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Facilitating the Learning of How to Learn: The Development of Active, Resourceful, and Responsible Learners in an Experiential, Cross-Cultural, Academic Program

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FACILITATING THE LEARNING OF HOW TO LEARN

The Development of Active, Resourceful,
and Responsible Learners in an
Experiential, Cross-Cultural,
Academic Program

By

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Abstract

Teryl Lundquist

Facilitating the Learning of How to Learn

A primary goal for education is the development of learners
who know how to learn actively, resourcefully, and respon-
sibly in the changing and complex environment in which
they find themselves. Based on my own experiences as a
learner and educator, and most specifically on my ex-
perience as Academic Director of two College Semester
Abroad groups to Ireland, I have formed five priori-
ties for myself as a facilitator of such learning.
These priorities are - (1) To encourage the learner
first to view him or herself as the most valuable re-
source available, and then to look to other human
resources. (2) To develop the group into a learning
community which enhances the learning for each member.
(3) To provide balance within the learning program
between the group and the individual, and between leader-
directed and self-directed activity. (4) To provide
choices to the students within defined limits. (5) To
provide and demand clarity: of expectations and object-
ives, of criteria and requirements, and of feedback and
evaluation. Each of the five priorities involves an ex-
periential process by which the students develop skills
which are then transferable to new situations. The fa-
cilitation skills themselves are applicable to most
learning situations.

ERIC Descriptors: Experiential Learning
                      Cross-Cultural Training
                      Teacher Effectiveness
                      International Education Exchange
                      College Study Abroad
                      Field Experience Program
                      Groups - Students

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> If there is one truth about modern man, it
> is that he lives in an environment which is con-
> tinually changing . . . . The goal of education, if
> we are to survive, is the facilitation of change
> and learning. The only man who is educated is
> the man who has learned how to adapt and change;
> the man who has realized that no knowledge gives
> a basis for security.[1]

As an educator, my primary concern has been to discover ways that I can effectively foster active, resourceful, and responsible learners who know how to learn and live creatively in their complex and changing environment. It is my goal in education to prepare persons to handle ambiguity and change, in their world and in themselves, by developing the skills and using the resources needed to apply to any situation or change that presents itself. In this paper I shall take a look at specific priorities I have formed about the facilitation of such learning in an experiential, cross-cultural, academic group program.

Although this paper reflects personal learning gained from and reinforced by a variety of past experiences as an educator and as a learner, I will draw my evidence from the experience I had most recently as an Academic Director of two College Semester Abroad groups which studied in Ireland this past year. Rather than refer to my role in this process as teacher, leader, or director (though I was all three), I shall refer to myself as a "facilitator," since that term most accurately reflects what it is I see myself trying to do as an educator.

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[1] Carl Rogers, Freedom to Learn (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, Publ. Co., 1969), p. 104.

I. The Ireland Program

The study abroad program with which I was involved was part of The Experiment in International Living. It was not a traditional overseas education program in which the students attended a university for an overseas version of what they could do at home. Rather, it was a non-traditional, experientially focused program that, among other things, involved the students in the new culture by living with Irish families; by participating in a contemporary culture seminar of informal lectures, discussions, and field trips; and by pursuing substantial independent field research projects. The structure of the program was provided by a rigorous schedule and a set of criteria and requirements to be fulfilled for academic credit.

There were 16 college students, mostly women aged 18 - 22, in each of the three-month long semester programs with which I worked. As Academic Director, I was responsible for orienting the students, coordinating the various components of the program, aiding the students in the processing of their learning, supervising and counseling them along the way, and evaluating progress at various stages. I worked closely with the National Director of the Irish Experiment, Carol Bergin, who played an active role in the academic portions of the program and handled the administrative logistics. Clearly, this experience held rich possibilities for me to explore and discover ways to help students learn how to learn, i.e. to make discoveries, to expand knowledge and experience, and to incorporate change.

The central goal of this and other College Semester Abroad (CSA) programs of The Experiment is to foster self-awareness and cultural awareness in each student through active involvement with other cultures.

Integral to this goal is the building of cross-cultural skills: learning how to communicate, verbally and non-verbally; learning how to solve problems; learning how to cope with unfamiliar cultures and values; and learning how to clarify one's own values.

Along with the experiential and cross-cultural objectives I had for the students, I wanted them to develop new approaches to learning; to see all persons and opportunities as potential resources; to know how to identify and use appropriate resources for any given need; to become more self-directed and self-responsible; to set objectives and define limitations; to work creatively within those limitations; and to design and accomplish a thorough and satisfying independent research project. I was pleased with the similarity of the objectives which the students in the groups set during their initial orientations.

I don't think any of us fully anticipated or appreciated the challenge and impact that such a program would have on us. The program offered a set of circumstances which were new to all of us. Furthermore, even though I had the position and responsibility of directing and facilitating the learning of the students in those two programs, I was dealing with much of the same newness and challenge as my students. Together we all had to find ways to overcome the long-habituated or self-imposed obstacles in ourselves to our own learning: the passivity, the tendency to judge and stereotype, the dependency on others, the lack of confidence in our own capabilities and the tendency toward irresponsibility to others. My advantages were in having had more experience and training in such new situations and in having, perhaps, clearer objectives for this experience.

For most of the students it was the first real change from all that

was familiar and safe in their lives, their first exposure to a new cul-
ture and all that entails, and their first look at themselves from a
different perspective.

The students had to adjust to three major unfamiliar elements of
the program, three interweaving strands of the same rope that would
stretch them during the semester to become stronger, more resiliant, more
mature, more self-reliant, and more responsible.

The first element was the newness of the <u>experiential</u> approach to
learning. It is a learning process in which familiar, well-tested meth-
ods and patterns of conventional didactic learning don't apply. It is a
whole-person approach to learning, in which the cognitive dimensions
are kept in balance with the affective dimensions of the learner's total
experience, because both are used and valued.

In Ireland, the students were asked to take risks physically and
emotionally, as well as intellectually, in going out from the group and
classroom and library to engage fully with the culture and the learning
process. However, going into the "field" for human resources and experien-
tially based research was new and frightening for most of the students,
as was having to take initiative and responsibility for their own learn-
ing. A complete new set of skills had to be developed, such as identi-
fying resources, interviewing, observing, setting priorities and time
allotments, being open and flexible to take advantage of learning from
unexpected situations or sources, etc. With guidance and direction from
Carol and me, and their Irish project advisors, the students were ex-
pected to become the initiators, designers, participators, and evaluators
of their learning. They were asked to apply theory to practice, and then
to re-examine theory based on their own experience:

> I feel like I saw Ireland from one perspective from
> my stay in the Republic, another from Northern Ireland,
> and yet another from England. It lends a whole new
> perspective to people's attitudes and prevailing opin-
> ions. Makes you stop and really look at what you think.
> I'm working now on applying it to myself and my culture.
> Ireland reminded me of the South in so many ways anyway.
> (Aurie)

The second element of the program was the complex <u>cross-cultural</u>

nature of the learning. By "cross-cultural," I mean the learning which

takes place when an "individual encounters a different culture and, as a

result, (a) examines the degree to which he is influenced by his own cul-

ture, and (b) understands the culturally derived values, attitudes and

outlooks of other people."[2]

On this program the students had to adjust to the newness of their

host culture and the accompanying feelings of strangeness, discomfort,

and disorientation it produced. They had to look beneath surface im-

pressions, fantasies, stereotypes and assumptions to see the deeper

realities and values of the culture. They had to confront cultural dif-

ferences which were not initially apparent, especially in a country whose

lifestyle and language so closely resembled what Americans are used to

(especially Irish Americans, as were many of my students).

