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THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM AS A SMALL GROUP: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING*

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In this article I apply principles of group process and development to the classroom situation. I use the literature on small groups to develop 15 principles applicable in the classroom and offer specific suggestions for implementing these principles.

INTRODUCTION

Although sociologists and education specialists have analyzed many aspects of the college learning experience, little attention has been directed specifically to applying principles of group process and development to the classroom situation. Yet, classroom groups exhibit dynamics common to laboratory or training settings established expressly for the purpose of analyzing group processes (Thompson 1974, p.17).

Recent research on student success and persistence suggests strongly that both are highly correlated to the student's level of involvement in college activities and relationships (Astin 1985; Tinto 1982). Learning, achievement, and retention appear to be socially-rooted phenomena. If it is assumed that a college education is not restricted to mere acquisition of facts or skills, but encompasses personal development, examination of values, learning to think creatively and analytically, and improving communication skills, then attention is warranted to group-building techniques that expand student/student and student/teacher involvement in academically appropriate ways. Furthermore, improved communication and high levels of classroom participation are desirable as much for their humanity as for their effectiveness in transmitting and analyzing knowledge, or for improving retention rates (McCroskey and Sheahan 1978).

Deeper awareness of small group processes can enhance teaching effectiveness of college faculty through improving their ability to raise student participation levels, increase individual and group motivation, stimulate enthusiasm, and facilitate communication in the classroom. Principles of small group interaction that can be applied to any classroom, regardless of subject matter, are

examined here in tandem with specific suggestions for course design and classroom management.¹

THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM AS A SMALL GROUP

A small group can be defined as a "complex information-processing system" (Newell and Simon 1956) that focuses on purposive and meaningful contact (Mills 1967, p. 2):

A small group is . . . two or more persons sitting *face-to-face* with a specific *agenda* that states some *goal* like solving a problem, feeling better, or pursuing enjoyment. Each participant, normally, has some *stake* or interest in the process and stands to gain or lose personally by the outcome. Each has the opportunity to develop some sort of *relationship* with each other person present . . . every participant has the opportunity to take on a distinct *role* or roles designed to implement or impede group progress. Usually there is a formal *leader* of some sort (other leaders are also likely to emerge) (Phillips and Erickson 1970, p. 5, emphasis added).

In the college classroom, primary, *face-to-face interaction* is the norm; the *agenda*, as delineated by the syllabus, centers on information processing and the exchange of ideas; the *goal* is to acquire knowledge and understanding at a level appropriate to higher educational standards; the *stakes* take the form of both formal and informal reward systems (salaries, grades, praise, satisfaction, etc.); the *relationships* include professor/student and student/student involvements that often extend beyond the classroom; the students perform their *role* according to norms established by other students, the professor, the institution, and past classroom experiences; the teacher performs his or her role according to norms and standards established by the profession, the institution, and the students; and the *leader* is usually and at least initially the

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¹ The principles of small group interaction presented here are by no means exhaustive. Issues such as group emotion, transference (the tendency of students to relate to faculty in terms of feeling patterns developed toward their parents), social control, social status, or numerical propositions regarding group size are not directly addressed.

professor, although students may emerge as informal leaders. The smaller the class size, the more room exists for negotiation and redefinition of these elements.

SOME PRINCIPLES OF SMALL GROUP INTERACTION

The college classroom, then, constitutes a small group whose viability and productivity rest on certain principles of group behavior that are shared by other small groups. Several of these principles, called from the sociological literature on small group behavior and the author's experience in both teaching and facilitating small groups, are explored here.

PRINCIPLE 1: EVERY PARTICIPANT IN A GROUP IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE OUTCOME OF THE GROUP INTERACTION.

Technically—because of contractual obligations, expertise, and power—the professor has major responsibility for the outcome of a particular course. Yet, college students, as adults, share a significant responsibility for creating a successful learning experience.

A class consists of two roles in complementary and reciprocal relationship—professor and student. A professor may suggest or assign readings; discussion will be vague and one-sided if students do not complete the reading on schedule. In such a situation, the class as a group will be held back from achieving its potential for meaningful and stimulating discussion.

