

Terry O'Banion hired both Gayle Privette and Charles Merrill in the early 1960's as counselors at Central Florida Junior College who both taught the personal development course described in this article. This course was the foundation for The Individual in a Changing Environment course that was the anchor for the iconic general education program at Santa Fe Community College required of every student.

A Humanistic and Experiential Approach to Personal Development

GAYLE PRIVETTE

CHARLES H. MERRILL

A community junior college made humanistic concepts and experiential methods the bases for a personal development course which was staffed by professional counselors. The course was designed to permit flexibility in content and class activities which were directed toward the personal growth and intellectual development of individual students, each with unique needs. Small, unstructured discussion groups and individual papers and projects were deliberately placed outside the grading context to encourage active student involvement. The experimental course was evaluated in regard to such questions as the following: Can humanistic and value-oriented course content stimulate intellectual development and personal growth on the part of junior college students? Are didactic and experiential methods compatible in a classroom setting? Can counselors teach and maintain effectiveness as student personnel workers?

BECAUSE MUCH OF modern life threatens to reduce persons to cards that must not be spindled, it is significant that humanistic values are coming to the forefront in several professions—education and psychology among them. The humanistic approach is based upon a system of values that stresses uniquely human characteristics of man and, in this context, does not imply

a non-theistic position. In reaffirming the worth of man, humanistic values extend beyond concepts of adjustment and conformity. The full life implies not only absence of pathology and deviant behavior, but creative development of potentialities, zest for life, rich relatedness to other persons, and realization of values—all more positive than adjustment suggests.

GAYLE PRIVETTE, Assistant Professor of Education, University of Florida, was previously Counselor and Instructor, Central Florida Junior College, Ocala. CHARLES H. MERRILL is Counselor and Instructor, Central Florida Junior College.

Several elements converged at Central Florida Junior College to make possible a synthesis of humanistic values and growth-facilitating experiences within the framework of a psychology course. The administration actively favored student-centered education and provided a large counseling

staff in a comprehensive student services program. The counselors were committed to a humanistic and existential understanding of behavior and to a client-centered approach to helping persons. Typical needs and problems of students were compounded because half the student population did not live permanently in the home town of the college. There were no residence halls and relatively few opportunities in the college environment that allowed meaningful relationships to develop among students.

The Dean of Students initiated thinking about a psychology course that, as a part of the student services program, could help students understand themselves and their various relationships in this educational and social environment. Because some assumptions that were basic to the course were not supported unanimously by the local faculty and were not held unanimously by writers in personnel services and education (see comments by Gustad following Glanz, Hayes, & Penney, 1959), the course was introduced on an experimental basis.

The course, Introduction to Personal Development, attempted to generate interest in subject matter that emphasized humanistic concepts and to stimulate active personal involvement that could lead to growth and improved psychological health. It was believed that personal growth and intellectual development could be mutually enhancing in a single setting, the classroom, wherein counselors, using academic procedures as well as methods borrowed from personnel services, could pursue these goals and still maintain effectiveness in the total student services program.

COURSE METHODS

With a flexible design that permitted changes in procedure and content, Introduction to Personal Development evolved. The course utilized two discernible methods: typical academic procedures to acquaint students with concepts of growth and development, and experiential methods to encourage further student involvement with concepts that were introduced by the course content. The course led students to look at themselves, as is true of most psychology courses. However, the typical development of psychological symptoms took on a new character; students dis-

covered degrees of health rather than degrees of sickness within themselves and found psychological goals to reach rather than personality disasters to avoid.

Course Content

Academic content was dealt with in traditional ways: reading and writing assignments, lectures, quizzes, and examinations. At the beginning of each term, students shared a common experience of course content that provided a reference point from which to explore personal meanings. The subject matter concentrated on psychological health, healthy interpersonal relationships, and values with implications for vocational decisions (Combs & Snygg, 1959; Frankl, 1963; Fromm, 1956a; Fromm, 1956b; Jourard, 1963; Maslow, 1956; Nixon, 1962; Rogers, 1956). Lectures and research topics emphasized such concepts as positive experience (Landsman, 1961), peak experiences (Maslow, 1962), self-concept (Chapters 7 and 8 in Combs & Snygg, 1959), self-disclosure (Jourard, 1964), and transcendent functioning (Privette, 1965). Several students combined action research and reading in their study of these concepts.

Experiential Approach

Experiences were designed to encourage self-understanding, improved relationships with others, and questioning which is unique and important to an individual student. The activities were course requirements, yet the quality of student performance was not evaluated for purposes of a grade in the course.

Reaction Papers. Weekly reaction papers required that each student describe some feeling or thought he had, one which may have been related to an important event in his life or how he felt one morning when he discovered it was raining. The papers were read only by the instructor who wrote brief responses and returned them to the students. Although the objectives of reaction papers were to help students become sensitive to their own feelings and communicate these feelings to another person, students were allowed freedom to be superficial rather than to falsify or pretend at disclosure. Most students began with "safe" reaction papers, such as the following:

I went to see one of James Bond's pictures. He is quite a hero on the screen. I read in a magazine that his producer didn't intend for the public to like him. He wanted the great 007 to be hated by all. James Bond, special agent 007, has a license to do everything under the sun. He is a fighter, a lover, businessman all wrapped up into one. In some of his pictures, I have to laugh because no one can do half the stuff he does. He missed getting killed by .007 (what a coincidence) seconds, and he is the only one left when a plane comes plunging to the earth. He shoots down airplanes with his little gun and outruns helicopters on foot. Yes, this guy is a wonderful person. My reaction to this is that the movies are made too, too unreal for the public. But for some reason we all like his movies.