The cross-cultural dimension of the program was profoundly chal-

lenging to the students. The excitement and curiosity about the Irish

culture were what prompted most of the students to choose this program.

But, they quickly discovered that important skills were required of them

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[2]Peter Adler, "Culture Shock and the Cross Cultural Learning Exper-
ience," <u>Readings in Inter-cultural Communication</u>, Vol. II, Ed. David
Hoopes (Pittsburgh: Regional Council for International Education, 1972),
p. 15.

if they were to interact meaningfully with the culture. Primary among these skills were listening, understanding, suspending some of their personal lifestyle needs and wants, and being willing to try new things, non-critically.

By having each student live with an Irish family in a "homestay" situation rather than stay in a dormitory, hostel, or hotel, the program forced each student to confront the culture individually, directly, and experientially. Having to share bathrooms and meals with relative strangers, fit into daily rules and routines, adjust to limitations of hot water and house heating and differences in foods, etc., all contribute to a far more personalized understanding of cultural factors. Such an experience also generated important examination of the students' own cultural patterns and values:

> My time in Ireland was one of the most important
> times in my life . . . I learned so much about under-
> standing another's perspective -- understanding with
> the heart instead of the head. I also learned a lot
> about myself and my culture and attitudes by comparison.
> I learned a lot about lifestyle too. I couldn't sleep
> for about three weeks (when I got back) because the
> bedrooms were so hot. I'm still amazed when I turn on
> the faucet and hot water comes out. (Aurie)

The similarities and differences between American and Irish cul-
tures were not the only areas of cross-cultural learning for these stu-
dents. Another dimension of their cross-cultural experience was the
unique diversity of their own group members. Though all were Americans,
the group members represented widely differing ethnic, regional, and
socio-economic backgrounds, fields of study, and of course, personality
and physiology. According to Dr. Paul Pedersen, educator and author of
several books on cross-cultural learning and counseling, these factors
represent some of the multiple variables which we deal with in all of

our interactions.[3] Therefore, even these intergroup contacts were "cross-cultural," by Pedersen's broad definition, and required the same sensitivity, responsibility, and communication skills that cross-national interactions require. The group was in many ways a microcosm of the larger world community. One student wrote later that "getting used to the people in the group was as difficult as getting used to Ireland." (Michelle)

Involvement in such a diverse group helped many individual learners to overcome or break out of the fixed cultural framework with which they each had entered the new culture. By "fixed cultural framework" I mean the previously unexamined set of values, perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes that can tend to bind us, and blind us, if we have never been exposed to anything else. Regional, socio-economic, and religious stereotypes in particular, had to be examined.

This brings me to the third challenging element of the program: the group. Most of these students had never participated in a group experience like this before, and they were not expecting that it would play such a major role in their semester (about 40% of the program time was spent in group). Since the majority of the students applied to the program as they would to any university class, thinking only of their individual goals, it is understandable that they would not tend to look to the group or its members as resources to their learning.

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[3] Paul Pedersen, "Cross-Cultural Counseling," a Training Workshop/ Lecture presented at The Experiment in International Living, Brattleboro, Vermont, August 1980.

There were 16 students in each program. Whether they wished to or not, they made a rather imposing collective impact on the host community and on each other. There was a definite need for the students to decide individually and collaboratively, whether to use the group as an ally and resource to deal with the other dimensions of the program, or to reject it in order to tackle the other areas of their learning more autonomously. For many students, the group format became an issue of considerable con- flict:

> The group, I suppose, initially "replaced" the family
> and friends I had somewhat relied on before. However, after
> a few days I tired of having to do everything as a group,
> because I felt I had to compromise myself and not do
> what I really wanted to do. From that time onward, I
> relied more upon myself . . . This is not to say that I
> didn't learn a lot from the group, because I did. (Jim)

These three elements of the CSA program: (1) the experiential; (2) the cross-cultural; and (3) the group, were to influence everything we did. Though these elements formed a unique framework for this particular learning experience, I believe that they are each integral elements of most interactive learning experiences, to some degree. Therefore, the learning from them is transferable to other experiences, just as the students' prior learning experiences had varying degrees of the same elements, which could be drawn upon as resources for this Ireland exper- ience. It is this transferability of learning skills, from previous experience to the present and from the present to future experiences, which makes this type of learning worthwhile and lasting. It is also the awareness and use of this transferability which makes the student more resourceful as a learner.

Within the three-dimensional program framework which I have described, it was my role to be the principal facilitator and organizer of these

various rich potentialities for learning. Over the course of the two semesters, I learned a great deal about how I can facilitate a learning which is process and transfer-oriented, rather than content-oriented.

With the first program I had no input into the advance planning and decision-making, nor did I receive any specific training or preparation for my role. I went through the semester doing my best to implement and adapt with my group what had been planned by the Director of the Irish Experiment and her Irish committee. A great deal of my energy went into my own cultural and role adjustments and into trying to keep up day-to-day with the program needs. Consequently, I overlooked many areas in which I could have had more active influence on the learning process. I also made many mistakes.

Thankfully, I had a chance with the second semester program to be more creative, to transfer and apply what I had learned from the first semester, and to contribute more positively to the experiences of my students. In looking back on the two programs, I have been able to isolate certain skills or tools which are priorities to me as a facilitator in the type of program which I have outlined, and again, which are transferable to any learning situation.

These skills fall into 5 major categories, which actually overlap:

1. Encouraging the learner first to view him or herself as the most valuable resource available, and then to look to other human resources.

2. Developing the group into a learning community which enhances the learning for each member.

3. Providing balance within the learning program between the group and the individual, and between leader-directed and self-directed activity.

4. Providing choices to the students within defined limits.

5. Providing and demanding clarity: of expectations and objectives, of criteria and requirements, and of feedback and evaluation.

I shall examine each of these priorities in light of what I actually did to facilitate the learning for my students in Ireland, or would do next time.

II. Learner as Resource

The most exciting, yet often most overlooked resource of all is the learner, him or herself. The more I engage in experiential education, the more I am convinced of the value of one's own experience, as well as one's own perception and interpretation of that experience.

However, traditional Western education does not teach us to view ourselves as valid resources for our own learning. Consequently, we learn to discount or distrust our own knowledge and experience, and we become passive, dependent, and uncreative learners.

I have come to believe that one of the most useful things I can do as facilitator is to identify each person as a knower as well as a learner, and as having the capacities to contribute significantly to his or her own learning process. In addition, I want to help students to see the potential in themselves to stretch far, to push out the boundaries of their experience and to extend their growing edge, using themselves as their primary resource.

An educator who has greatly reinforced this concept for me is Dr. Caleb Gattegno who, in his "Silent Way" approach to teaching foreign languages, believes strongly in the abilities of the learner. Gattegno's study has shown that each student, at whatever age, is "a learning system" and can "mobilize what is required by the tasks from his arsenal of achievements and from that part of his potential called in by the challenges."[4] Gattegno also says that "we are freeing our students when we recognize that they are intelligent and imaginative persons."[5]

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[4] Caleb Gattegno, The Common Sense of Teaching Foreign Languages (New York: Educational Solutions, 1976), p. 8.

[5] Ibid. p. 55.

With my students in Ireland I worked to have them recognize their own abilities in a variety of ways, such as encouraging them to recall and use their store of knowledge and experience in new situations and by putting them in situations where they would have to rely upon themselves.

In preparing for homestays, for example, I asked students to recall an experience in their lives in which they lived for awhile with another family, or in which their own family hosted an outsider. I then asked them to recall the feelings and adjustments and learning gained from that experience. The students could then transfer what was useful to this situation, giving them tools to work with. Also, rather than giving them a list of common complaints which host families have about students (the basis for the usual "do's and dont's"), I asked my group to imagine or role-play themselves as host family members, complaining at a general evaluation meeting after "their students" have departed. I didn't have to prompt the students on what the issues and problems were. They knew. The knowledge came from their own store of experience.

