

Ethics in Training

Training, Frustration and ...

"Happiness? Sorrow that has not succeeded."

Leo Ferré

It was our colleague and friend Jean-Marie Bergeret who, at the end of one of the first Long-Term Training Courses of the European Youth Centre in the early 1990s, told us that "...training is always a matter of management of frustration". For some unknown reason, I have registered that statement in my mind and keep using it, especially in team meetings when it appears clear that the gap between what we wanted to do and what we were able to achieve is wider than what we had reckoned on.

by Rui Gomes

Frustration: a circumstance or act that prevents the satisfaction of an aroused physiological or social need of a person. (...) some frustrations are (even) socially constructive, for they may cause the person to discover new solutions to problems.

(Encyclopaedia Britannica)

We never really asked Jean-Marie what he meant by it, because it seemed so natural and so obvious to us. It was only later that we started to look more closely at its actual meaning and implications for what we spend most energy on: preparing training programmes and evaluating them.

Apart from more or less pathological tendencies to see things negatively, including creating conditions which will secure our future frustration through strategies that Paul Watzlawick¹ has named "the pursuit of unhappiness", our work as trainers in non-formal education is bound to generate frustration. Fortunately, it also generates other more positive and motivating feelings and attitudes. Going beyond the negativeness of frustration implies taking into account at least three other issues: management of expectations, making full use of evaluations and coping with the limits of a training course.

Frustration and the management of expectations

In pursuit of the autonomy and participation of trainees in the learning process, it has become very common to associate them with the shaping of the programme of the training or, at least, to ask them to identify their own expectations, motivations and sometimes also their perceived training needs. Such self-reflection and examination is indeed very important for the trainee - or for a candidate for training - in order to review what he/she needs, is looking for or wants to develop. And it still constitutes a very important tool or indicator for the trainers of the probable priorities of the

trainees. Leaving aside the differences that exist between expectations, motivations and needs (not always clearly defined or definable), and also leaving aside the question of the accuracy of that self-perception, one of the common consequences of such self-reflection is that it invites the trainee to believe that (1) this is what s/he needs, (2) this is what s/he will get and (3) that s/he has a fundamental right to demand it. Unfortunately, as regards creating frustration, it also sometimes means that the trainee feels that in the absence of what he has asked for, nothing will work or, at least, that the training has not been successful.

There are in fact at least two principles that enter on a collision course at this stage: participation and adjustment to participants' needs on the one hand, and realism and limitation of resources on the other. It is very nice (and very empowering too!) to involve participants in their own learning process and to invite them to think about and to express what and how they like and need to learn. But it is also a fact that no team will ever be able, in the normal conditions of space and time of the average European and intercultural training course, to cater for the needs and expectations of ten, twenty or thirty participants. And we are still assuming that participants actually know enough about the training to identify specific needs. Hence the honest answers to the question about "Your training needs" on some application forms: "an overhead projector", "to be trained" or "everything".

The fact is that we more or less inevitably set the conditions that create later frustrations. Of course, we can cover up the problem by declaring that the programme is exactly what the participants "wanted, expected and needed". (It has happened more than once that this was done without even checking what the participants had actually identified!). This is no



¹ Watzlawick, Paul, *The Situation is Hopeless but not Serious. The Pursuit of Unhappiness*, New York: 1983.





doubt still the best way to comfort participants ('Don't worry, we will take care of it'. 'Trust your team.'). What this does in fact however is to transfer the frustration from the participants to the trainers (because in most cases trainers are aware of their limits). And if it does not produce frustration, it should.

The challenge that remains for many of us is precisely how to distinguish the task of identifying training needs and motivations from the obligation of the team to (try to) answer them. Without hypocrisy, and with professionalism. Ideas and experiences are welcome.

Using and abusing evaluations

The supreme moment of frustration for the trainers and, to a lesser degree, for the trainees, is the final evaluation, usually at the end of the course or seminar. Despite everything we may learn and train about evaluation, it is still very much the moment at which criticism and dissatisfaction are voiced, and somehow we are more sensitive to this than to the expressions of appraisal, appreciation and thanks.

