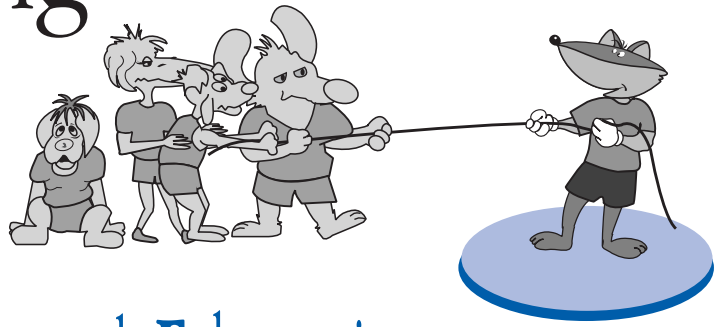
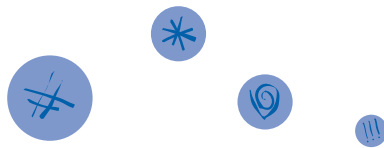


Ethics in Training



Resistance in Non-formal Education



“In working with some political and/or student organisations, I have frequently experienced resistance among participants against dealing with more personal issues at seminars”. In her article, Mette Bram gives some explanations of the psychological mechanisms which might provoke such resistance, and some tips for trainers on how to react in those situations.



by Mette Bram

In working with some political and/or student organisations I have frequently experienced resistance among participants against dealing with more personal issues at seminars. I think this is a general phenomenon that most of us experience to a certain extent.

During study sessions and training courses as trainers we often try to facilitate personal, individual awareness about issues such as roles, identity and feelings, no matter whether the title of the course is “Generation Gaps”, “Intercultural Learning” or “Organisational Management”. This focus on a more personal (both inner and social) development is one key factor which makes non-formal education radically different from formal education.

This article attempts to give some explanations of the psychological mechanisms involved when participants meet us with either passivity, irony or a very critical attitude (inspired by the work of P. Berliner). Typical reactions of participants can be:

- To focus on intellectual arguments and generalised, abstract discussions, and avoid at all costs any personal statements.
- To criticise the structure and time frame of the seminar or exercise, directly or delayed

and indirectly, during breaks (out of the relevant context and away from the relevant trainers).

- To try to escape from the learning environment, either by constantly requesting breaks or another frame for the activity (e.g. “why can’t we be outside more, the sun is shining”), or else by starting to talk while the trainer or other participants are presenting their points.

I see many of these reactions as resistance mechanisms characterised by an unwillingness to deal with potential psychological conflicts concerning personal self-confrontation and relations to others.

Most of the participants from political and/or student organisations are what we can characterise as verbally or logically intelligent (see the work of Howard Gardner/Daniel Goleman), and most of them are taking first steps on the career ladder in higher education. They are used to a certain pupil role and to being rewarded for “good arguments”.

In non-formal education it is not always the “good argument” that has a high value. In seminars some of the most gratifying moments are those when a participant really feels that

s/he learned something new about her/his culture, personal relations or attitudes. In other words people are developing their emotional intelligence that is so often totally neglected in formal education.

Many participants will automatically resist getting in touch with these feelings. So first of all, in my opinion, a lot of resistance is merely a natural defence mechanism. It is an unconscious protection of the person against involving personal emotions and life experience in the learning process. The root of this type of resistance is fear of change, which is related to the breakdown of the traditional pupil role (which typically takes place at seminars): it is fear of changing previous beliefs and identity, and fear of being manipulated. These fears are usually unconscious for the participants and the shield against them is resistance towards getting involved in certain activities.

Resistance among participants, whether it appears as passivity or maybe anger, can start a vicious circle. For instance, some participants might express their dissatisfaction by stating that “there is not enough time for the discussion” and “we are wasting our time in the “family/tree/focus groups” (the moments set aside during seminars for process evaluation in smaller groups that typically demands personal statements). The trainer(s) might then start to argue that “we have a time schedule we have to stick to”, and this then results in a process whereby the participants will not thoroughly engage themselves in the assignments as an indirect form of protest. This might end up with group inputs in plenary sessions that are of low quality or simply make fun of the subject matter. The trainers can then complain among themselves that the participants are “a bad group” or “difficult and blocking all the good things we have to offer”. This attitude will of course be reflected in the continued work: general dissatisfaction rumbles through the rooms.

As a trainer you can get really annoyed if you feel that some participants are not taking the exercises seriously, so everybody gets caught up in a web of unspoken and unfulfilled expectations towards each other. Participants expecting a different kind of “teacher” and trainers expecting a different kind of (read: more emotionally capable) participant.

It is too easy to blame such difficulties on the participants. As a trainer you have the responsibility of understanding these mechanisms - and resistance is to be expected. When met with complaints many trainers make the

mistake of arguing with the participants. This usually takes up a lot of time and frees the participants from actually dealing with how an exercise may affect them personally and emotionally.

Of course, resistance, distance and more or less aggressive criticism are not always a matter of participants’ unconscious transformation of repressed fear. In some cases trainers should definitely be criticised. For instance when an attempt to stay in control causes the trainer to be so out of touch with the needs and wishes of the participants that good learning options are disrupted. Here are some tips about methods that I have used to prevent resistance and the potential aggression from evolving into major conflict and loss of the always limited and thus valuable time:

- Speak openly and directly about what you see happening and analyse the process.
- Use small theory-inputs (e.g. from communication or conflict theory) explaining why a situation is difficult to handle. It can calm people to connect an intellectual explanation with the emotional experience of the situation. The feelings are then “normalised” - we have them in common.
- Use yourself as an example. Explain and visualise how you have learned to tackle a similar situation. In this way you make the participants understand that you have understood and accepted the situation.
- Agree with the criticism and clear the air. Form working groups to free participants from the pressure and powerlessness of some plenaries (you can also ask them to come up with 2-3 solutions to the alleged problem).
- Ask participants to make their own estimate of how much time they need for group work. Often they sense this better than do you and your plan.
- Stop focusing on the disappointed and resisting participants and base examples on the quiet and positive people.
- Be a dynamo and try pumping initiatives into the group when you sense resistance and fear of change (but be aware of your limitations, because this can be exhausting).

Finally, I would like to refer to the classic advice mentioned by Rui Gomes in his article in the previous issue of Coyote: Never ever forget to deal with expectations - both your own and the participants’ - in the ever-prevailing “management of frustration” that we face as trainers...



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