Student discontent is often expressed outside the classroom but seldom brought to the professor's attention. The student is in a relatively powerless position as long as the professor has the power of the final grade. Telling students at the outset that their discontent, as well as yours, is "group business," and that you *welcome* their opinions and ideas, sets the tone for openness and mutual responsibility toward course goals.

A professor who takes this principle seriously, and at the same time understands student reluctance to ask questions or criticize a professor's style or methods, may do the following in order to provide opportunities for student responsibility:

1. Explore at the beginning of each term the concept of joint responsibility, especially with regard to assignments and format.
2. Design a detailed course syllabus that is explicit in terms of requirements, methods of evaluation, and your general expectations.
3. If possible, ask students to plan certain segments of the course, to make some class presentations under your guidance, or to determine the weight of various evaluation mechanisms.

4. Determine student sentiment early in the term so that student feedback can be incorporated, when appropriate, into the course format. End of course evaluations may be useful in helping to assess professor performance, but do not afford students the opportunity to take responsibility for the outcome of the course. A simple instrument can be administered during the early weeks:

- What do you like most about this course?
- What do you like least about it?
- Do you have any suggestions for improving it?

These are written and returned anonymously for discussion and possible fine tuning or restructuring of the course format.

PRINCIPLE 2: "GROUP INTERACTION IS BASED ON FEEDBACK. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A GROUP DEPENDS ON THE QUALITY OF THE FEEDBACK CONTAINED IN THE INTERACTION..." (Bates and Johnson 1972, pp. 51–52).

A study by Bolton and Boyer distinguishes between two types of communication/feedback patterns. In one-way communication, the flow of information is from one person to another (or to a group): "the listener has little or no opportunity to respond or react immediately or directly" (1972, p. 2). This type is typical of televised courses and lecture courses (regardless of size) in which the professor leaves little or no time for questions.

In two-way communication, the flow of information is among and between two or more persons: "the sender of a message has a much greater opportunity to get immediate reactions and responses from his listener". This is typical of seminars, small group discussions, lecture/discussion courses, or study groups.

Research on the two communication types shows that one-way communication is more "efficient"—that is, a greater amount of material can be transmitted in a shorter amount of time. However, it is less "accurate" and stimulates less thoughtful consideration than two-way communication—that is, the listener's understanding of the information sent is less complete. The professor who is geared to straight lecturing may fail to take advantage of the opportunity for two-way communications provided by a small class setting.

Other research shows that feeling-oriented, positive feedback results in the "greatest efficiency, least defensiveness, and greatest increase in participation" (Egan 1970, p. 247). These outcomes are particularly important in discussing sensitive issues, stereotypical views, prejudices, values, etc. Finally, research suggests that "small classes are probably more effective than large, discussions than lectures, and student-centered discussions more effective than instructor-centered

discussions for goals of retention, application, problem solving, attitude change, and motivation for future learning” (Eble 1976, p. 55). With these results and the principle of two-way communication in mind, we might conclude that a circle is the seating arrangement most conducive to effective feedback and communication, particularly if the professor occupies a different place in the circle each session.

Suggestions for creating two-way communication channels include:

1. Make it a rule never to lecture up until the last minute of class, no matter how brilliant your lecture or how much you feel you must cover that day (see Hight 1976, p. 109).
2. Pause frequently to make sure students are still with you. “Lecturing creates the temptation to set one’s voice on ‘play’ and forget everything else” (Eble 1976, p. 48).
3. Avoid lecturing from a written script or text. Provide students with a brief outline of your lectures—this allows them to listen more carefully to the flesh on the skeleton, and helps them organize their “listening.”
4. Remind yourself of two-way communication: “The best general advice to the professor who would lecture well is still ‘Don’t lecture.’ That is, for most of teaching, to think in terms of discourse—talk conversation—rather than lecture” (Eble 1976, p. 42).
5. During the course of lecture or discussion, frequently ask if students have questions or reactions. This gatekeeping role also maintains student involvement and responsibility.
6. Allow for silence after extending such an invitation; students in general do not feel comfortable with silence any more than professors do—someone will break the silence and pave the way to further comments.²
7. As a check on comprehension, ask students to analyze a situation or problem by employing concepts or principles under discussion. This technique carries the message that you expect students to be active rather than passive learners.
8. Reward constructive participation with affirming comments and follow-up questions.

