

## Misuse of Group Discussion

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*Four factors are proposed as basic to any decision about the selection of a teaching technique: group-member interdependence, time available, previous experience (in groups and with content), and the learning objective to be achieved. It is maintained that other factors, such as group size and teacher experience, can be evaluated after these four "basic" factors have been considered. Examples are used to suggest how the proposed factors can be used in deciding whether to use group discussion or some other teaching technique.*

THE group discussion technique is often misused by adult educators. When an educator decides to use group discussion, he is making at least three important assumptions. First, he assumes that a climate will exist in the group so that individuals will interact and feel free to enter into discussion, to test their ideas against those of others, and to evaluate ideas suggested by others; or, he assumes that sufficient time exists for the necessary climate to develop.<sup>1</sup> The desired climate emerges as member interdependence develops.

Second, the educator is assuming that the group members understand the content to be discussed and are able to verbalize it. Unless they have such understanding and ability, they cannot discuss the content nor assist other members in learning. This is a logical conclusion and is supported by our knowledge of learning and verbal behavior.<sup>2</sup>

Third, the educator using the discussion technique is assuming that the individuals have sufficient experience in discussion groups<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jack R. Gibb, "Sociopsychological Processes of Group Instruction," in Nelson B. Henry (ed.), *The Dynamics of Instructional Groups*, 59th Yearbook, Part II, National Society for the Study of Education (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 131-33.

<sup>2</sup> Robert M. Gagné, *The Conditions of Learning* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1965), p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond G. Kuhlen (ed.), *Psychological Backgrounds of Adult Education* (Chicago: Center for the Study of Liberal Education for Adults, Notes and Essays No. 40, 1963), p. 124.

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to perform effectively as group members. Or, he is assuming he can provide the missing components necessary for the group to accomplish the learning objective. Examples of these components are providing rewards for members, insuring compliance with group norms, or initially providing norms for the group. To provide these missing components, the educator must be able to help the group set goals and to perform roles the members cannot perform which are necessary for group survival. This inability of the members may be due solely to their unawareness of the need to perform these roles (for example, providing leadership or controlling the group).<sup>4</sup>

Underlying these assumptions, and all adult education, is a value of our society known as the "efficiency criterion." This criterion demands that participants learn the greatest amount possible within the allocated time. Stated another way, it calls for maximum output or learning from minimum input<sup>5</sup> of time, money, and effort. Where this value exists, as I propose it does, it must be considered in selecting a teaching technique.

The foregoing assumptions appear simple and straightforward. However, their significance increases immensely when we use them in deciding which teaching technique to use. We must ask in each situation whether the respective assumptions are fully met. When one or more assumptions are not met, the educator's best judgment is called into play and he must thoroughly consider the total situation before he decides to use group discussion.

#### SELECTED FACTORS

Four factors drawn from literature are selected for explanation and discussion to provide a basis for deciding the validity of the charge that the group discussion technique is misused, and for determining whether group discussion is appropriate in any situation. The first three factors, derived from the foregoing assumptions, are interdependence, time, and previous experience both in groups and with the content to be learned. The fourth factor, the learning objective to be achieved, is basic and must be considered in any decision concerning learning.

These factors are not all-inclusive. For example, size of group is important, but it has been over-emphasized at the expense of more basic factors. An educator cannot change, at a given time, the

<sup>4</sup>Nathaniel Lee Gage, *Handbook on Research in Teaching* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1963), p. 1139.

<sup>5</sup>Gale Jensen et al. (eds.), *Adult Education* (Adult Education Association of the United States, 1964), p. 142.

learner's experience in groups or his knowledge of the content. Neither can he change the nature of the content. At a given time these are fixed. The educator can make small groups out of a large group with a little effort.

### *Interdependence*

The first and very important factor is interdependence. Group interdependence means that members rely upon one another. They can have interdependent goals, or be interdependent in control of the group, or in the performance of roles or functions. They can be interdependent for the content to be learned or for providing rewards within the group.

