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An Interactive Teaching Plan to Further the Understanding and Experience of Stereotypes in Groups

Goh Pik Bien, Michael

"For things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them"

Aristotle

BACKGROUND

NED 281 Fundamentals of Group Guidance is a free elective course offered to Bachelor of Arts with Diploma in Education and Bachelor of Science with Diploma in Education students at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University. This two academic-unit course is intended to introduce teachers-to-be to the application of developmental guidance to enhance learning and social interaction in the classroom. Group theories and techniques in group guidance, decision-making, problem solving, conflict resolution in groups and the fostering of creativity are some of the topics covered in the course. The course objectives are designed such that upon the completion of the course, participants should be able to:

1. carry out their role as group tutors;
2. state the group process and assess group dynamics;
3. lead and manage groups effectively;
4. handle problems arising from group interaction and
5. monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of group guidance programmes.

Beyond the description and stated objectives of the course, what makes this course unique is its emphasis on experiential and active learning strategies. The course is designed such that participants are actually assigned to groups to experience, in their groups, the activities that

they will conduct in the future. In other words, this course uses groups to teach group guidance.

The idea for the structure of this course was motivated primarily by Johnson and Johnson's (1994) process of experiential learning. Experiential learning can be conceived of as a four-stage cycle:

1. take action on the basis of one's action theory;
2. assess consequences and obtain feedback;
3. reflect on how effective actions were and reformulate and refine the action theory and
4. implement the revised action theory by taking modified action.

Experiential learning is based upon 3 assumptions:

1. You learn best when you are personally involved in the learning experience.
2. Knowledge has to be discovered by yourself if it is to mean anything to you or make a difference in your behaviour.
3. Commitment to learning is highest when you are free to set your own learning goals and actively pursue them within a given framework.

Experiential learning is a process of making generalisations and conclusions about your own direct experiences. It emphasises experiencing what you are studying, building your own commitment to learn and being partly responsible for organising the conclusions drawn from your experiences.

The purpose of this paper is not to elaborate on the content of the entire course or the efficacy of the "group" method. An analysis of a pilot study on a similar course — its impact and implications — are discussed in Goh (1995). Rather, this paper focuses on the teaching of the concept of *stereotypes* in one class within the entire course.

The teaching of *stereotypes* comes towards the end of the course after participants have experienced the so-called "nuts and bolts" of group

process such as group communication, group leadership, techniques in group guidance, etc. The purpose of such an arrangement is to move participants beyond the intellectual practice of conducting groups towards experiencing the impact that feelings about fellow participants (attributes, personalities, etc.) can have on group dynamics and interaction.

Yalom (1985) states that such group experiences offer many types of learning not available elsewhere because one learns at an emotional level what one may previously know only intellectually. One is able to experience the power or lack of power in a group, learn about how important it is to be accepted by the group, learn about preferred roles in the group and many other group dynamics. One is then able to critically appreciate the value of such group processes.

If positive interdependence is one of the key factors to successful group interactions, then Johnson and Johnson (1994) aptly state that the inability to deal effectively with diversity among members leads to a number of barriers to effective group interaction such as prejudice, the tendency to blame the victim and cultural clashes.

Therefore, while understanding stereotyping tendencies is clearly important in the area of guidance and counselling, whereby counsellors and teachers do not prejudice the helping process, it is hopefully apparent that such heightened awareness can only be beneficial to the population at large as well, in everyday relations, and more so in a multiracial society such as Singapore with her multiracial classrooms.

In response to the above, an interactive teaching plan was adapted from Hazen (1977) to suit the needs of students in this course. A version of this plan was first introduced to and piloted with staff at NIE during the School of Education's Staff Interaction Seminar. The following plan incorporates feedback from the discussion at the seminar.

TEACHING PLAN

HEADBANDS: A STEREOTYPE SIMULATION

"To know one's self is wisdom, but to know one's neighbour is genius"

Minna Antrim

The following exercise, developed by Logan Hazen (1977), is designed for use either as a staff development tool or as a consciousness-raising experience for student groups and other populations. It uses a “party” theme to set up a situation in which participants must respond to one another based solely on stereotypes.