PRINCIPLE 3: GROUP SOLUTIONS AND INSIGHT PROFIT FROM HETEROGENEITY OF INPUT.

Even though students may be encouraged to feel more comfortable in the *process* of participating,

² Goldman-Eisler (1958) found that pauses in speech serve to introduce new and less predictable information; thus the incidence of silence in group interaction may indicate flexibility in adapting to new situations and elasticity of group processes.

on sensitive issues they may still be reluctant regarding the *content*. Unconventional ideas and offbeat solutions to problems will emerge only if students feel safe in the classroom. Prior to discussing sensitive topics or solving complex problems, provide opportunities for students to express their ideas anonymously. For example, in teaching the concepts of prejudice, discrimination, and social distance, first ask students to fill out a version of Bogardus’ social distance scale as well as a brief questionnaire about their own ethnic identification. For a mathematics or science problem, ask students to write down their best attempts, even if they seem to be unorthodox solutions. Summarize the results and present them anonymously at the next session. In this way a wider range of ideas, values, and attitudes are available for discussion and problem-solving.

As Kelley and Thibaut (1954, p. 778) note, it helps to encourage students to “express their ideas under conditions of low threat. Criticism or evaluation of contributions are reserved until a later time, when they have tended to become the property of the entire group and are less closely identified with a single contributor.” Soliciting ideas anonymously reduces the likelihood of receiving only conventional or conformist expressions, thus contributing to the heterogeneity of ideas available for discussion.

PRINCIPLE 4: WHEN PEOPLE FEEL PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE IN A GROUP, THEIR PARTICIPATION LEVELS WILL INCREASE.

In a climate of psychological safety (Schein and Bennis 1965) students will feel more comfortable about “showing their ignorance” or displaying their knowledge. They will also be more willing to share experiences and expertise and to disagree with the point of view expressed by the professor or other students. Reduction of self-consciousness, apathy, and boredom will enhance dialogue.

In discussing the concept of psychological safety, Benjamin (1978, p. 7) states that groups provide a “climate in which to learn” that is warm or cold, friendly or hostile, or simply neutral. The group climate affects the students’ sense of belonging and whether or not they look forward to class, participate, drop the class, or leave college altogether. A safe and friendly climate increases participation levels and class attendance. Some suggestions for creating a positive classroom environment:

1. Learn each student’s name, where feasible, and use it.
2. Respond positively to a student’s *initial* attempts to communicate and invite further contributions; this response will affect whether

a student will risk contributing again (see Hurt, Scott, McCroskey 1978, pp.153 ff. on communication apprehension).

3. Respond to all comments. Avoid passing students over. Comments that are not quite on the mark can be responded to invitationally:
 - “good . . . now let’s take it a step further.”
 - “keep going . . .”
 - “not quite, but keep thinking . . .”
 - “that will become important later . . . don’t forget what you had in mind.”
4. Avoid “put down” and close-off comments such as:
 - “you’re way off . . .”
 - “you’re the only one who doesn’t understand”
 - “you’ve missed the whole point”
 - “you haven’t heard of . . .?”
5. Avoid sarcasm or ridicule, especially aimed at someone in particular.
6. Avoid making terminal statements where no disagreement is possible.

According to Bolton and Boyer (1971), the professor who is perceived by students as having “psychological bigness” inhibits participation and the establishment of a positive climate. Psychological bigness stems from frequent reference to the professor’s high status and titles, a formal manner, displaying an overwhelming amount of detailed knowledge, using sarcasm, ridicule, or terminal statements. These characteristics tend to be associated with domination rather than leadership.

Finally, student reactions to each other need to be tempered in order to establish and preserve a safe climate. Before dialogue has passed on to another focus, healing comments to both sides of a conflict will ensure that students are not reluctant to participate again.

PRINCIPLE 5: TRUST AND PARTICIPATION LEVELS WILL INCREASE AS PEOPLE COME TO FEEL THEY ARE “ALL IN THE SAME BOAT”—AT LEAST SOME OF THE TIME AND ON SOME ISSUES.

Students who discover in the process of interacting with others that their opinions, fears, or problems are not always unique are less likely to feel timid in the future to express themselves.

