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Interpersonal Dynamics in the Small Group

GERALD M. PHILLIPS
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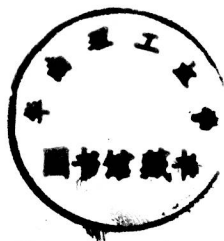
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GERALD M. PHILLIPS The Pennsylvania

Dedication

Our thanks to our wives, Ann and Nancy, for their patience and cooperation while we worked through this project, and to our children, Dean, Kenyon, Judy, Steve, Ellen, Jeff, Abigail, Kirsten, and Amy, for putting up with our hostilities and frustrations. Our thanks also to the institution out west where the authors first met and discovered that people in different disciplines really aren't so far apart, and where they found that it is a delight for people to share their specialities and come up with something that is, hopefully, new and stimulating.

Introduction

How to Use This Book

Learning about small groups is something like learning about love. Somehow, people have managed to fall in love and sustain that feeling without ever having read *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, and a great number of people who know a good deal about the biophysical, socioemotional, and psycholinguistic characteristics of that human emotion classified as "love," have been quite unable to form any sort of viable liaison with the girl of their dreams. There is, in short, quite a gap between the theory and the practice, as every lover knows.

Most complex human activities are very difficult to describe and even more difficult to generalize about. About the fourth century B.C., Aristotle, for example, wrote a book called *The Rhetoric* in which he described, in essence, the speechmaking behavior of the great orators of the Athens of his day. Note, he described what he saw; he did not necessarily prescribe a

way to do it. Unfortunately, humans seek the easy way out most of the time only to discover at the end that it was a most uneconomical mode of procedure. Consequently, generations of teachers attempted to disseminate the findings of Aristotle's "study" in the form of prescriptive advice to speakers, without very much success. It has only been a recent pedagogical discovery that the act of learning how to carry on a human activity is best learned by carrying on that human activity, and further, that it is possible to act effectively without knowing the theory behind the acting. Speakers like Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Adlai Stevenson, and others were not firmly rooted in the theoretical bases of the art of "rhetoric," yet they were able to become models of its use. And all of us know that on every campus there are any number of young men who are "great lovers" and cannot write a poem and a great number of frustrated poets who cannot get a date.

We find essentially this same pattern emerging in books and writings about small groups. On one hand we have men known as sociologists, who write the results of their experiments in small group interaction, or summarize what they have seen in a live group engaged in discussion. On the other hand, we have "speech people" who attempt in the classroom to teach the "techniques" of group discussion. It is interesting that many of the men who know the most about theory of the small group are quite unable to participate in one, and many of the men who perform very effectively with others in small groups are unable to say very much about the "theory" under which they operate.

Those who seek to discover "law" or "scientific principles" may do so for various reasons. Some men study a phenomenon because "it is there." Others hope to discover some generalization that, when applied, will improve the state of the phenomenon they are studying. Both are perfectly legitimate reasons for study. What is illegitimate, however, is the assumption that *study about* confers *skill in*. The man who studies about may, through practice, cultivate skill, and he may have a deeper understanding of his skill because he understands some of the generalizations. The man who has skill may find himself better able to transmit some of the components of his skill to others

if he can develop a theoretical framework into which he can fit his practical propositions.

It is perhaps for these reasons that sociologists and rhetoricians are coming somewhat closer together in their approaches to the small group. Sociologists are becoming more concerned about the doing, and speech experts are becoming more concerned about the reasons why. It almost appears now that in most cases the parts are interchangeable, and what we have developed is a cadre of people who are concerned with the phenomenon of people interacting with each other, regardless of their own home base discipline. They want to know both how to improve it and what its essential nature is.

This book, written by a "sociologist" and a "communication expert," purports to be a possible solution to the problem of combining theory with practice. The writers were somewhat startled and also encouraged by the areas in which they agreed—despite the fact that they had trained in different disciplines at different universities, and despite the different courses they had taught, and the different texts used for apparently different purposes. The agreements indicated that the phenomenon was worthy of attention in and of itself. The two contrasting focuses were not so different after all. It seemed it might be possible to approach the problems of the small group independent of academic limitations, and to attempt truly to coordinate the particular academic "grooves" of speech and sociology.

The book combines generalizations derived from experimentation and observation with controversial questions drawn from the literature of a number of fields. It is written without footnotes, as though the authors were expert enough to speak on their own authority, but it is clear that they both owe a considerable debt to the men they spoke to and the books they read, all of which are honored in a final chapter. Since within each discipline, and for that matter between and among them, there is considerable agreement on many generalizations about the small group, it was hard for them to discover precisely where their ideas came from. It seemed dishonest to try to attribute them to particular sources. Where identifiable sources are used they are referred to in the text. But it is recognized that there are particular statements with which some

persons, arguing from different premises and circumstances, might find exception. We hope this does not reduce the effectiveness of the whole book. We think not. For those interested, we will try to cite the ten or so men or works that have most influenced our thinking. We humbly request that the readers (teachers and students alike) accept this deviation from the formalities of the academic function called "textbook writing."

The generalizations and controversial questions supply, hopefully, a theoretical basis for understanding the small group. The problem of improving participation is a bit more difficult. In the bibliography chapter a number of works are cited that present methodologies for participation in the small group. Both authors question, mildly, the effectiveness of these books, despite the fact that they have been used for many academic generations to the satisfaction of the professors. There is so little feedback from the students about how the books "changed their whole lives" that we cannot be sure that the methodologies presented were of any use at all. Since at least one of them was written by one of the present authors, at least one of the stones cast turned out to be a boomerang. But since there are so many books available, and so little we could add to the various methodologies, no attempt will be made here to offer a system to follow to improve participation.