Once the students were in their actual homestays, they had to rely on themselves a great deal, to deal constuctively with the unstructured time, to adjust and fit into the family, to find ways of interacting in the unfamiliar setting, to work out ways of meeting their personal needs, etc. This was a time in which I encouraged them to strengthen and use their skills of observation, inquiry, participation, and resource gathering in order to learn as much as possible about Irish values and attitudes, culture and customs, institutions, family life, etc.

Throughout the semester, I asked the students to keep a personal journal, in which they would record experiences, reactions, observations, questions, hypotheses and insights about the culture, and thoughts on their own learning and personal growth. I stressed that such a journal

would allow them to stay close to their own learning process and to turn to themselves for understandings.

Though I never read these journals, I asked the students to use them as a basis for the two required cultural analysis papers they were to write during the Contemporary Culture Seminar. These 2-3 page papers were assigned as a means for the student to explore and evaluate what was learned from experiencing particular critical incidents involving the student and the new culture, perhaps something that occured within the homestay or community situation. I also asked the students to refer to their journals at the end of the semester in making an assessment of gains and growth, personally, academically, and cross-culturally. In the future, I think I would also structure periodic individual conferences in which the students select an entry in their journals to discuss with me.

One requirement I added to the program second semester, was a mini-project during the rural homestays in which each student had to initiate and implement a project involving herself* in a contributing, volunteer capacity. To do this they had to assess what they each had to offer of themselves as a resource, then set objectives and fit the project into the scope and limitations of their time and situation. They kept track of the project's development and progress in their journals.

Unfortunately, some found this project to be a difficult task, mainly I suspect, because they didn't see what they had to offer. I visited each of the students once during this two-week homestay period, and used that opportunity to encourage them and offer suggestions on their projects.

*For ease in reference, I shall hereafter use the female pronoun, rather than a double or masculine pronoun, when referring to individual students in my programs, since 30 of the 32 students I worked with in Ireland were female.

Two weeks was too short a time for those who struggled with this assignment to achieve a satisfying project. However, all of the students managed to do something, even if the effort was weak and ill-defined.

Some of the more successful mini-projects created were tutoring a child in piano, helping a clear some farm land, assisting with the community meals-on-wheels program to the elderly, helping with the immunization of cattle on the host's farm, and teaching host children a new craft.

Later, when the group was together again, I had the students report to the others on their individual projects and evaluate the process they went through. One result of that group-reporting was in increased recognition and appreciation of one another as knowers and as valuable resources. Another result was that the less assertive and creative of the students began to see what they could have done and how they might have gone about it.

Naturally, such a project can contain cross-cultural, as well as personal and interpersonal learning. For many it was also an initial look at field research methods, because interviews, observations, and historical and sociological perspectives entered in. The process of selecting and limiting the projects was also preparation for more complex projects they would tackle later.

Once the students became conscious of themselves as resources, they began to identify and tap into the vast reserve of human and situational resources available to them in their group, their host family, and their host community. However, this was not a natural or familiar way of learning for them. Again, it required practice and the conscious development of new skills. It required curiosity, openness, flexibility, and creativity. It forced active involvement in the learning, throwing

the passive excuse of boredom out the window. It also required the sus-
pension of judgment, since the basis for evaluation may be a value sys-
tem inappropriate to the situation. We had the chance to practice these
skills nearly every day in Ireland, because we were in a constantly
changing and unfamiliar situation which demanded our resourcefulness
and openness.

A clear example of this occured during our Contemporary Culture Sem-
inar. Over a period of four weeks, guest lecturers (arranged by the Irish
Experiment Committee) came to talk on the history, culture, and politics
of the country. Because not all of these people were trained teachers,
many of the lectures were delivered "poorly" by American university
standards. In three cases, in particular, the people who came to talk
were real characters, actual eccentrics, who rambled off on tangents,
confusing and boring my students. Yet, I knew that they were people who
had a wealth of knowledge and experience and whose lives were marvelous
case studies of Irish culture. Unfortunately, these particular speakers
were ill at ease in the formal lecture setting, something which none of
us had anticipated.

It became clear to me that my students were being blocked from
learning by their fixed notion of how and by whom content should be pre-
sented. It was difficult for them to be flexible and to look for what
they would learn from the persons rather than from the content. The
students fidgeted and turned off, as they might in a public school at
home, giving nothing back to the speakers and counting the sessions as a
waste of time. This not only alienated the guests, but also cost the
students opportunities in which they might have learned a great deal. It
never occured to the students that their behavior and attitudes might
have been used to positively alter an awkward situation and to make the

guests more comfortable. Instead, they fell into old patterns of being passively negative, critical, and irresponsible.

I initiated a discussion later about how the students could have been more creative and active in using those situations to enhance their learning, rather than letting them slip by. The discussion was a bit of a consciousness-raising session, reminding them of their own objectives for learning and for taking active responsibility. However, it is something I wish I had done earlier to avoid the awkwardness we faced later. I also realized that I, or the committee, could have done more to prepare the students for the speakers.

Later, as the students went out into the field to seek resources, they seemed to become more open to finding valuable human resources in unexpected places and forms. However, it took practice, and the adoption of the relaxed Irish style of "chatting up" people they encountered, plus taking enough time to allow those people to open up, which they inevitably would. Since Ireland is still very close to its oral tradition of history and story-telling, we often found a wealth of knowledge in the least expected persons as they began to talk to us. We also found surprising accessibility to authorities and "experts" in our various fields of study, people who invariably gave more than was expected of their time and help to the students.

One thing I realized later in evaluating my work with the students was that I needed to assume less, and prompt action more. I had been assuming that, because we had established appropriate objectives and had assigned appropriate tasks, the desired new behavior would automatically follow. What I learned from this was that learning new self-responsible approaches to learning requires overcoming deeply-rooted old habits.

As a facilitator, I need to encourage and prompt and guide, and perhaps give even more structure to situations where new behavior is expected.

If I assume that my students understand something, or have already learned certain skills or information, or hold certain values or opinions, I do them a serious disservice because I have probably inappropriately based my expectations and plans on those assumptions. If I am then angry or disappointed that the students didn't follow through as I expected, they will not know why and will resent me for judging them by a "measuring stick" that is unknown to them.

At the same time, I want the students to avoid making assumptions about me, about each other, about their host families, or about the culture. Again, this requires the active use of observation, inquiry, and listening skills.

In working with the individual learner as a resource, I found that I had to be willing to spend frequent time with her in focused, one-on-one conferences. I also had to seek each person out whenever possible for informal chats to get better acquainted. These individual sessions were invaluable for me to learn about the student's own goals, concerns, assumptions, and progress. Then I could better encourage, counsel and guide her to dig deeper into herself as a resource to accomplish those goals and to overcome inner obstacles.

This was an area I neglected somewhat during the first semester because we were spending considerable time together as a group and I was trying to deal with needs "en masse." During the second semester, however, I made it a priority to individualize, both in scheduled conferences and in not-so-impromptu chats. For example, when we went on a long bus trip I moved around the bus to sit with different students for awhile. I sat alone on the first couple of excursions and later realized what a valuable

opportunity I had missed for this individual contact.