THE GOALS OF THE EXPERIENCE

1. To create an experience where stereotypes can be demonstrated behaviourally.
2. To have participants experience the pressure of stereotypical role expectations.
3. To demonstrate the effects of stereotypical role expectations on individual behaviour in a group.
4. To explore the effects of stereotypical role pressures on total group performance.
5. To explore methods of combating negative stereotypes.

GROUP SIZE

16 to 30 participants.

TIME REQUIRED

60 to 90 minutes.

MATERIALS

- A. Head sweatbands or paper headbands for each participant.
- B. Prepared 5 x 7 cards or marking pens to write on headbands.
- C. Masking tape to secure the ends of headbands if using paper headbands.

PHYSICAL SETTING

Comfortable room with movable chairs for each person and room for group to mill around comfortably. Chairs should be placed in a circle with open space in the centre. Highly reflective surfaces (like mirrors or windows) should be covered or removed prior to the exercise.

PROCESS

- I. The facilitator begins the exercise by noting the goals of the simulation.
 - A. To facilitate and enhance awareness of the “differences” between people through the exploration of stereotypes.
 - B. To explore one’s individual stereotype views and the effects of those views on the interaction between members of distinct groups.
 - C. To experience the effect of being treated as a member of a different group.
 - D. To explore methods of combating stereotypes.
- II. The facilitator leads a brief discussion on what “stereotypes” are, noting that while they are generally viewed as bad, they are a much needed shorthand for normal human communication.
- III. The facilitator explains that this will be a simulation exercise and how it works.
- IV. The following directions are read to the participants (in a pace slow enough to allow full relaxation and comprehension):

“Close your eyes, take a few deep breaths and relax... Breathe deeply...Try to remove all sense of tension from your body...Relax...Relax...” (The facilitator should continue with varied relaxation exercises until the group is sufficiently prepared for the exercise.) *“...Lower your head to your chest when you are completely relaxed and at ease with yourself...”*

“Imagine that you are coming home from work/school for the day. The day has been long, and you’re kind of tired, but otherwise, you’re in a good mood because the day has gone very well.”

“As you enter your building/block/home, you remember to check your mailbox. You notice that there are two or three letters and you wonder what they are. Once inside your room, you begin looking through your mail more closely and notice a pretty looking envelope – it is bluish-green and has a faint, though attractive

scent. As you open the envelope you can tell it's an invitation to a party/reception. You become excited as you open the envelope because you haven't been to such a social event for quite a while."

"The invitation states that you are invited to a party/reception on the following Saturday evening. It is being sponsored by a group you've admired for a long time, even though you've never been to any of their activities. You're very excited and, since you have nothing else planned, you decide to go. The only catch is that you don't know who has invited you, even though it says you were recommended."

"On Saturday evening, you arrive at the party/reception and you walk up to the door. You're anxious to start the evening because you know this will be an excellent time. Upon entering the place, you find there are a few minor requirements to come into the party/reception. The requirements seem a little strange but you decide to go along and agree to them since you're already there and besides, you don't have any other plans. The requirements are as follows:

- First - You don't know anyone at this party/reception.
- Second - You must agree to talk to everyone at the party at least once.
- Third - As part of a way to meet others, you must wear a label on a headband during the party.
- Fourth - You must not actively try to find out what label you are wearing. That is, do not ask or look at the label until instructed.
- Fifth - In talking with everyone at the party, you should be yourself, but you should relate to others based upon the label they are wearing. Furthermore, in asking questions to find out more about the individuals at the party, the questions should relate back to the labels that others are wearing without directly indicating their label.

"Because the directions are a little strange, you ask the person at the door to repeat the directions..." (The facilitator should read items "First through Fifth" above.)

"With your eyes still closed, when you are ready for your headband, please raise your head. From this point forth, please do not remove your headband until instructed to do so."