For example, a student who feels “stupid” because he or she cannot solve an equation may experience a renewal of self-confidence when others admit the same difficulty. The professor who can aid in this discovery through asking simple questions in response to student comments—especially unconventional or controversial ones—such as:

—“does anyone else ever feel that way?”

- “have any of you ever had that problem or experience”
- “do you *know* anyone who has had that problem or experience?”

This last question is particularly useful in stimulating discussion of social issues or psychological phenomena. Students often hesitate to discuss their own experiences or attitudes, but are quick to discuss those of parents, neighbors, friends. This approach paves the way to open discussion of their own prejudices, fears, biases, or questions.

PRINCIPLE 6: SMALL GROUPS FUNCTION IN TWO FUNDAMENTAL AREAS, TASK AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL. MORALE, COHESION, SOLIDARITY, AND EFFECTIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING REST ON THE ACHIEVEMENT OF BALANCE BETWEEN THEM.

The task and socio-emotional areas correspond roughly to issues of power and affiliation, authority and intimacy, goal-attainment and pattern-maintenance. Achieving balance between them is the central problem of group life, and both are essential to successfully accomplishing the work of the group.

Similarly, Blanchard and Hersey (1977, p. 177) contend that professors as leaders operate within two dimensions: initiating structure (task) and consideration (socio-emotional). They hypothesize that the teacher-centered style, which is high for initiating structure and low on consideration, is appropriate for immature groups or individual students. As the group (student) matures, a more student-centered style, high on consideration and low on initiated structure, will yield better learning results. Ultimately, the professor of a mature group should be low in both dimensions, having moved through a “life cycle of leadership” in the teaching setting.

Slater (1955) and Bales and Slater (1955) theorize that leadership of the small group must respond to the needs of both areas, whether or not the two roles are played by the same person. In addition to the formal leader, various members of a group may play one or both roles at different times. To the extent that the formal leader (in this case the professor) does not perform both roles effectively, it is likely that informal leaders will emerge from among the group—or low morale and productivity will result.

The professor who fails to make expectations clear, is disorganized, or does not move the class toward achieving its stated goals, is performing inadequately in the task role. The professor in a small class setting who does not learn students’ names, who is insensitive to their feelings, opinions, or problems dealing with the course, or who ignores signs of low morale or lack of responsiveness, is performing inadequately in the socio-emotional area.

An analysis of balanced leadership suggests that the following roles must be carried out effectively (Miles 1973 p. 20):

1. *“Initiating*: keeping the group action moving, or getting it going (e.g., suggesting an action step, offering an idea, or proposing procedures);
2. *Regulating*: influencing the direction and tempo of the group’s work (e.g., summarizing, pointing out time limits, restating a goal);
3. *Informing*: bringing information or opinions to the group; clarifying information and issues;
4. *Supporting*: creating an emotional climate that holds the group together, making it easy for members to contribute to work on the task (e.g., harmonizing, relieving tension, voicing group feeling, or encouraging);
5. *Evaluating*: helping the group evaluate its decisions, goals, or procedures (e.g., testing for consensus, noting group progress).”

Even though task and socio-emotional functions can be separated conceptually, they are in fact intertwined. A professor who performs well in roles 1, 2, 3, and 5—task areas—will be contributing greatly as well to morale, positive climate, etc. Conversely, if a professor is overly concerned with 4, to the neglect of other roles, the class will have difficulty in achieving its goals of learning and information/skill acquisition.

PRINCIPLE 7: NATURAL LEADERS MAY EMERGE AMONG STUDENTS AND MAY FUNCTION POSITIVELY OR NEGATIVELY IN THE SOCIO-EMOTIONAL AND TASK AREAS.

Roles such as joker, clown, negativist, organizer, class spokesperson, and the like will materialize from time to time in a small class setting. These roles can be utilized by the professor when they are constructive, and redirected when they are not (see Kohl 1967). The professor who is able to recognize informal leadership and subgroup formation among students (through observing interaction patterns before and after class, seating arrangements, eye contact, etc.) is likely to cope better with the class. As Benjamin (1978, p. 7) observes, “This leadership will encourage or discourage member involvement, form coalitions and factions, or attempt to rule unilaterally. It will operate with, oppose, or act independently of the formal group leader.”