One thing I wasn't fully prepared for first semester was the re-
sistance that many students would exhibit in dealing with all these changes.
They complained so much that I had to work hard to keep from feeling
personally threatened:

> I must keep in mind that when learning a new way of
> learning and a new culture, there will be a necessary
> amount of rebellion, testing, struggle, and guardedness.
> It is really part of the learning process of gaining
> independence and autonomy. (Journal entry)

Many students found this new, self-responsible approach to learning
to be burdensome and uncomfortable, especially at times when their en-
ergy and spirits were low. They slipped back into expectations of
being "taught", taken care of, entertained, and directed.

This is when I especially needed to spend individual time with
those students exhibiting negative reactions - to listen to them, to
counsel with them, to challenge and encourage them, and to direct their
energy toward positive action. It was also necessary in these times to
remind the students of the limits and choices with which they had to
work; and then to remind myself to allow those choices and to hold to
those limits when tested. Sometimes it helped to hold a group session
where the conflicts and resistance could be aired in order to collec-
tively look for ways to move on to new growth.

The exciting culmination of all that had been done to encourage the
learner to see herself as a resource came in the final four weeks of the
program, the Independent Study Period. Other than periodic meetings with
me or with Carol Bergin, and a prescribed number of hours in consulta-
tion with their Irish project advisors, the students were completely on
their own for the four weeks. Their housing, transportation, budgeting
of time and money, etc. were under their individual control. Most of

them accomplished a mammoth amount of resource gathering and made great

leaps toward self-reliance as learners. Many traveled widely in the

country for their resources; some lived "on location" with their field

work in apprentice, tutorial, or practicum relationships with their project

advisors (such as the girl who studied under an accomplished weaver

in County Clare); and the rest stayed in the Dublin area, where a variety

of resources were available (including the support of other group mem-

bers).

It was not easy for them and not all of them managed to complete

their projects, but there wasn't a single one of them who came away

without a new sense of what she could accomplish on her own. Yet, it is

an independence that was accomplished as a result of structured exper-

iences that were designed and directed to develop resourcefulness and

self-reliance in a building process. I feel doubtful that these students

would have gained as much if they had gone to Ireland on their own. The

program structure and support for taking risks were essential to this

kind of growth, especially for students of this age and experience:

> It was the first time in my life that I felt
> completely out on my own. I felt so independent
> and proud of myself. It was good that we were
> forced to go our and find our own way. (Kim)

In the opportunities that I have had to see or talk with students since

their return to the U.S., I have heard numerous tales which give evidence

of their newfound strength and learning skills:

> Being away from my country had given me a deeper
> appreciation and understanding of it. After the
> initial shock of jumping back into a faster, more
> keyed-up and developed culture, I feel that my life
> will be more constructive and directed. I'm excited about
> the prospect of applying all my newfound skills and
> growth . . . I feel that I have become more self-motivated
> and independent. This is due in large part to me being

in a foreign environment with new people for such
a length of time and having no way in which to run
back home to the security of my family and close
friends to be re-energized and reassured. The
separation and challenge has been strengthening
and positive for me. (Helen, Spring group)

As you probably know, academics is the least
of what I got out of my time in Ireland. But the
experience as a whole was, is, and will be for a
long time a very important turning point in my
life. (Tish, Fall group)

III. Group as Learning Community and Resource

From the outset of each program the fact of our group format caused divergent student reactions. Some students were relieved to know they could depend on some security in the group to allay their fears and insecurities. And, as I mentioned before, others (probably the majority) were leery of "groupiness" and its demands and dangers to their developing independence:

> They seem quite fearful of being too group-
> bound or group identified . . . of not being able
> to explore their own emerging independence and self-
> confidence. (Journal entry 9/20/79)

They also had some fears that an intense group involvement might include "touchy-feely" aspects, i.e. the demand for emotional and personal disclosure, the loss of privacy.

It became a serious priority, then, for me as facilitator to make the group work _for_ them and not against them. My goal was to do what I could to shape this collection of students into a "learning community," a supportive environment which would be a rich resource to the individual students for the many levels of need and phases of learning they would likely encounter during the semester.

The concept of learning community is relatively new and controversial in our Western (especially U.S.) educational system. Charles Curran, founder of Counseling-Learning/Community Language Learning, describes most classroom learning as being based upon a "laissez-faire, rugged individualism" which promotes learning in an intellectualized and competitive way with little or no consideration given to the need for a community learning experience.[6] On the other hand, the community approach, accord-

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[6] Charles Curran, Counseling Learning in Second Languages (Apple River, Ill.:Apple River Press, 1976), pp. 37 & 50.

ing to Curran, is "learning, then, not by students in isolation and com-
petition, nor with the teacher removed, but as a total community with
knowers and learners all engaged together."[7]

This kind of community, as I saw it, is one which uses its collect-
ive and multiple resources to serve the individuals within it so they
they can develop and learn to their greatest capacity. Within this
learning community each individual learns to make collective decisions,
to draw upon strengths, to share responsibilities, to cooperate, to care
for one another, to allow others their uniqueness and individual rights,
and to reconcile conflicts - all of which are important skills for life.

> Our group, during the program, provided much
> support and inspiration for me. The combination of
> the energy which we created together and our many and
> varied interests made for an exciting and stimulating
> learning environment. The emotional support given in
> times of the "doldrums" was crucial and made it
> possible for me to continue when times were rough.
> Without our supportive group I think I would have been
> tempted to ditch out and give up early at times. The
> group held me up. (Helen)

The issue of the group becoming a learning community absorbed an
enormous amount of my attention and energy in Ireland. This was the
area in which I made the most mistakes and had the most to learn. Early
on I wrote in my journal "It is no longer the assumption of community I
must work with, but rather the question of community." (10-15-79)

An important thing I discovered is that it isn't easy to create a
"community" or a supportive climate out of such diverse and unacquainted
elements as these 16 students (what sounds good in theory is not always
easy in practice). I realized that I must not talk about community in

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[7] Ibid. p. 45.

the abstract, but rather <u>do</u> it. In other words, I must not impose the con-
cept of community on my students as an <u>ideal</u>. Rather, I must design
real activities which foster the development of group responsibility,
interdependence, and cooperation; activities which offer them ways of
discovering and accepting their differences and similarities; activities
around which trust can build naturally.

Here again I had to be cautious about making the assumption that a
collection of individuals will naturally want to form such a community,
especially if they are leery about the idea of being group-identified,
group-dependent, group-rejected, group-conformed, group-invaded, or
group-pressured to be "touchy-feely."

On the other hand, after examining my assumptions, I became convinced
that I should not allow those fears and defenses to dissuade me from my
goals of community. The kind of intense living and learning experience
we were involved in demanded that we work cooperatively, rather than in
opposition to each other. I learned quite clearly from the struggles
of the first semester group that if community is not effectively facili-
tated, resistance can take over and the group format becomes a useless
part of the learning experience. It can become 17 people riding a bus
and never interacting.

Therefore, I had to look at our many group activities and find ways
to foster a sense of community that would serve the students in the
areas which I saw as most useful to this experience, namely, (1) provid-
ing support; (2) multiplying their learning; (3) providing a means of
processing their experiences; and (4) developing responsibility and inter-
dependence.

FALL: One activity in which I realized my direction was critical

was the orientation. For the fall program, the orientation was split between London (to accommodate the English CSA groups) and Dublin, and was primarily an academic preparation for the academic requirements of the semester. The orientation schedule was planned by others prior to my arrival, leaving me little room for input by the time I arrived. Although I had strong ideas about what I wanted for an orientation, I felt it best to be as adaptable as possible and fit into the existing scheme.

I tried to be as supportive, helpful, and personally authentic as I could with the students, but found that the group was not developing trust or caring. What we needed were orientation sessions and activities which would get the students working together, opening up to each other, taking some risks together, verbalizing their hopes and fears, playing together, and committing themselves to mutual objectives. A few of our activities made efforts to meet these needs, but were undermined by conflicting and confusing information the students were getting about the program, due to new academic regulations and confusion on the part of the leaders. The effect of all this was to put the students on the defensive, focusing on the discrepancies and lack of clarity present in the orientation - not a very positive nor supportive way to begin the program.