- V. When headbands are in place, the facilitator instructs the group to open their eyes and join the party. Each headband should have up to four descriptors, the first and second being sex and race. The final two should be typical of populations the participants could encounter in the university or other relevant setting. For example, athlete, shy, physically disabled, foreign student, engineer, psychology major, etc. A category called "invisible" should always be included, but this should only be on one card. Participants should be given descriptions different from themselves. In some cases, two persons can be assigned to the same category to allow comparison. The group is given 15-20 minutes to interact within their roles.
- VI. Participants are asked to return to their seats **without removing their headbands**.
- VII. Participants are individually asked to first discuss how they feel about people's reactions to them (before anyone gets to see their personal descriptions).
- VIII. Participants are allowed to remove headbands to discover roles. Group discussion on how people feel when responding to stereotypes, how they choose to respond in specific ways, how quickly people assume the stereotypical role in spite of the instructions, how stereotypical problems can be prevented and how this relates to their position or job.

ASSISTANT'S INSTRUCTIONS

1. Help arrange the room for the exercise.
2. Assign specific roles to each participant.
3. Affix the role assignment to each participant's headband.
4. Observe the participants' behaviour in the party.

5. Contribute your observations during the debriefing discussion.
6. Gather the materials at the end of the exercise.

The specific timing and greater details about your responsibilities include:

1. **Room set-up:** The room must be set-up with a circle of 20 chairs so that participants can see each other clearly. Leave enough room for walking behind each seat in the entire circle. If additional participants are present, they will be observers and should be given seats outside the circle.
2. **Headbands:** Give each of the participants seated in the circle a headband and instruct them to place the headband in place on their head.
3. **Observe the Participants:** Observe the participants seated in the circle to try to determine what the person is like (outgoing, quiet, sensitive, etc.). Later you will assign each person a role and it helps to have a general feeling for the type of person they are.
4. **Assign Roles:** While the facilitator is leading the “fantasy” segment of the exercise, assistants must assign roles to each participant in the circle. A “role card” is to be placed, face down, behind each person. The roles should be as different as possible from the person (i.e. different sex, race, etc.). The only card which must be given out is the “INVISIBLE” card and it must be given out with great care (it is the most powerful role in the exercise). It should be given to, preferably, a strong, outgoing person whom you feel will be able to handle heavy ostracism.
5. **Placing Cards:** As the “fantasy” segment ends, the leader will tell the participants, “with your eyes still closed, when you are ready for your headband, please raise your head.” Quickly place the card (behind the person) in the headband so that others can read the descriptions when facing the person directly. (It is best to ask the participant to pull the band forward for you to insert the card.)

6. **Observe the Party:** The participants will be allowed to circulate for 15-20 minutes. You should make process observations to be used later. Each group progresses differently. However, you should generally note:
 - how long it takes group members to assume the roles on their cards.
 - how the INVISIBLE person is treated; how long before the group ignores the person; what behavioural changes occur with the person as the exercise progresses?
 - what stereotypes people advance (not touching the AIDS victim; talking about need to diet for a heavy person; etc.); how they are “cruel” with their behaviour; whether the participants demonstrate surprise or remorse about what is happening; etc.)?
7. **Discussion:** The leader will structure the discussion for the first 10-15 minutes, then allow the discussion to move in the direction the group takes it. During this period, feel free to introduce any observations during the process.
8. **Pick-up Materials:** When the exercise ends, please gather the headbands and cards and return them to the leader.

POSSIBLE VARIATIONS TO THE STEREOTYPE SIMULATION AND OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

1. It would be appropriate to change the characteristics on the labels to suit different participant groups (e.g. characteristics of pupils for teachers or teacher trainees; an emphasis on racial or cultural characteristics to facilitate cultural awareness; students from different backgrounds/streams/majors, etc.).
2. If the class is too large, it is possible to have half the group observe the “party” seated in an outer circle surrounding participants of the “party”. This is sometimes referred to as a “fishbowl” format.
3. Be aware that certain audiences or cultures may be less inclined to talk about feelings expressed or experienced during the simulation.

While pressing cautiously for participants to talk about their feelings, such expressions should not be avoided or excluded from the debriefing because it is a critical component for understanding stereotypes.