Some suggestions include:

1. Capitalize on emerging subgroups and leadership by assigning academic tasks along subgroup lines (discussions, team projects, peer feedback on first drafts of papers, etc.).

2. Dissolve disruptive or potentially disruptive subgroups (“cliques”) by changing seating arrangements, separating “leader” from clique, or talking to the subgroup after class about their impact on class interaction. The same applies to dysfunctional roles such as clown or negativist. (The longer dysfunctional behavior is tolerated, the stronger the group norms supporting it are likely to become.)
3. Ask emerging leaders to serve as discussion group leaders.
4. Ask students who show strong organizing skills to help the class organize itself for special projects.

PRINCIPLE 8: THE LEADER OF ANY GROUP SERVES AS A MODEL FOR THAT GROUP.

The way in which professors play their role, including how they present expectations of students, carry out responsibilities, and handle privileges implicit in the professorial role, has a profound effect on how students enact their role. In the early years of public higher education, the community was so aware of the modeling function of the professor that strict rules of moral and personal conduct were imposed. While we are loathe to extend this protectiveness into the private lives of professors today, professorial role behavior does set the tone for the student behavior. Implications of this principle of modeling include the following:

1. Early in the semester model behavior you want your students to exhibit, particularly regarding punctuality, reading, and keeping agreements.
2. If your syllabus is full of typographical and spelling errors, admonishments to students about turning in carefully prepared work will fall on deaf ears.
3. If you are barely a page ahead of your students in reading assignments, encouraging them to read on schedule will hold little significance.
4. If you distribute materials when you say you will, and grade assignments promptly, then requests that students hand work in on time will carry more weight.
5. Students take the lead from you in terms of enthusiasm, energy, and excitement about subject matter. Chances are that if you are mildly bored with the course materials, your students will respond likewise.
6. If you expect students to think critically, listen to divergent opinions, and ask questions, model those behaviors yourself.
7. If you want students to provide examples from their own experience, begin by sharing an experience of your own.

8. By saying "I don't know" when you do not, you help students to accept the limits of their own knowledge
9. By saying "But I know where we can find it . . .," you help students feel that knowledge is worth pursuing.

PRINCIPLE 9: AS TRUST LEVELS INCREASE, PARTICIPATION BECOMES MORE BROADLY DISTRIBUTED IN THE GROUP. AS PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE AND CONTACT INCREASE, TRUST LEVEL IMPROVES.

Most students want to participate, but do not. It is not unusual for a handful of students (and not always the brighter or best-prepared ones) to dominate the discussion, if allowed to do so. Students fall along a continuum of participation from the high participators (or dominants) to the low participators (or quiet ones). This pattern is common to most small groups unless specific efforts are made by the leader to elicit broader participation patterns from the group.

Unfortunately, students tend to become labeled by themselves, their peers, and the professor as being dominant or quiet. Such labeling occurs very early in the life of a course. Being quiet easily becomes associated with rejection or even scapegoating. For example, Hurt and Preiss (1978, p. 327) found that groups tend to reject potential isolates who fear participation. The labels tend to harden unless the professor facilitates participation through a variety of gatekeeping measures ("how do others feel," "any other ideas on this," "let's hear from some of those who haven't had a chance to talk yet").

Many professors are reluctant to call on people who do not voluntarily participate. However, using ice-breaking techniques (see Principles 10 and 11) will typically create an atmosphere in which more students voluntarily participate, and in which being called upon is not a traumatic experience. Establishing a norm of non-interruption will help quieter students who find it difficult to break into an on-going discussion, and who succumb quickly to the efforts of dominants and interrupters. Although simultaneous talking and interrupting can be signs of a dynamic discussion and high involvement, they can also be used to close out less assertive members of the class.³

PRINCIPLE 10: OPPORTUNITY FOR INFORMAL, NON-PURPOSIVE CONVERSATION WILL REDUCE FEAR OF

³ Mishler and Waxler (1968) cite research by Farina (1980) indicating that interruption rates within families of schizophrenic patients were higher than rates within families of tuberculosis patients. Interruption rates, especially among the parents, were found to have predictive value regarding family conflict and disorganization.

INTERACTION IN FORMAL OR CONTRACT SETTINGS (Egan 1970).