Of course, many students found support on their own, in pairs or clusters, as they roomed or traveled together during that first week. And, our whole group had moments of feeling like a community, like when we traveled for hours by train and ferry to get from London to Dublin, charged with excitement; or when we arrived by bus in our small homestay community, nervous and eager about being met by our respective host families.

However, the size of the group, coupled with the frustrations and tensions that had been building from our shaky beginnings only intensified a love-hate relationship with the group format as time went on. By the second week of the program, the students (all girls in the fall) had formed a self-initiated buddy system to serve their needs for security and support. As situations arose during the semester when I needed everyone to pull together responsibly as a unit, I again was confronted with resistance and disconnectedness.

During the long homestay and Contemporary Culture Seminar period, the portion of the program which is most like an academic experience at any university at home, we met on a daily basis for lectures and classes. And, though we saw each other often, there was no real need for the students to cooperate with and serve one another. In fact, as I've already mentioned, they were slipping into passive patterns of expecting to be taught and taken care of:

> I don't know what to do about the group at
> this point, other than to let them each struggle
> with their own needs. Some want freedom from the
> group and the seminar, others want a stronger group
> commitment. Our group time is so focused on academics
> and intellectualizing that we haven't had much oppor-
> tunity to work on group spirit, trust, conflict, etc.
> Conflicts have been brewing from the start, but we
> never have time to work them through, causing further
> rifts and divisions of the group. I hate to see that
> happen, when it means that so much is lost in learning
> from one another. On the other hand, I don't want to
> push the group artificially to be more of a community
> than they are ready for, nor do I want to discount the
> necessity of each of them to move at their own pace
> and readiness. (Journal entry 10-23-79)

Then came the time for our group trip to the isolated west coast peninsula of Dingle. It came at a low time for me, when I was wondering if I would make it through the semester. I certainly didn't look forward to four days of traveling and living together if everyone was going to ex-

pect me to make it a success, and blame me for anything that didn't go well.

I saw no alternative other than to call a meeting to express my concerns, to find out what the girls were expecting of the trip, and to confront them with the choices we had regarding the trip (which were to cancel it, to go ahead with a potentially negative experience, or to pull together to make the trip a good experience). We hadn't had a meeting to deal with affective concerns in weeks, due to the resistance, and I was nervous about having one now. However, the meeting proved to be a valuable opportunity to air various concerns and to process what we were learning and experiencing, in a relaxed living room setting over tea and biscuits. I initiated a discussion about being active rather than passive, about taking responsibility for the quality of our own experience, about:

> viewing each experience as a learning opportunity . . . about ourselves if nothing else, and the importance of being open to the newness in ourselves and each day . . . the changing that is happening in each of our lives. (Journal entry 10-26-79)

The combination of releasing negatives that had been bottled up in some of the girls, and refocusing on our learning objectives, enabled the group then to move toward a mutual effort of resolving the situation. Everyone made a verbal agreement at that meeting to assume responsibilities for various details and tasks, and to do what they could to make the trip positive.

The trip turned out to be exhausting, exhilarating, intense, and demanding for all of us. We had to draw upon every creative, flexible, responsible, active, helpful, spontaneous, trusting, curious, and culturally sensitive resource and skill within us, individually and collectively.

It was an experience that made a community of us, yet still allowed for
time alone:

> The girls dealt with the unexpected far better
> for having given conscious thought to how they'd
> been handling things lately. They took on the
> weather, the housing, the meals, the projects and
> concerts and excursions in true adventuresome spirit,
> with survival being a force to unite them in their
> common efforts. They also took advantage of the
> physical setting to get out and release energy,
> or to be alone, or to make contacts with the local
> Irish. I was especially pleased with their willing-
> ness to participate in the ecumenical church services
> Sunday and the community concert Monday night, pulling
> together musical programs of surprising quality
> each time. (Journal entry 10-31-79)

It wasn't all perfect. There were a few conflicts and tensions, and
occasional abandonments of responsibility. There were times when I need-
ed to be far more directive, and times when I clashed with the direction
of the Irish co-leader, who was our local contact. But there were also
times that worked well to build community, like the late night musical
rehearsals or small group chats around the fire, which drew the students
closer as people.

When we returned from that trip there was a new energy and
power within the group, a new sense of themselves as resources, a new
level of trust:

> The group is getting to balance themselves well
> now, challenging each other, clarifying, mediating,
> pacifying, encouraging, leading, and helping. (Journal
> entry 11-12-79)

> I suspect that I have been far too focused on
> "The Group" and not on the individual, and that the
> "Group" is not an entity unto itself, anymore than
> a "relationship" is. (Journal entry 11-15-79)

This experience helped me to be less passive as well. I had been
in a learner, observer, program interpreter position for much of the
semester. I now knew how vital my own active direction was to the

success of the students' experience.

SPRING: For the spring semester I was ready to be more directive as an initiator and designer of the program. I knew I had to make changes in ensure a stronger sense of a learning community.

First of all, I took full responsibility for the spring orientation and made sure that it was held in a comfortable setting with carefully planned activities. I also made sure that we did not have to begin the program in London. We took time to discuss and experience Irish culture, independence and cooperation, resource gathering skills, and experiential learning. Each exercise and discussion was designed to have the students practice what we were talking about. We also set group objectives and talked about hopes and fears of group involvement.

To get better acquainted, we did an exercise of making personal posters, where the students drew anything that represented their view of themselves and what they wanted to "say" about themselves to the group, through symbols, slogans, shapes, pictures, or whatever. Each student then shared her poster with the group, with no pressure to reveal more than desired. I was impressed with the students' willingness to engage in this exercise and to use the posters as a means of letting the group know who they each were. A very special warmth and trust grew out of that session. I was later entrusted as keeper of the posters until the end of the program, when I brought them out for the final evaluation and wrap-up session.

Though I had long been a proponent of the use of theater games and trust exercises for creating community, I found myself in a situation where I first had to carefully evaluate the appropriateness of any exercise I wanted to try in light of the students' needs. I knew all too

clearly that games could either aid in building group spirit or cause a real turn-off to any further group interaction. I might develop greater boldness again in the future about the use of games, but for these programs I felt constrained and cautious. Yet, this sense of responsibility to the students forced me to be perhaps more creative in finding appropriate ways to achieve the same ends.

One of the greatest benefits of learning with a group is the multiplication of learning made possible by bringing together different people with different experiences. In my groups, the students were able to multiply their learning by 16, the number of students in each group, if they were open to seeing each other as resources. I stressed to the students their responsibility to the group, not only as knowers, but also as givers of what they know. They were aware of how much they were receiving, but needed to have structured situations in which to share what they were learning for the benefit of the others. Therefore, as often as possible, I scheduled student-led discussions and presentations designed to inform the others of what had been learned. In the future I would make this an even greater priority because, even though a great deal is shared informally among the students, much can be lost unless it is focused and articulated formally.

Each student couldn't do or experience or study all she might have liked in three months, but she could gain insights from the others, as well as share her own experiences. For example, not all of the students could live with a farming family, but during the homestay debriefing sessions they could learn from the students who did. Not all of them could travel to the west coast during their independent time, but they could share in the experience vicariously and increase their understanding of

the culture by hearing later in a small group discussion what a few of their fellow group members encountered in that region. By discussing the cultural analysis papers, the students could also learn from one another's insights and efforts at cultural adjustment.

