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COUNSELLING-ORIENTED GROUP LEARNING EXPERIENCES

When Seneca, one of Ontario's Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology, opened in 1967 to serve North York and the Regional Municipality of York, it offered to its many "communities," on both a day and evening basis, a voluntary, confidential, free, and diversified Counselling Service.

North York, an expanding suburban municipality of Metropolitan Toronto, is rapidly changing from a predominantly middle-class residential community to one composed of industrial complexes, apartments and new suburban homes. The Regional Municipality of York, an adjacent rural district stretching to Lake Simcoe and embracing a number of small towns, is becoming increasingly popular with commuter dwellers. Seneca College offers the residents of this large geographic area a wide variety of programs and services.

Established on a developmental model, the College Community Counselling Service emphasizes diversification and flexibility of program. The counsellors, endeavoring to identify and respond to the needs of many differing counselees in a facilitative, supportive and innovative way, are at present devoting approximately 60% of their time to 1:1 counselling relationship and 40% to counselling-oriented group learning activities.

Those who consult the counsellors are searching not only for a deeper sense of self, but also for a more definite sense of direction: young adults presently in high school who seek information about college, help in assessing their personal qualifications and suitability for further study, and information regarding job opportunities; young working people who wish to return to school and complete an interrupted education; mature men and women who, for various reasons, desire to alter in some way their accustomed pattern of living, learning and working; newcomers to Canada, increasing in numbers in the college area, who are undergoing dramatic and often traumatic change in life style, language and culture, with all the accompanying financial, employment and family problems.

These counselees are assisted, through individual counselling relationships and by participation in counselling-oriented group learning experiences, to re-assess their interests, abilities, aptitudes and aspirations.

The group programs presently being offered by the Counselling Service are designed for students already enrolled in the College, who are experiencing difficulties related in some way to an unfamiliar learning situation and also for individuals in the broader community who are considering a change of occupation, further education, or revised life style.

Worlds of Women (W.O.W.)

Through their contacts with many citizens of the College area, Seneca's counsellors have become increasingly aware of the concerns of mature women.

These women, usually married, with children growing up, come to the counsellors with a variety of problems which accentuate their feelings of uselessness, lack of involvement and hopelessness. Many of them seem to feel that there is no way they can obtain the help or knowledge necessary to enable them to lead active, productive lives in the community.

Most of these mature women seek information regarding education, re-education, employment opportunities and community services. In addition, they often desire individual counselling and a group counselling-oriented program, to help them overcome a very real sense of inadequacy, and to assist them in gaining confidence and a feeling of self-worth.

After six months of investigation and preparation, a pilot program "The Worlds of Women" was launched in January 1970. It focused on the two "worlds" of women: the "World Within" (understanding oneself, one's family, inter-personal relationships) and the "World Without" (opportunities for education, employment, voluntary service). Designed to assist women of all ages, educational background and work experience to gain the knowledge and confidence necessary to return to education and employment, the fourteen sessions were attended by a selected group of twenty-four women. During their course, the women met all of the counsellors, gained an understanding of the purpose and complementary nature of the personal counselling service and were encouraged to use it in conjunction with their group sessions.

Evaluation of the program was conducted jointly by the Co-ordinators and the participants on an on-going basis during the series, and at a meeting held six months after the completion of the course. The participants expressed satisfaction with their increased ability to make and implement decisions and to commit themselves more wholeheartedly to a planned course of action. Feeling strongly that flexibility in response to changing needs is essential, the counsellors continued to experiment with a variety of groups.

Due to changing attitudes of and towards women, participants enrolling in the second W.O.W. project appeared to differ somewhat from those in the first group. They seemed to have a greater awareness of their own educational capabilities and opportunities, and to have a stronger motivation to achieve them. Their question appeared to have developed from "Should I change my life style?" to "What steps do I take to continue to grow and develop through the changing stages of my life?"

So too with the counsellors, our question is no longer "Should we offer counselling-oriented group learning experiences?" but "How may we best involve others in the community as well as the College in providing such groups?"

One of the answers has been the Continuing Education Division's decision to appoint two interested graduates of the first two W.O.W. programs as part-time staff Co-ordinators of the present programs (in which a full time College counsellor serves as resource person).

College Orientation

The first "Orientation to Learning" experiment within the College

started in January 1969, when six women in a retraining course arrived outside the Counselling Centre, expecting "daily group counselling" sessions. From such a small beginning, an Orientation program was designed to meet the expressed needs of mature Commercial students (a number of whom are sponsored by the Department of Manpower and Immigration).