No small group can function well on a strictly business level. The social climate of a group, in this case the classroom, is elevated considerably by allowing a period at the beginning of each term, and a short time at the beginning of each session, for informal conversation. Coffee or stretch breaks, before and after class chatting, all serve to facilitate informal interaction:

1. Each day allow the class to "warm up"—the professor who arrives two or three minutes prior to class time affords students an opportunity to chat informally. This period of "settling in" is highly recommended by Eble (1970) and Highet (1976); the latter speaks of the value of a few minutes of "lighter discourse" — perhaps commenting on a relevant newspaper article, for example.
2. Help students maintain contacts outside the classroom (this seems to be particularly important in commuter colleges) by obtaining and duplicating students' names and telephone numbers early in the term.
3. If logistically feasible, ask students to organize a coffee or juice pool for mid-class breaks.

PRINCIPLE 11: BEGINNINGS ARE IMPORTANT FOR ANY GROUP; ICE-BREAKING EARLY IN THE GROUP'S LIFE WILL GENERATE HIGHER PARTICIPATION LEVELS.

People will participate more readily in a small group setting when they have been given an opportunity to get to know each other and to interact in subgroups before they interact in the group as a whole. Early in the course, "there must be ample time for the members to test each other out, to estimate reactions, and to familiarize themselves with the communication styles of other people" (Phillips and Erickson 1970, p. 8). Some techniques include:

1. Ask students to chat for a few minutes with the person next to him or her, on either side. Encourage them to share information such as why they are taking the course, their major interest in college, where they live, and the like.
2. Serve as the model. Tell students initially a little about yourself, your interests, your educational and work background, why you teach the course.
3. Ask them to work in subgroups of *three or four* to define concepts central to the course — what is a city, what is a chemical, is there a difference between sociology and psychology, how is health defined?

4. Ask students to answer, on paper, the question "Who am I?" ten times. Then ask them to form groups of four or five and discuss their responses with each other. This strategy is especially appropriate for stimulating class discussion of such concepts as identity, self-image, personality, ethnic, racial, or sex identification.
5. Ask students to pair off by interests, numbers, proximity, or random selection and introduce themselves. These dyads can then become "pair partners" for the duration of the term, assisting each other with assignments, missed work, and feedback on paper proposals or early drafts. This suggestion works most effectively if the members of each dyad are not already best friends.
6. Ask students to pair off. The topic they discuss is not particularly important—it could be biographical data the first day of class, or an issue or problem relevant to course material. Give each pair ten minutes to talk to each other. The dyadic form of interaction is less threatening and establishes at least one "bond" for each participant.

Then ask each pair to join another pair and share information that emerged during the dyadic session. Instruct the groups of four to merge with other groups of four, then eights with eights, until one large group is created for a class discussion of what they learned in the smaller groups. (This technique can be used effectively with a class of 30 or more, but the progression must move in larger steps until the class is fully merged.)

Although even one session of ice-breaking will reduce barriers to communication and raise participation levels, the principles of responsibility, two-way communication, and involvement will be reinforced if students are asked to work in subgroups occasionally during the term.

PRINCIPLE 12: STUDENTS TEND TO FORM VARIOUS SUBGROUPS IN A CLASS. EFFORTS MADE TO CUT ACROSS CLEAVAGES HEIGHTEN PARTICIPATION AT THE CLASS-WIDE LEVEL, RATHER THAN LEAVING IT AT THE SUBGROUP LEVEL.

In virtually any small group, differences generate the formation of subgroups along certain lines (cleavages) such as sex, age, major, social class, race, and residence. Activities or discussions that cut across cleavages tend to reduce conflict and increase empathy between subgroups, thereby increasing participation. In selecting students to participate in discussion groups, the professor reflects subgroups he or she expects to find. For example:

1. Minority groups and race relations: Ask students to form groups of four or five

including at least one person of a different racial or ethnic group. Discussion can focus on positive and negative experiences associated with membership in that group, value and life style differences, and the like.

2. Urban sociology: Ask students to form groups based on their residence (rural, urban, suburban). Discussion centers on perceptions of how the political system works, issues of corruption and power, and other such issues.
3. Social psychology: Ask students to form groups based on birth order. Discussion focuses on differences in upbringing, achievement, motivation, relationship with parents and siblings, and the like.