4. Feedback from students in this course indicated that some felt uneasy about the task because they are shy and non-interactive by nature. While it is desirable that as many participants benefit from the experience, it is respectful to allow students to choose not to participate but to instead, observe and later comment about the process. Observers learn no less.
5. Beyond experiencing and understanding stereotypes, a mini-seminar can be conducted immediately after or as a follow-up workshop on models suggested for overcoming stereotypes. One approach often used is Pedersen's (1988) three stages of Multicultural Development: Awareness, Skills and Knowledge. For the purpose of this class, Pedersen has used the acronym "ASK" to suggest that, rather than trying to be a master who knows every culture or background of persons we try to relate to, a more important skill is that of knowing how to ask questions so that we do not jump to conclusions based on our stereotypes. As such, the stereotypes that we so commonly hold merely serve as frameworks that become clearer, the more we ask.

EVALUATION

For the purpose of exploring the effectiveness of this teaching plan, the above was conducted for the first time in the NIE *NED 281 Fundamentals of Group Guidance* course in the second semester of the 1995-96 year. As part of the experiential group learning process, students were asked to keep a journal at intervals in the class to reflect on how they were experiencing the group process. Similarly, students were asked to write a journal on their experience with the stereotype simulation. Different from the previous journals students wrote, they were requested to remain anonymous for this journal so that they would feel and write more candidly about their experience with this simulation. Students also rated the effectiveness of the simulation in highlighting the concept of stereotypes (on a 10-point scale with 1 being "Not at all Effective" and 10 being "Very Effective"). The average score for this group of 32 students was 7.5.

The following are some of the comments from students' journals about the stereotype simulation:

"Stereotyping is done because we do not have sufficient information about another person...we need to go beyond our narrow inaccurate perceptions of those we interact with."

"People must learn to know more about other persons and try to unlearn false ideas we hold."

"Through this exercise, I have learnt that not all people are what they seem. Effort must be made to know and understand others better."

"In the process, it is halting to see how many of us were unaware of the way we were stereotyping others."

"It is hurtful to others when we put labels on them....let not our attitude toward certain people be based solely on stereotypical views."

"The exercise taught me how it felt to be stereotyped. The questions asked of me and the way people perceived me gave me insights about how it felt being categorised into a particular stereotype."

"I feel that this exercise is useful in the sense that it made me aware that stereotyping exists, and that I am sometimes guilty of it. I have become more aware of its undesirable effects and how it feels to be stereotyped."

"Looks deceive, so we should not draw conclusions simply based on the first few minutes or even meetings with a person."

"I already know that it is important not to jump to conclusions about people in terms of race, religion, culture, etc., but I was surprised by the impact this activity had on me. The activity has made me more conscious of others' feelings especially in what I say, and my reactions towards them."

"I realised how much I (subconsciously) depend on cues as reflected in the labels to start a conversation and my reactions....like taking a step back when I discovered someone had AIDS."

"This exercise has broadened my view of stereotypes beyond race or religion but also to include other characteristics such as family background, dressing, etc..."

"As a teacher, pupil, friend, etc., I have often found myself stereotyping other people and this exercise helped me to see how it feels like to be stereotyped and how important it is to keep an open mind."

"This exercise has taught me that I should never make assumptions about others and placing them in my own frameworks. It felt bad, the way I was treated. It seemed that all the questions people asked of me were of a similar kind and it categorised me rather than recognising me for who I am."

"It is better to learn more about others through more contact and communication."

"It felt awful when people seemed more concerned about your shortcomings than the positive side of you. Even though you may be a confident person, you begin to feel discouraged and find it hard to carry on the conversation."

"I was 'assigned' to be an expatriate and even though I'm not, the fact that everyone kept asking me which country I'm from just made me get tired of it and resigned to just play the role. I am concerned that in real life, people end up living by others' false expectations."

"People tend to classify you and relate to you based on their classifications. There is a feeling of being trapped in a mould. You cannot seem to get out even though others' opinions are wrong."

"This exercise is good because it helped me see the prejudices and biases people have about others."

"I think that in the real world, stereotyping is a negative way of approaching and getting to know people. This exercise has taught me to be conscious and objective from the very start."

"This exercise was unique and interesting. It certainly taught me about stereotypes especially the way questions were directed at me...how hurtful it can be."

SAMPLE HEADBANDS

14 year old Female	18 year old Female	15 year old Male	26 year old Male
Partial hearing disability	Mother sells newspaper. Father's a taxi driver.	Obese Strong body odour	Chinese Has AIDS
Walks with a limp	President's scholar		

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