If participants do not express dissatisfaction with anything in particular or at least regret that this or that has not been dealt with at greater depth, then we, the trainers, may legitimately conclude that their level of awareness (of their own training needs) has, unfortunately, not improved; or that their critical spirit and attitude, so crucial in many ways for the development of personal autonomy and a critical mind, have not sufficiently progressed. We may, indeed, adopt attitudes and methods that, regardless of what happens, will lead to frustration in one way or another. This obviously has a positive side since there will be always be areas to improve and motivations to do things differently next time. Including experiencing new frustrations.

It can also legitimately be argued that planning a course by objectives - and evaluating it by objectives (inevitable, to some extent) - is itself a generator of frustrations, because not all objectives will ever be fully achieved, or to the same extent. The issue is not new, and there are indeed training approaches that give a much higher priority to the results or to the process (but one could still argue, that they should nevertheless be transferable into objectives).

I read a debate some time ago between two computer engineers about the possibility or impossibility of the prevention of the year 2000 computer bug, and how easy - argued the first of them - it would have been to prevent the problem by adding one or two lines to some computer programme 20 or 30 years ago. To which the second expert replied that although now it seemed extremely easy and simple, at that time it was virtually impossible. In fact, the article concluded, that we tend to ignore or to forget that high technology hardly works. Training should sometimes be considered part of high technology, too. I was recently talking to a participant and we were commenting on what would happen if our system of translation into three languages failed. Nothing too serious, I said. Yes, she replied, but now imagine if a trainer broke a leg, or if two trainers got flu and had to stay in bed, or if the group got food-poisoning or if there was an airport strike and nobody could land for a week. She was just imagining, but I really thought that yes, indeed, after all it is a small miracle that most courses happen without any major incident or accident. That would be really adding tragedy to frustration.

Incidentally, our research into the number of training courses that we would have had to cancel if the year 2000 bug had struck was inconclusive. That was really frustrating!

The limits of a training course

Possibly the best way to understand, absorb and channel frustration into something useful and constructive is to accept our own limits as trainers and the limits of what can be achieved in one training activity.

It is only to be expected that participants want to learn everything they feel they should know about European Youth programmes, filling in application forms, fund-raising, European institutions, group dynamics, intercultural learning, games and ice-breakers, leadership and communication skills, conflict management, project management and report writing, networking and public relations (...) in a five day training course (that should also include free time, sports activities, sight-seeing and 'individual time!'). It is only to be expected, because we are curious, we want to learn, and we don't want to miss anything. And also because we have access to very few education or training activities in which the trainers bother to ask participants what they need or would like to learn. Working with participants who are motivated and inspired for action motivates the trainer to go further, and to deliver the best possible content, method, advice.

Both participants and trainers sometimes act as if this Chance for Training was a question of "now or never". Other attitudes, such as participants requesting more methods, practical tools and immediate solutions to challenges they meet with groups, frequently reflect a similar anxiety, equally healthy and potentially positive.

"Now I know better what I need to learn more about" - a more positive re-formulation of "now I know what I don't know" - is a perfect example not only of the limits of one training activity, but also of how positive events (learning, self-development) can generate frustration, or at least be interpreted as such (and therefore "hopeless but not serious", as Watzlawick puts it). The trainer should probably feel partly frustrated not because of what s/he has not done but because of what could not possibly have been done.

Accepting the limits of training - and enjoying living with the frustration it may create (no masochism involved) - is in fact accepting the limits of what the trainer can accomplish, whether s/he is an inspirer, teacher, leader, expert, motivator or guru. For, at the end of the day, or at the end of the course, one can also say that what worked well was in a particular setting of space and time. And it is a reminder that if the training had continued for the three extra weeks that the remaining needs would require, the magic between trainers and trainees would probably have been broken and frustration might have turned into bitterness and dislike. And then frustration would really start.

At the end of the day, we are just trainers. Not gods, not gurus, not even teachers. Not even colleagues. Just trainers. And that too can be very frustrating. And empowering, too.

Carpe Diem.

P.S. Who will dare to write the first article about empowerment?

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