Many students viewed reaction papers as valued expressions of important thoughts and feelings:

Love is the greatest element in the world; without it, life would have no meaning. Love is what causes people to be concerned for others and sometimes to give up their lives for its cause. Because love is so important, I don't know why it is so extremely difficult for me to express to another person how I feel about him (or her). I guess my inability to express my feelings about them causes me to sometimes become frustrated. It's like a counseling session in which I want to disclose myself more fully, but sometimes something seems to be keeping me from it. (Perhaps it's because I'm afraid of something; I don't know.) If I'm right about myself and these are my basic problems, I'm sure that I can make progress along these lines. Somehow if I keep striving (. . . this is torture) the things which I want to accomplish will become a reality and not just a goal (they are beginning to).

Group Discussions. Students met in groups of five to eight for an hour of discussion each week. Counselors, serving as leaders, neither attempted to adhere to the academic content of the course, nor did they lead students in the direction of group counseling. The counselor's task was to provide freedom for students to choose their own topics and their own individual levels of involvement.

For most students, the unstructured group was a new experience. Frequently discussions focused upon school situations, ranging from opinions about educational theory and practice to gripes about parking

problems aggravated by building construction. Students also explored—sometimes tentatively, sometimes openly—questions of apparent significance: dating relationships and sex morality, their changing roles in the family and resulting conflicts, and feelings about approaching desegregation in schools and racial attitudes.

Term Project. Each student selected a project related to some goal, problem, or question important to him and to the objectives of the course. The intention was to encourage each student to become actively involved in understanding himself, his own personal growth, and relationships that could be gratifying to him. Instead of some amount of reading, what happened to the student became the substance of the project. To facilitate personal involvement, each student was required to submit a preliminary outline of his project plans, and, at the end of the term, a statement indicating the activities in which he had been engaged.

Many students chose individual or group counseling at the college or with counselors in the community. Specific questions prompted the design of several projects. A girl who had tentatively chosen a vocation interviewed a practicing social worker. The girl reported apologetically at the conclusion that she was no longer interested in social work as a career. A prospective teacher made a 50-mile trip each week to observe and share class responsibilities with a third grade teacher. One group of students regularly met with a minister who was not offended by their metamorphosis from a childhood faith.

Individual students designed laboratory situations to help change their own behavior that they believed needed changing. Some students kept logs of social interactions which increased their confidence with new acquaintances. Several men students helped direct recreational activities for young boys, attempting to understand better the social behavior of the boys. A girl taught young children in her neighborhood. A married student worked out ways to help resolve a problem of communication with her in-laws.

EVALUATION

By didactic and experiential procedures, Introduction to Personal Development at-

tempted to foster personal growth and intellectual development. To evaluate objectively the effectiveness of these procedures in realizing these goals was virtually impossible. Evaluation included close examination of teaching methods and subject content by the instructors and feedback from discussion leaders regarding student perceptions of what was happening. In addition, many students felt free to criticize through their reaction papers.

Student evaluation was systematically invited at the end of each term. The following excerpts represent anonymous student expressions of the worth of the total experience:

helped me find myself and understand myself,

helped me tolerate others' opinions and attitudes,

helped me get along with my father and form opinions on sex and the family,

helped in no specific way (personally, not much),

let me express myself,

made me realize I shouldn't talk about myself,

helped me determine my major in college.

Some aspects of the course were perceived negatively by some students but were acclaimed by others. For example, one instructor was criticized as "indefinite, lacking an 'authoritarian air,' and too easy-going," yet was praised as "encouraging individual thought, having an informal manner, and showing respect for students."

Another step in the evaluation process was a follow-up of students who had completed the course during 1963-64. Students, as a group, believed the course to be worthwhile and felt that they had experienced personal growth in some way. A significant implication of the total student evaluation, including data from the semester evaluation, the follow-up study, and personal communications, is that students responded differentially to the same activity and viewed differentially their individual needs and direction of growth. Specific activities which were helpful and specific ways of growth were unique for each student.

Members of the counseling staff had an

active interest in Introduction to Personal Development and the worth of experiences for students enrolled in the course. At the end of the second year of experimentation, the course was re-evaluated by the counseling staff. The counselors' endorsement, based upon study of student evaluations and their own observations, supported these beliefs:

1. Humanistic and value-oriented content with experiential methods can be an effective springboard to intellectual growth and to personal development by providing personality ideals, facilitating heightened awareness of self and others, and encouraging a growth process;

2. Experiential methods are compatible with didactic procedures in the classroom and help students become personally involved in their formal education;

3. The class activities afford opportunity for significant relationships among students and address the local problem of inadequate facilities for meaningful social interaction;

4. Introduction to Personal Development opens the door to personal counseling for many students;

5. Counselors can responsibly pursue educational goals in the classroom without losing effectiveness as student personnel workers.

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