This factor can be clarified by contrasting interdependent conditions with dependent conditions found in discussion groups. A group dependent for content has an instructor or group member providing all the information. Information flow is primarily one-way, from the source to each member. In an interdependent group, each member has some knowledge of the subject and shares responsibility for providing information or content. Information flow is two-way among most if not all of the members.<sup>9</sup>

The product of this information interchange can be feedback and evaluation. A group member states an opinion; it is evaluated by one or more of the members; the person who states the opinion receives evaluative information and potential feedback. He is either provided with reinforcement or made aware of the differences between his opinion and that of one or more group members. Through such a process much of the learning in groups takes place.

Being interdependent for control means most members feel a responsibility to regulate behavior in the group. Any member may and will question the content of a discussion whenever he feels it is not relevant. He may also suggest ways the group can solve its problems of control. Contrast this with highly dependent conditions where members feel no responsibility for control or where they are willing to let one individual control the group. Often a formally appointed leader is made responsible for deciding when an item of discussion is not relevant, or a member has taken too much time. The leader must then singlehandedly attempt to move the group back on the road to achieving its goal.

A similar contrast exists for goals of the group. If activity by all

<sup>9</sup> Harold Guetzkow, "Differentiation of Roles in Task Oriented Groups," in Darwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander (eds.), *Group Dynamics* (New York: Row Peterson and Co., 1960), p. 684.

of the group accomplishes only the individual goals of a few members, the group is operating in a highly dependent condition. However, if a group goal has been identified and accomplishing this goal accomplishes each person's goal, members are interdependent.

If a leader or group member assigns all roles to be performed in the group, and if he provides most of the recognition for achievement or encouragement, the group is dependent on that person. Contrast this with interdependent conditions where any group member may assume a role which must be performed, such as rewarding members, giving support to individual members, or helping create and maintain a desirable social climate in the group.

Interdependence produces desirable group climate. When a high degree of interdependence develops in a group, members reduce their defensiveness. They feel safe to test untried ideas, to critically evaluate ideas of others, and to give suggestions which will insure maintenance of the group or enhance its productivity.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Time*

Individuals who have previously worked together in groups often find it fairly easy to engage in social interaction and develop interdependent relationships in a new setting.<sup>8</sup> Strangers or individuals who are only passing acquaintances first test the intentions of each member in the new group. They try to determine the individuals' goals, whether others are willing to share responsibility, and whether members will respond either aggressively and defensively, or in an open and permissive manner. These tests and evaluations must be made either consciously or subconsciously in the formation of every group. Individuals then react according to their interpretation of the feedback. To complete the testing and receive the necessary feedback requires time. Short-circuiting the process by attempting to achieve the desired learning before the necessary climate has been developed and before testing and evaluating have been completed will result in less than optimum learning.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Experience*

The third factor—experience of group members—has two pertinent dimensions. The first is experience in a learning group. Although individuals spend a large part of their life in groups, there

<sup>7</sup>Gibb, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-22.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 117-21.

are important differences between learning groups and other groups. For example, in a policy-making group, differences of opinion are often resolved through bargaining. In a learning group, the objective is not to arrive at a decision by consensus, which is often the decision proposed by the most influential member, but rather to find a desirable solution to the problem. Thus in a learning group, politics and bargaining can be extremely detrimental.<sup>10</sup> If group members are to have strong motivation, they must believe that learning in a group is possible and that learning can be facilitated through cooperative effort. Such beliefs can be created and enhanced through experience in productive learning groups.

The second dimension of experience is the knowledge group members have of the content to be learned. They must be able and willing to verbalize the content before they can assist one another in learning. Ability to recall is necessary before the members can either verbalize or apply the contents to the solution of a problem.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Level of Learning Objective*

This factor can also be divided into two dimensions: the nature of the content and the level of learning desired. If the objective of a meeting is to bring about *awareness* of an idea, or a similar low level of learning such as to *identify* or *recall* facts or ideas, then lecture is the most efficient and effective technique.<sup>12</sup> The information can be quickly conveyed to the learners with minimum effort on their part. If the objective is some higher level of learning such as *evaluation* or *application*, the discussion technique is the most desirable, provided the other conditions are met. If the learner is to evaluate the information to see if it fits with his values, mores, and folkways, or if he is to determine the desirability of proposed alternatives,<sup>13</sup> group discussion provides him an opportunity to practice application and evaluation of the content.<sup>14</sup> He can obtain immediate feedback. Feedback in the form of constructive evaluation provides the learner support and aids him in correcting misapplications, misinterpretations, and illogical reasoning.