In many cases, these students have experienced a series of disappointments. Most of them, because of lack of training, reinforced by poor attitudes, have failed to find rewarding employment. Inadequate behaviour patterns have caused a breakdown in their family and/or work relationships, and an accompanying sense of failure and lack of self-confidence. On coming to College, they are usually highly motivated in a very pragmatic way to acquire such basic skills as typing, shorthand, etc. but are initially unaware of their potential for self-directed learning. The daily 50-minute "Orientation to Learning" session (during the students' first four weeks in College) provides an invaluable experience in self-development.

The early part of the program assists the students to understand the College, become more aware of their own needs for learning and building relationships, and enables them to select options in accordance with their career goals. The latter part of their Commercial course, "Orientation to Employment," provides an opportunity for them to discuss and practise the preparation of letters of application and résumés, and to role play in an interview situation.

Another group of students for whom a special Orientation program has been designed consists of recent high school drop-outs who are presently enrolled in a College Preparatory course. After unsuccessful or interrupted schooling and a period of unchallenging work, these young people are usually highly motivated, very often personally mature and autonomous. Participation in small group discussion enables them to discover a self-directed learning environment. Their daily Orientation program focuses on three main topics: "You and College life"; "You and your peers"; "You and society".

Both the Commercial students and the College Preparatory students, in seeking to clarify their changing goals, make extensive use of the counselling and testing services of the College.

Multi-Lingual Service

Another innovative aspect of Seneca's Counselling Service has been the provision of a multi-lingual advisor for the College's "English as a Second Language" students. These men and women of all ages probably represent as great a variety of social and cultural backgrounds as any group ever assembled in a classroom situation. An impressive number of them left school many years ago, never expecting to return to the difficulties of a group learning situation.

Not understanding the Canadian way of life, these students experience acute difficulty in adjusting to a new culture. By consulting the advisor, they are able, in their own or a familiar language, to solicit help in understanding and interpreting regulations pertaining to such areas of concern as housing, schooling, day-care, medical assistance, further education and employment opportunities.

The personal problems which emerge during initial interviews frequently reveal one of the newcomers' greatest needs: that of formulating realistic goals. This is extremely difficult, since many are still haunted by the romantic

dreams of their forefathers which were instrumental in motivating them to emigrate. While the anticipated future in Canada had appeared to offer challenge and promise, the reality of the present is one of overwhelming uncertainty and insecurity.

The "English as a Second Language" students often suffer from a high level of anxiety and a sense of great urgency. They need continuing assistance in reassessing their own abilities and potential, especially in the light of the limitations inherent in coping with the unfamiliar language and environment.

The helping relationship established between the empathetic, multi-lingual advisor and the troubled newcomers enables them to gain confidence in themselves as students, citizens and workers. They leave the College encouraged to be optimistic about the future, and knowing they have an understanding friend to whom they can continue to turn for moral support and practical suggestions.

Future Plans

On basis of success with the programs summarized here, we are currently investigating possible variations for such additional groups as: men or women wanting to alter their careers (due to redundancy of present skills, changing goals with maturation, ill health, etc.); recent immigrants with only a basic knowledge of English, seeking a general sense of direction in their new country; settled newcomers who are endeavoring to integrate their values into the Canadian culture; women supported by Mother's Allowance; unemployed men or women requiring attitudes and skills both to find and retain a job; and professional persons desiring refresher courses and a consultative education-vocational service.

Involved also in such related projects as Study Skill groups, Encounter groups, Therapy groups (conducted by our Consultant Psychiatrist) the counsellors at Seneca are continually experimenting, evaluating, and revising, seeking to remain flexible, enthusiastic, creative and productive as we look to the future of our College and our profession.

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VIDEO TAPE SIMULATION OF INTERPERSONAL GROUP DYNAMICS

Simulation by role play, socio-drama, in-basket studies, and other means has long been used in educational training programs. It is possible by simulation to provide life-like environments without the dangers and consequences usually associated with errors or mistakes in judgment. This is particularly important in counsellor training programs. Beginning counsellors are often placed without prior simulation with difficult, unscreened clients because there seems no better way to "see what the trainee can do." The supervisory relationship is crucial in seeing and utilizing mistakes (Kell & Burrow, 1970) but occurs after the counselling session, and too late at times to maintain relationships. To prevent this, the usefulness of one-to-one video recording as