. Each month a group can choose any one of several hundred novels and nonfiction books described in a catalog issued by the council, and can borrow a box of materials for that book. The box contains 15 copies of the book, 15 copies of commentary and supplementary information, a discussion guide, and about 10 additional reference books. The questions for discussion are arranged in increasing order of difficulty. According to Wesson (1966), new groups rely heavily on the discussion questions. The typical group uses one box a month. The group is encouraged to comment on each box or book, and many of these comments are printed in a quarterly newsletter that goes to all groups.

In the United States, Mowrer, in *The New Group Therapy* (1964), has drawn attention to "the spontaneous appearance of a wide variety of special groups and associations, inspired and operated largely by *laymen*, whose main objective is to provide restorative experiences which scores of people have sought, but failed to find, at the hands of would-be professional healers, religious and secular alike [p. iii]." Mowrer states that most of the groups in this "lay group-therapy movement" do not seek or even want professional leadership by clergymen, psychiatrists, psychologists, or social workers.

In a textbook in adult education, Kempfer (1955) devoted an entire chapter to the topic "Working With Unorganized Autonomous Groups." This chapter provides examples of some specific ways in which adult educators can assist autonomous groups.

Autonomous learning groups exist for almost all ages. In our exploratory interviewing in Toronto, for example, we found a naturalist club of 12-year-old boys in which each boy had an area of specialty (birds, astronomy, or whatever). At the other end of the age scale was an 85-year-old woman responsible for a weekly meeting of about 10 women to hear speakers on the United Nations and other international topics.

Survey findings

In our 1970 survey, we wanted a rough measure of the number of autonomous groups: Consequently, for each group project, we asked the interviewee whether his group fitted either of the following categories: (1) "this group was sponsored by an educational institution, or it had an instructor or leader or speaker who was assigned to that group or was paid for this task," or (2) "it was just a group of

equals meeting outside of any organized or institutional framework, and taking turns planning their own learning activities.” The second type is a crude lay definition of an autonomous group or democratic peer group. About 20% of all group-directed projects (including credit projects) were of this type. If our findings apply to the general population, about one adult out of five is a member of an autonomous learning group.

Women's groups

One pioneering study of women's groups, a widespread form of learning group, was conducted by Heather Knoepfli while a Ph.D. student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. It is reported in her dissertation (Knoepfli, 1971).

Because of her special interest in how women's groups originate, Knoepfli included only those that began completely independently of other organizations. The typical pattern was for one woman to become concerned about some problem or issue, or to become aware of some useful function that an autonomous learning group could perform – for her and for others. She then discussed her ideas with one or two other women, made several tentative plans and decisions for the formation of a group, and called the first meeting.

The founder of an autonomous learning group is both a learner and an adult education program planner. We already know something about the program-planning process followed by the professional adult educator and even the self-planner. Knoepfli's study fills a logical gap in our knowledge by describing the process followed by the founders of autonomous learning groups.

When interviewed by Knoepfli, the founders recalled a variety of reasons for forming a group. For many founders, the major reason was to increase their own motivation to learn: they needed an impetus or stimulus to learn. A second major reason was a desire to use or apply the knowledge and skill. This second reason was also very important in our study of why adults learn (see Chapter 5).

The groups studied by Heather Knoepfli covered a wide range of subject matter. Their purpose was to learn about investing (one group was called *The Fortune Cookies*), the Bible, French, history, contemporary literature, current events, women's liberation, writing, yoga, painting, urban living, and psychological theories.

In many women's groups, the members take turns presenting reports or topics. A few groups rely on outside resource persons for most sessions, and a few hire an outside expert or teacher for the entire year. Other groups rely exclusively on group discussion for the input of subject matter.

Most of the women's groups meet each month or so, usually for two hours, in a member's home. Half the groups in the study did not have a formal leadership structure, others appointed an executive committee, and a few appointed a single leader.

The future

As we become more and more aware of the frequency and importance of autonomous groups, perhaps we will develop more effective ways of helping them plan and conduct their learning. New types of organizations and consultants might be developed to encourage and facilitate the formation of a wide range of autonomous groups for all ages. Booklets or handbooks as well as human assistance could be provided when such groups want help in planning their learning activities.

As with self-planned learning, we must first understand how the learning proceeds in its natural form. Only then will we be ready to fit our help into that natural process without disrupting it.