<sup>10</sup> Herbert A. Thelen, *Dynamics of Groups at Work* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 286-87.

<sup>11</sup> Gagné, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

<sup>12</sup> Efficiency is the degree of accomplishment of the individual goals and effectiveness is the degree of accomplishment of the organization's or agency's goals. James G. March (ed.), *Handbook of Organizations* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1965), pp. 1171-72.

<sup>13</sup> Alan C. Filley and Franklin C. Jesse, "Training Leadership Style: A Survey of Research," *Personnel Administration*, XXVIII (May-June, 1965), 15-16.

<sup>14</sup> Gage, *op. cit.*, p. 1140.

The second dimension is the nature of the content. If it is factual and easy to communicate, then the lecture or direct dissemination of the information is quicker. However, if the content requires interpretation or is less factual in nature, then group discussion will be likely to increase understanding of the content.<sup>15</sup> For example, the net return expected from applying fertilizer to corn is factual, value free, and requires little interpretation. Compare this with a question concerning effects of rising agricultural land prices on the entry of youth into farming. In the latter case, the content is less factual, more value laden, requires more interpretation, and is thus more suitable for group discussion.

#### USING THE FACTORS TO MAKE DECISIONS

The educator must decide which basic technique to use for the learning experience. He must weigh all the factors. To illustrate how he can use the discussed factors in making the selection, three examples are given. In each case, as we have just indicated, the underlying assumption is made that it is desirable to accomplish the learning as efficiently and effectively as possible. If this is not a concern or if the learning objective is to provide experience in groups, then additional criteria should be considered.

Let us examine first the learning of factual content. The presumed learning objective is for farmers to understand the use of a new weed control. Everyone interested can participate, and only two sessions are planned. This is a situation very familiar to Cooperative Extension agents. The objective, to use a new practice, means that the adopters must be able to apply it to their situation. Group discussion would best accomplish this level of learning. However, considering all the proposed criteria, the educator could find the lecture technique most desirable. The limited time allocated, the educator's lack of knowledge concerning how much the farmers already know about the new practice, and the highly dependent conditions that would exist during the first meeting would make lecture preferable to group discussion.

For another example, consider a project with the objective of having young farm families establish and use a family budget. Assume that five sessions are scheduled, and that the families have had some experience working together in discussion groups. In this case, the educator has two desirable alternatives for the first session. He could use the lecture technique to provide background information on family budgeting. His decision would depend on the

<sup>15</sup> Filley and Jesse, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

learners' present knowledge of the content. If they have had experience with budgets, the first session could give major emphasis to group development. The remaining four sessions could be devoted to accomplishing the learning objectives.

Four factors are considered relevant in the decision to use the discussion technique for this example: (1) Since the allotted time is relatively long, interdependent relationships could develop along with the desirable social climate necessary for active, open discussion; (2) the members know each other; (3) the content requires interpretation; and (4) the objectives require the participants to apply their acquired knowledge to the solution of their problems. A discussion group would be the best way to achieve these objectives.

Homemaker and 4-H leader groups develop a high degree of interdependence over time. A group climate can exist that is conducive to learning. Members assist one another in acquiring knowledge and skills in a group and they study many subjects fused with values. All of these conditions render group discussion highly desirable. Frequently, however, nongroup members are brought in to teach lessons or conduct training schools, which immediately creates conditions of dependency. Unfamiliar content, which members are unable to verbalize, is also introduced. In such cases, use of group discussion is likely to result in less than acceptable results. A more direct presentation of information is desirable, even if the level of learning achieved is lower. Higher levels of learning could be achieved through group discussion techniques at follow-up meetings involving only the established group members.

#### SUMMARY

The contention is made that adult educators often misuse the group discussion technique. The author's position stems from field experience and from his study of research and authoritative writings. While not all-inclusive, four ideas are considered basic to the selection of teaching techniques: interdependence, time, experience of group members (both in learning groups and with content to be learned), and the learning objective to be achieved. Their relevance must be weighed for each situation.

Group discussion is effective when: (1) the objective is to achieve higher levels of learning such as evaluation or application; (2) allocated time is relatively long; (3) content is less explicit or factual, requiring more interpretation and involving values; and (4) individuals have had experience learning in discussion groups and possess some understanding of the content.