Similarly, each student could only work on one project topic, but had the opportunity to learn about the other topics through informal sharing and formal presentations. During the Contemporary Culture Seminar second semester, we asked each student to research a different contemporary Irish issue, write a 5-10 page paper, and present her findings orally to the group. On a larger scale they did the same thing with their major independent projects. An hour was alloted for each presentation, discussion of the project, and group feedback on the presentation. These presentations proved to be informative and well-researched. They reinforced the concept of the individual as the knower, and gave the students the satisfaction of "teaching" the rest of the group. Again, in the context of such a learning community, the students could valuably multiply their learning:

> I learned such a great deal from the people in the
> group and I was exposed to subjects which I never would
> have taken an interest in alone. This, combined with
> all the methods of informal and alternative learning
> we used, provided me with a rich and adequately struct-
> ured atmosphere in which to explore and discover. The
> value of "experiential" learning is now strongly
> cemented in my mind and my life. (Helen)

Most of the situations I have described in which learning was shared were also situations in which learning was processed. Perhaps not all individuals need a group for support of their affective needs, but it seems they can all benefit from group opportunities to discuss, expand, and develop the cognitive dimensions of their individual experiences.

By placing their personal experience into a larger, more complex framework, the students can gain perspectives which lead to new understandings. Furthermore, this processing helps the student to integrate the experience, skills, and understandings deeply enough in her system to have them serve as resources later in new situations, again, the importance of making the learning transferable. Finally, in processing the learning the group can serve as a mirror to reflect what has happened to each person individually, helping them to see themselves with new eyes and to adjust their concepts of themselves in relation to a world that is newly presenting itself.

To ensure that such processing would occur, I had to build into the program time and structure for a debriefing of each significant phase or experience. This was as true for a one-hour cross-cultural exercise as it was for a two-week homestay or a four-week seminar. Usually a debriefing took the form of a group discussion led by me, in which I asked students to discuss "What happened? Why did it happen that way? How did you feel about it? How might it have been different?" As indicated before, whenever we didn't do some kind of formal processing, a lot of the value of the experience was lost.

Even processing the re-entry to the learner's own culture can be made easier by a network of support and concern of the community. Although my group members were scattered widely when they returned home, and were unable to see one another, many were in touch by phone and letter to give reassurance that the experience was real and that the feelings of readjustment were natural and shared. Although I would like to have had a reunion after the first few weeks back home, this was not feasible with my groups; but, it might be in the future.

Though these students may never form life-long relationships in

such a focused, short-term group, they have shared an unrepeatable experience which has bound them together in a very special way:

> I found working in a group much more effective
> than if studying completely independently. It gave
> us a chance to exchange ideas, experiences, and gave
> us the needed identity in a foreign country that
> would have been unattainable if on our own. There's
> something about knowing you're not alone that helps
> you get through the tough times. The group was there
> when I needed them, and I hope I was there when they
> needed me. (Jo)

Although I am a strong proponent of group learning, I have had to admit that the group is not always appropriate as a learning vehicle. There are some students, or some times, when the group is counter-productive or limiting to the learning that is possible. It has been true for me at various times in my own life, and it was true for three of my students in Ireland.

Two girls dropped the program, one each semester, and the third just disengaged, as much as the program would allow, to go her own way. They all wanted to test out their independence. Although I think they would have benefitted from the processing and multiplying of learning available in the group setting, I had to respect that they didn't want it.

However, one of the girls who dropped the program did so precisely because of all the growth she had gained from it, and because it had brought her to a point of readiness. Eileen's decision to withdraw turned out to be a positive assertion of her independence and right to control her own life in the face of a web of family and academic pressures. She acknowledged that the program had empowered her with the skills and courage to make this decision. It had helped her to see that she was responsible for her life and her learning. Therefore, she decided to take this opportunity to eliminate all pressures, expectations and

requirements, which others had imposed on her, in order to re-think her
own goals. The group/community was a supportive base for Eileen as she
stepped out and away to spend the rest of her time in Ireland on her own.

IV. Providing Balance:
Between the Group and the Individual
And Between Leader-Directed and Self-Directed Activity

As a facilitator for a learning experience such as we had in Ireland, I found the issue of balance to be something to which I had to give frequent, conscious attention. I was especially concerned with providing a healthy balance between the individual learner as a resource and the group as a resource in the development of resourceful and responsible learners. I was also concerned with balancing activities directed by the leader with activities directed by the learners.

Charles Curran described the learner as having two opposing forces: the "will to power" and the "will to community." The first is a need for individual self-assertion and the second is a need for cooperation and belonging. It is the will to community which balances the will to power.[8] Both are equally important to the development of the learner.

It was the will to power which caused the resistance of the students to the group. Yet, it was the will to community which caused them to turn to each other, even when they didn't have to. It was the will to power that kept the students from becoming too reliant on the group, and which gave Eileen the readiness to become more independent.

> It may seem corny, but at times I have felt that
> our group was like a family, not always sitting down at
> the supper together every night, but always ready to
> bind together as a family whenever necessary. I've
> learned about myself that although I cherish the freedom
> and independence of being 'on my own,' I appreciate having
> a familial base rather than just isolation. It's so nice
> to realize that there were people here who knew me well
> before I left for my independent project who I could call
> for help or just a chat when needed. (Paulette)

[8] Ibid. p. 7.

Naturally, in a program like ours, total group dependency is not desirable, especially if it keeps the individual from extending out to the wider community or including others in the group. There were times in Ireland when I feared that the group members would not make the effort to step away from the safety of the group to interact openly with the Irish. Total independence is not desirable either, when it means that an individual is not willing to make a group commitment or share in any group responsibility, undermining the success of the experience for everyone.

Independence is desirable if it means self-reliance, self-responsibility, and resourcefulness. The move from dependence toward independence is natural as the learner gains the skills and confidence to move further out in risk-taking and experience. A healthy balance between the two is an interdependence, which allows for an equal give and take of strengths and skills between the individual and the community.

One dilemma that I have seen with a supportive group is that it can offer too much of a refuge or panacea from healthy individual conflict, i.e. a place to escape from the important learning and growth and discovery that come from occasional solitude, loneliness, struggle, risk-taking with strangers, and having no one else to depend on. Without risking interaction with the unfamiliar culture, and confrontation with new values and life styles, the student may never really understand the culture, nor gain in self-awareness.

This is why it was valuable for each of my students to have her own host family, preferably at some distance from the other students; and why the students were encouraged to go out on their own during the independent study period. Also, Carol and I made a concerted effort to include local Irish people in our lectures, discussions and excursions. We also encouraged our students to get involved with community organizations. We even

gave the students the option of using such participation to fulfill an academic requirement (to be described further on). Those who got involved in local activities, such as church youth groups, scouting programs, or town politics, found a definite balance to the group interests.

At this point I must also stress the value of being alone and apart from the group for reasonable periods, to balance time spent in "society" with others. From my own experience I know that one must spend time in solitude and retreat for the purpose of individualizing and integrating the learning one does in community. I find such a balance critical to my own personal wholeness and to the depth and fullness to which I allow growth and change to occur in me. I need to meditate, relax, and reflect on new learning - alone - for it to take hold in me and create change. I also need time alone in order to have more of myself to give to others in community.

I believe my students had that need as well, to varying degrees. Therefore, I saw it as my responsibility to design a program agenda that allowed time for such detaching, and for balancing individual time with group time. I was able to do that in the spring program much more than in the fall program. For example, during the seminars and group excursions spring semester, I tried to make sure that there was time each day for students to get away from each other if they wanted. And, one of the most positive changes Carol and I made for the four week Contemporary Culture Seminar, was to schedule only four days, rather than five, for our lectures and meetings. This left one day during the week, in addition to weekend time, when the students could be apart from the group. It was called their "project day," when most students did research or scheduled interviews or appointments with their project advisors. However, some-

times they would spend that day resting, reading, or availing themselves of local opportunities.