PRINCIPLE 13: A GROUP WILL SET ITS OWN NORMS OF BEHAVIOR AND WILL EXPECT CONFORMITY TO THEM. THESE NORMS MAY EXTEND TO THE PROFESSOR.

Norms develop in every classroom group: entering late, leaving early, missing classes for medical appointments or work schedules, relying on a handful of students to engage in "pseudo-discussion," trying to talk the professor out of exams, punishing "rate busters" who read and complete assignments on time, and manipulating extensions on due dates. It is more likely that emerging norms will be apparent to the professor in a safe climate and when channels of communication are open. Norms that work against achieving the goals of the course should be noted openly and discussed if necessary.

PRINCIPLE 14: ATTENTION TO NONVERBAL CUES IS IMPORTANT FOR RECEIVING AND INTERPRETING COMMUNICATION.

Nonverbal cues such as frowning, fidgeting, sleeping, reading the college newspaper, and slouching may be as important feedback as that which students give at the end of the semester in a computerized questionnaire. Students who are reluctant to state their confusion, boredom, or dissatisfaction verbally may signal the professor through facial expressions, posture, or gestures. Often the quieter, less participatory members of a group will exhibit higher rates of nonverbal cues than more dominant members. Nonverbal cues are useful in assessing whether students understand a concept or grasp the solution to a problem, evaluating interest level, and gauging class morale. For example, students who enter the classroom late, leave early, or skip altogether are demonstrating a lack of commitment to the group activity (in this case, the coursework); if this behavior becomes normative, it is a sign of (unspoken) low morale.

Failure to attend to nonverbal cues hampers the professor's ability to recognize lack of student

comprehension or dissatisfaction with the course materials and procedures. Students complain that the professor is "losing the class" or "over our heads"—often they vote with their feet by poor attendance or dropping the class. Probably the most effective way of becoming more aware of nonverbal cues is to have a class session visited or videotaped and analyzed with a sympathetic colleague. Feedback to students as to your observations can improve communication and group morale.

PRINCIPLE 15: ALL GROUPS NEED A SENSE OF CLOSURE AT THE END OF THEIR DURATION IN BOTH TASK AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL AREAS. TERMINATION RITUALS ARE IMPORTANT FOR THE CONTINUITY OF THE EXPERIENCE.

A class, like any small group, functions most effectively when it has clearly stated goals (task area). As mentioned earlier, the course syllabus should establish goals and objectives, as well as means for attaining them. The group that keeps track of its progress toward achieving goals and objectives is likely to be more efficient and effective. Goal assessment can take place at the end of each session and at the end of each term. For students, this often takes the form of examinations. For the class as a group, it should take the form of a final session of open discussion of both individual and group goals for learning. This mechanism helps reinforce the material learned and also acknowledges the class as a group.

In the socio-emotional area, saying goodbye, wishing students a good day or weekend, and engaging in some type of termination ritual at the end of the term all serve to increase group solidarity or sense of belonging. Specific suggestions for these two areas include:

1. At the end of each session, summarize the main points of the day and suggest where they will lead in the next session.
2. At the end of the term, review major points of learning and assess goal achievement through:
 - a. Evaluation of students: term papers should be due well before the end of the course so that feedback can be given to students in a meaningful way.
 - b. Evaluation of professor: though generally done by departments, professors may gain more satisfaction from an informal feedback session reflecting on the successes and failures of the course.
4. Invite students to free-write for five or ten minutes on what they learned and how the course has affected their perspectives and their futures.
5. Give the class a few minutes at the end to share final evaluative ideas and reactions with their pair partners.
6. If time permits, hold an informal class party to say goodbye, which leaves a positive invitation with students to continue interacting with both you and each other after the course has ended.

CONCLUSION

Principles of small group interaction apply to the college classroom as a context for learning. Basic principles delineated here, if attended to, will make the professor more aware of classroom interaction, process, and communication patterns. Professors may adapt techniques of classroom management based on small group processes, through creating personalized strategies appropriate to subject areas and personal teaching styles.

Sensitivity to group-building and maintenance techniques will contribute to enhanced student satisfaction, success, and retention by raising levels of both academic and social involvement in the learning process.

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