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A SEMINAR IN HUMAN REACTIONS FOR DEAF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Human learning is a complex task. Observers of behavior in this area are faced with the paradox of seemingly immense personal potential resulting in deeply disappointing results. Self-knowledge and awareness of others are vital aspects of learning that, if ignored, impoverish both the individual's personal growth and his relationships with those around him. Deficiencies in these areas can be impediments to other forms of learning.

This article will discuss a teaching experience that we think to be somewhat unique and know to be rewarding. Our perspective is that of the mental health professions, preventive psychiatry, and applied psychology, if you will.

The setting is an elective psychology course at Gallaudet College, a liberal arts college for the deaf in Washington, D.C. The course was first established in the Fall semester of 1968 by one of the authors¹ with the following objectives:

1. To provide an understanding of the psychodynamics of human behavior.
2. To help the students form an integrated cognitive and affective awareness of their everyday emotional reactions.
3. To aid progress in general adjustment, growth and ways of coping.

Since its inception, 118 students have completed the course. Of these 49 were male and 69, female. Students from each of the four undergraduate years and from the "Special Student" group were represented. The majority of the students, however, have been juniors and seniors, no doubt reflecting a limitation in enrollment with preference given to upperclassmen. Most were in their early or middle twenties with an upper age limit of 51 years.

As would be expected in a liberal arts college setting serving deaf and hard of hearing students on an international basis, there are students who are

¹*Luther D. Robinson*

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either congenitally or adventitiously deaf, pre- or postlingually deaf, and those with a widely varying range of residual hearing.

The educational background of students represents residential institutions, oral schools, day classes in public schools, public school attendance with no special provisions, and transfer students from other colleges and universities. The communicative skills and preferred mode vary widely as would be expected in a group with such a diversified background. During class the simultaneous method of communication is used. Skill in this varies depending on the individual's particular expressive and receptive ability in the differing components.

Most classes have at least one foreign student in the group. Some are married or engaged couples, and most have "steadies."

The course was originally designed to cover such emotional reactions as separation anxiety, grief, shame and guilt, inferiority feelings and the like, and what could be termed "normal" reactions to problem situations. The content and method have remained unchanged with appropriate adjustments and additions being made according to the sophistication and course background of each group. Additional topics that have been discussed are loneliness, death, encounter groups, mental hospitals, psycho-drama, paranoia, defense mechanisms, frustration and conflict, homosexuality, love and hate, inhibitions, stigmas and stereotypes, and reactions to disability.

No text book is used. Emphasis is on the relation of personal experiences and observations of the particular human reaction being discussed. Students are encouraged to present their own ideas, beliefs, and opinions. Fundamentals of psychodynamics are explained as appropriate topics arise. Direct information is given as it is pertinent to a particular experience or when the group becomes aware of the lack of an adequate basis to continue the discussion. Often the question of possible differences in the emotional reactions of deaf and hearing people is examined.

As the various topics are completed, each student writes a summary giving his definition of the emotional reactions discussed including examples from his own personal experience. The aim of this is twofold: to effect an increase in feedback and a check in individual understanding, and to accumulate over a period of time enough meaningful material to compile a reference book available to future classes.

Each group also views a film about the Mental Health Program for the Deaf at Saint Elizabeths Hospital and then visits the ward for deaf patients there to observe some therapeutic activity such as psychodrama or dance therapy.

The reaction of the initial class is of interest. In the beginning it was one of suspicion, rebellion, and wonderment. Students complained of inability to understand the teacher's signs and they felt insulted by the strict rules concerning attendance, tardiness, and participation. The fact that no text was used, no formal lectures given, and few writing assignments required seemed to result in feelings of non-achievement. During one meeting of this

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group, these issues were discussed. The teacher listened to the students' concerns and explained the methods, principles, and goals. The students then agreed to struggle through the course with the teacher. As the course progressed, the group process began facilitating cooperation, easing tensions, diminishing anxiety and the outlook became brighter as each one discovered that the others had similar inner feelings, attitudes toward hearing loss, and other emotional reactions comparable to their own. There was a comfortable forum for expression of feelings, even negative ones.

Individual reports of past suicidal ideation did not come up in this group discussion, but some group members did express this in their individual writings to the teacher and later they learned that they were not alone in this. This dawning awareness gave a great deal of interpersonal support and comfort.

An increasing enrollment necessitated the addition of a second teacher after the first semester. A total of four members of the Gallaudet Psychology Department have taught such a group at one time or another. One of the authors² has taught the course for three successive semesters. The authors are presently teaching the class jointly.

Developments in recent groups are worthy of note. Students appear to have a much more positive outlook to the course and prior expectations are more accurate.

It should be noted that some of the students are psychology or sociology majors or those with course background in the behavioral sciences. This is of interest because, as would be expected, they come to the course with a basis in the terminology and principles of psychodynamics. Many tell us this was enhanced by the course. Equally important, they seem to be positive in evaluating the personal benefits received from the class experience. This seems to support the value and success of the course objectives, especially in reference to the formation of an integrated cognitive and affective awareness of their everyday emotional reactions.

Assessment of influences on human behavior is no simple affair. Self-knowledge and awareness of others are life-long tasks that in scope and completeness lie always just beyond our precision of measurement. A partial appraisal of what we think the course contributes to the student's learning experience is best conveyed by excerpting from their individual course critiques. This demonstrates how much can be learned by all when the students speak for themselves.

"I profited two things from this course: 1) vocabulary and 2) I learned to recognize people's reactions and understand them better by knowing which (defense) mechanisms they use and why. It enabled me to understand people better."

²Jean Mulrooney

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“This course helped me to further develop an ability to listen to others, to try to see their point of view, to be open, more accepting. In some ways, I was disappointed with the course expecting something in more depth. Experiencing this feeling sort of helped me ponder how realistic my expectations of other people are.”

“The only regret is that two hours were not enough. True, we talk everyday in rap sessions but the atmosphere is different. In class we are willing to give and take but not so often in other places.”

“It enabled us to define our emotions and see in what various ways they affect us, either harmfully or beneficially. We shared some of others’ personal experiences . We may have learned in what other ways we could redirect or redefine our emotions.”

“We learned more about psychology in general. We felt free about discussing our own opinions about psychology itself in many ways.”

“All people (at least if they are human) possess different types of feelings. I learned some of the ways people overcome their feelings and that if you are human you will have many different feelings.”

“Whatever was said gave me the feeling of what is really done in everyday (life). Like I myself have been wondering of something within myself and could realize it when we were discussing loneliness.”

“I enjoyed feeling closer to the students in the class and sharing their experiences with them.”

“. . . the informal manner in which the course was conducted made us all feel comfortable and free to speak our minds. It helped us overcome shyness of speaking of feelings and ideas with a group of people.”

“All people are human and we are apt to make mistakes. It has given me an insight of the real reason people behave as they do. It has also taught me that the human being is a very fragile thing and must be dealt with care.”

As the above comments show, the major benefits seem to center on the identification and validation of their own feelings, greater tolerance of other people’s behavior, awareness of their own and other’s stimulus value, and an opportunity to relate knowledge of professional fields to their everyday lives. We think this is an important contribution that can aid each student in the challenge of becoming most fully human, most fully himself.