Again, the use of individual conferences by both Carol and myself provided the individualizing of attention that each student rightly deserved. The hardest part of this commitment was the time that it required. However, Carol and I divided the group so that each of us had eight students for academic counseling on their projects, giving us a more in-depth focus on each student.

The issue of balance is also important in terms of leader direction. Within the concept of learning community that I have outlined, the leader/teacher/facilitator/knower is also a learner and full participant. As such, the leader contributes to a trusting, open learning climate by sharing in the learning process and not sitting outside of the group in a superior role. Nevertheless, the leader still has a separate role and responsibility. And, in order for the students to maximize the potential of their new, experiential learning opportunities, the leader must carefully plan, direct and guide. Appropriate structure and definition have to be given to the students or else they won't know what to do with the responsibility they have been given, especially students of this age and level of experience. New learning skills must be built step-by-step, by increasing the scope of the task each time. Such careful control and preparation are the important responsibilities of the leader.

On the other hand, I believe that the leader must exercise restraint and discretion over the power she has. According to Dr. Gattegno, learning is best done when there is minimal interference from the teacher. His approach is designed to keep the teacher out of the way of the learner as much as possible, believing that "It is the students who have to do

the work . . . and we should let them do it without interference."[9]

For this reason, Gattegno says that the teacher must "subordinate" the teaching (or in my case, the leading and facilitating) to the learning. This demands a conscious focus on the learners, a planning that meets their needs and not the teacher's, and a willingness to pull back so that the learners don't develop dependence, or even counter-dependence (rebelliousness), on the leader, which undermines the development of self-reliance.

> I want to keep my leadership subordinated to their learning. This means constant adaptation and change. What I must not neglect is real attention to the individual in the group. I'm a bit overwhelmed by the 16 of them in terms of energy to give out. But, I can't work with them in a unit only. I've been using a lot of energy to figure out the set-up here and my role in it. I think it is high time I give new priority to the individuals in the group. This may help to ease some of the resistance. (Journal entry 10/12/79)

This issue of subordination is a real challenge to me as a facilitator. I am still learning how to give increasing responsibility to my students and opportunities for them to direct their own learning.

[9] Gattegno, op. cit.

V. Providing Choice

If I want to help students to develop responsibility, initiative, and self-reliance in their learning, I must offer them the freedom to set goals, to make decisions, and to have creative power within their learning situations. In other words, I must make available to them a range of choices, appropriate to their learning situation and set within clearly defined limits. Although this facilitation skill has much to do with providing a balance between dependence and independence, as well as with developing the learner as an active resource, I shall give it separate attention here.

In Freedom to Learn, Carl Rogers, psychologist and educator, stresses choice in learning:

> . . . the student learns by making independent choices
> in terms of what will be valuable to him, and taking the
> initiative in implementing these choices.[10]

Another language educator, Earl Stevick, in his book Memory, Meaning and Method, said, "The availability of choices is the condition that most naturally brings the Adult into play."[11] Stevick was using Eric Berne's Transactional Analysis (T.A.) model of the Parent-Adult-Child ego states within each of us.[12]

I believe, with Berne and Stevick, that it is the Adult which is the effective learner. It is the Adult within us which is able to be rational,

[10] Rogers, p. 52

[11] Earl Stevick, Memory, Meaning and Method (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1976), p. 79.

[12] Eric Berne, Games People Play (New York: Grove Press, 1964).

take in new knowledge, develop and transfer new skills, make decisions, expand, observe, interpret, and evaluate. It is also the Adult which "frees up" the Creative Child in us to be receptive, curious, spontaneous, and playful - all qualities which facilitate learning. However, the Creative Child cannot play the game of learning without the Adult to provide a trusting and safe environment in which the Nurturing Parent gives the Child reassurance, understanding, and encouragement.

When we are left with no choices or options, we can easily feel trapped, powerless and dependent, clearly not good conditions for learning. In T.A. terms, the Adaptive Child takes over and either submits or rebels, the latter being more likely. Since the characteristics I most desire to foster in learners come from the Adult within them (and the Creative Child which the Adult frees up), I would hardly accomplish much by denying choice. Therefore, I am convinced that, as a teacher/facilitator, I must offer a clear range of choices to my students, within the natural limits of the situation or within limits that I establish.

It is not freeing to have complete freedom and choice. The limits and boundaries of the choices are as important as the availability of choice. This is a condition that I, as facilitator, must manage wisely and thoughtfully, so that the limits are clear, reasonable, and helpful to the learners. Experiential learning is not what happens when we simply experience things, or flounder with limitless possibilities, but rather what occurs when choices are intentionally and carefully made within the limits and discipline of study and planning. It is the clarity of those available choices and the clarity of the limits which frees the students to use them creatively.

The availability of clear choices, within limits, also frees the

facilitator from the role of rule-maker, decision-maker, watchdog, and
Controlling Parent (T.A.); and it reduces resistance.

In Ireland we had considerable structure and limits to what we could
do. There were too many logistical, programmatical, and situational re-
quirements to allow for much leeway or choice. The planning of each stage
of the semester had to be done in advance, leaving little opportunity
for group participation in decisions.

My students often felt powerless in having to depend on others for
so much, and having to suspend so many personal needs. They were always
having to be flexible, careful, patient; always having to adapt to other
people's space and values and schedules and needs; and, having to depend
on undependable public transportation and postal systems, on the host
families, on the group, on the far away bureaucracy of the Experiment
organization. Probably less than at any other time in their lives were
these students in control of their lives or free to do what, when, and
how they wanted. Yet, at the same time, they were expected to show more
responsibility, independence, and maturity than ever before, and deal
creatively with ambiguity.

To resolve such a double bind, it was my challenge to find as many
opportunities as possible within which I could offer freedom, such as the
group trips. I also had to be quite clear with my students about the
limits of each situation. In addition, I worked at getting the students
to identify limits themselves, so that they weren't always seeing me as
the imposer of limits. We did this in our orientation and in all our
briefings as part of our setting of goals and expectations. In fact, this
became one of the program objectives set by the students, "To recognize
limitations in our situation and in ourselves, and to work flexibly within

those limitations." The mini-project was one exercise in identifying limits and then making choices. The Independent Research Project was another. In those situations the students had fewer imposed limits to govern their day-to-day choices. Therefore, they had to learn to set their own.

Another way in which I provided an availability of choices in the Spring was by leaving ten required "lecture" units unscheduled, so that students could individually select educational activities of interest to them (such as lectures at local universities, tours, community meetings, cultural events, etc.). I set the limits and requirements within which the students made the choices.

This, combined with their free day a week, gave the students considerable latitude for exploring and choosing activities of personal interest, and for balancing the group format with active individual experience, self-initiated and evaluated. To substantiate the learning gained from these academic choices, the students were required to write 1-2 page reports on each experience or activity.

This approach worked well, although some students were naturally more creative with their choices than others. But here again they learned from one another, without being dependent on each other. One thing I would do differently, though, is to make sure that time is structured into the program for oral presentations of these activities, for those who would prefer to talk about what they did, rather than write about it (again offering more choice). This would also aid in multiplying the learning they would get from others.

VI. Providing Clarity

From my experiences with the two semester programs, I have formed another priority for myself as a facilitator of learning: to provide clarity and frequent opportunities for clarification. This includes clarity of objectives, expectations, criteria and agenda; and clarity of feedback and evaluation.

My students helped me to see that I must respect and respond to their need to organize, visualize, anticipate, plan, define, choose, understand what is expected of them, and to receive feedback. I know that I have the same needs, as a teacher or as a student.