The essential philosophy about participation presented in this book runs as follows:

1. The act of discussing problems with others in groups is a real and vital act, essential to success in our society.
2. The traditional modes of teaching participation in society were somewhat detached from its realities.
3. The activity can be best learned by participation under "real" conditions where you have a stake in the outcome, in other words, will either profit by or suffer from what is decided.
4. It is possible to generate such discussions in the classroom without being accused of detached simulation or spurious roleplaying, provided both teachers and students are willing to risk a little.
5. The generalizations about group discussion and group inter-

action are much better understood if they are studied during a time of participation, rather than in isolation.

6. A pedagogy based on a combination of theory and practice offers the most learning potential to the student, and is the most efficient for the teacher.

From these propositions, we offer a method of teaching a course in the "small group" based on somewhat traditional activities and a few new ones, which may startle the austere and ivy-covered, but that not only provide solid answers to the question of how to teach the small group, but peripherally deal with the question, "how can students be given a greater share in the planning and operation of their own education?"

This is a book for the beginning student in the social sciences. Libraries are replete with books filled with general conclusions on the small group. But, since they are so often based on controlled observations, these are difficult to use as companions to the classroom sessions that deal with understanding the small group.

In attempting a book aimed at the students' behavior in a small group we have of course chosen a very complex subject. In fact, it is a subject as complex as social science itself. In attempting to make the material manageable we may have oversimplified or distorted data. This can hardly be avoided in a beginning book for students in different disciplines. But we hope that students, in their first exposure, will have a little better understanding of the complexity of their roles as they actually participate in social interaction.

A Teaching Philosophy

Almost all of the teaching done in colleges is cognitive. Students learn *about* things. They may study the history of their country without living it, they may learn about the political process without participating in it, and they may learn about their society and experience none of it. It is the basic premise of the authors that it is relatively worthless to learn *about* small groups. The phenomenon of small group interaction is so personal that most of the propositions really make little

sense unless the student has had some real participation. Anyone who doesn't believe this should try to generate an "objective" test on small groups, or try to come up with some firm criteria for grading an essay test.

On the other hand, the propositions available about human interaction in small groups become exquisitely simple once the student has experienced the tension of interaction. The problem is that in the classroom it is very difficult to simulate reality sufficiently so that the student will feel that he has enough at stake to make the kind of commitment he will have to make to groups he experiences in "the life outside." One way to "beat this rap" is to permit the student to take the lead in generating and evaluating the course in small groups. Small groups can be used to generate assignments and to develop a method of evaluating them. Small groups can be used to present substantive material. Small groups can carry on projects in the community in which they actively attempt to exert their influence on events. One of the authors experienced this less than a year ago. He told his students to discover a problem on campus and do something about it. The result was that one group organized a continuing seminar with the local merchants, resulting in publication of a pamphlet of advice on how to get along with local merchants. A second group generated a proposal for improvement of registration procedures that is now in the hands of a select faculty committee. A third group discovered that there was very little that could be done about law enforcement on the campus. A fourth carried on a public relations campaign to explain procedures at the university health center, and a fifth discovered that the drug problem on campus was as bad as stated. Every student in the class received a first-hand experience in small group interaction, complete with the frustrations that go along with it. Not all the groups succeeded. They took delight in sharing their experiences and relating them to the theoretical material offered in the classroom. They did not care about their grades. When the instructor gave them the task of parceling out the A's, B's and C's, they did not hesitate at all, and came up with something resembling a normal curve. Their decisions were based on their perception of the amount of contribution each made

to the completion of the selected group task. The whole business was a pleasant experience for teacher and students alike, and the teacher was convinced that this class not only learned something about small groups, but they learned small groups as well. Most important, they learned something about themselves and their reactions under conditions of interpersonal stress.

Examination of the exercises at the conclusion of the chapters will indicate that we have recommended assignments similar to this throughout. We have also provided assignments that can be administered in a more traditional way. It is, of course, the choice of the students and their instructor. Instructors should be cautioned that private study and classroom-based activities do not generate the empathy and clarification of values that are necessary to real understanding. More to the point would be to suggest that this learning problem be shared with the class. Perhaps they, working in small groups, can come up with some exercises that simulate small group interaction and work in the most traditional of classrooms. If they do, please communicate those ideas to the authors, so they can be shared.

Just before this book went into final production, the instructors were treated to another example of what students working together to learn about groups can do. A group of twelve students decided to simulate a public relations firm and perform a task of publicity on a national scale for less than \$50.00. They decided to attempt to get a word into the dictionary. The word, created by one of the professors, was "khulyages." It was a word without definition, for the students declared that the public ought to be offered an opportunity to play some role in defining this new word.

Planning together, they developed a series of staged events: a fund drive, a button sale, a publicity table, a half-time demonstration at the football game, and publicity photos. They also disseminated the results of their activities to the press, and their story has appeared in more than 100 newspapers. Interviews were conducted with ten radio and television stations. To date they have received more than 500 contributions of possible definitions. They had a great deal of fun with the "Khulyages Khonspiracy," and they also learned the power

and impact that people working together in groups can have. They did this without injuring anyone; indeed, their project brought smiles to a great many people. Most important, they are now able to converse intelligently about what goes on in a group, what their own capabilities are, and the impact people can have on people. They are now ready to acquire understanding of theory. It is to this kind of learning that this book is addressed.

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possible material on impact of group.