The fall program suffered the most from lack of clarity in these areas, breeding poor academic work, weak commitment to activities, resentment of authority, uncompleted tasks, and additional group tension. Therefore, I made a conscious effort to reduce ambiguity and to provide greater clarity in the spring program. This seemed to aid in freeing the students to deal more confidently with the learning process and to produce more quality work. The experience and clarity I had gained in my own role by the second semester was of considerable benefit to me. But most of all, when I focused on the needs of the students and allowed them an active voice in the various components of the program, I was better able to hear their problems or confusions.

The following are a variety of specific ways in which I worked to provide clarity. These are things which I plan to integrate into all future situations in which I am facilitating learning.

First, I tried to provide opportunities for the students to set clear expectations and objectives for their experience, both individually and as a group, with my own expectations included. The orientation was

a critical time for this to occur as a group. However, I found that even before the program began it was helpful to briefly outline to the students in a letter, my expectations along with the objectives of the institution. Then, at the very outset of the orientation we had a session in which we first discussed their expectations and, second, their objectives, using a brainstorming approach. Each contribution was written onto brown butcher paper with magic markers, so it could be seen clearly and saved for later use. The need to capsulize each item in a few words on paper aided our clarification of terms and meaning. With the objectives, we then prioritized our list, making sure everyone was comfortable with each item.

Another idea I tried, which I think could be used to greater effect, is the "letter to self" in which each student wrote, in a letter to herself, personal goals and hopes, especially in regard to areas in which she wanted to grow and change over the course of the semester. These letters were sealed and kept with me (unread) until the end of the program, at which time they were returned to the students for their own evaluation process. Not all of my students took the time to do this, but those who did found it to be an encouraging measure of how much they had learned and how well they had succeeded in meeting their personal objectives.

As the semester progressed, I tried to provide a briefing or orientation prior to each new phase or major activity, where again, we would set objectives and define the limitations and scope of the activity. These sessions were collaborative, but I usually provided the information regarding the perimeters within which we would be functioning, such as schedule, budget, transportation, etc.

Over the course of the programs, my students taught me that they have a valid need for clear agendas prior to any orientation session,

seminar, trip, or phase of the program in which a schedule had been planned in advance for them. They appreciated having both an oral and written advance daily agenda (with copies for each) so they could know what to expect at what time, and could see in advance what was being planned for them. This also gave them some say in rearranging or adding things. I found that when this information was not given to them, they felt more dependent on the leaders, less secure about what was going to be expected of them, less in control of their time, and less prepared for the sessions. By giving the students this kind of clarity, I was being responsive to their needs, and I was treating them as responsible people.

Another important area of clarity is in providing periodic feedback and evaluations for the students so that they are clear about what their progress is in relation to the expectations of the program, the group, the leader, and themselves.

This is especially important in an experiential learning situation where the learner is trying out new and tentative skills in unfamiliar territory. It is also important in terms of giving focus and attention to the individual. If I know in advance what the students' goals and objectives are, I can then check in with them from time to time to offer support, guidance and feedback on the progress being made toward these goals.

For me, in Ireland, this meant visiting students individually in their homestays and in the "field" when they were doing research; meeting them individually or in small groups for coffee and a chat about "how things are going;" and reviewing their research findings, outlines, and rough drafts often enough so that they would not flounder alone or go off on a non-productive track. It was a way for me to encourage and to

offer suggestions, to listen to and understand their frustrations and obstacles, and to celebrate with them their victories.

Some students wanted less contact for progress checks and some wanted more. But I found that they all wanted feedback, to hear words of affirmation and acknowledgement of effort, to be reassured that their individual progress was not being ignored or lost in the bigger picture.

With the group collectively there was also a need for feedback and periodic assessment, especially after any of the group activities. As I found out with the fall group in preparing for our group trip, we needed to assess how we were functioning, what our needs were, and how well we were meeting our objectives, before we could successfully move on to the next activity. Such sessions helped to trigger the individual processing of experience, as I discussed in the section on "the group." All of these efforts served to clarify the experience, both for the students and for me.

Final evaluations (both oral and written, group and individual) were also very important for reviewing and clarifying our learning experiences. I was never fully satisfied with the evaluation processes we used, however, because they seemed to lack clarity, focus, application, and closure.

This did reinforce for me that evaluation tools need to be very carefully designed to meet the needs of the participants and the situation, and that the evaluation sessions have to be scheduled to allow adequate time and direction so that a thorough review is accomplished. This includes providing a constructive vehicle for the venting of negativity and criticism, and a way to channel the negativity into positive learning in follow-up sessions.

An evaluation tool which I experimented with in Ireland, and found

useful to most evaluation or debriefing sessions, is what I call the "observation-interpretation-evaluation" tool. The first step, observation, asks only for an objective description of what happened, what was seen, what was done. This demands the suspension of verbalized judgment and opinion until later. The second step, interpretation, asks for cognitive analysis and opinion. It says "this is what I infer, based on what I see." Emotion and judgment are still held off. The third step, evaluation, allows for a subjective response of feelings and judgment.

By using this format, I can direct students to first look responsibly at the factors involved, then at how they interpret or handle those factors, before making a judgment about the value of the situation. I would have liked to use this approach more with my two groups, because it might have helped us to avoid vague and undirected evaluation sessions. With such a tool, I believe that negative feedback is also focused more responsibly into specific issues.

Besides the group evaluation sessions, I relied a great deal on individual conferences with each student for final evaluation of their participation in the program. I scheduled 1½ to 2 hours to discuss how each student viewed her own progress, how I viewed her progress, and how we both assessed the special gains made and/or areas of individual difficulty. Again, the observation-interpretation-evaluation format served well here, when I used it. Only after both the student and I had discussed our observations and interpretations, did I give my evaluation and explain what would go on her academic evaluation form. By discussing these comments openly, I avoided the problem of students guessing or misunderstanding what was going to their home institutions. These sessions, scheduled at the end of the independent study time and before the final

group evaluation, were quite valuable to me in my relationship with each
student, though they basically meant a 30-hour time commitment on my part.

Another tool that worked well with the spring program was the require-
ment of a _written_ self-evaluation from each student. This demanded some
thought and work from them during an already hectic final week. However,
it meant that each student had already done some valuable processing and
evaluating prior to our final group session. It also meant that each
student had a chance to say what she wanted, about any aspect of the pro-
gram. These comments were not only helpful as feedback for the leaders,
but also gave evidence of growth that we may not have been fully aware of.

Evaluation is still a risky process for me because I am not always
confident that I have the detachment to handle criticism directed at me,
or at things I tried to do. I need to become more skilled at giving what
Curran calls "understanding responses,"[13] that is, summarizing or para-
phrasing what the speaker says, to assure that it is understood (another
tool for clarity) and to give recognition to the speaker's need to say it.
This kind of listening helps me to really hear what someone is trying to
say, before I interfere with my own thoughts, interpretation, or defense.
According to Curran and other psychologists, once someone has been heard,
he is more freed to move on from feelings of anger or hostility to more
growth and learning.

I would like to train my students in these skills to aid in giving
clarity to the complex and subjective situations which arise, like the
mood of the group or leader, inter-personal misunderstandings, cross-cul-
tural conflicts, "culture shock" reactions, or feelings of resistance.

[13] Curran, pp. 3-5.

With those skills available, a fair scheme could be set up by which individuals could ask for or give clear statements of feelings or opinions or observations, and more likely be understood. This strengthens the observation step of the 3-step format I described earlier. I believe the evaluation process would be less risky if all participants could use these skills.

One final thing I learned about evaluation from this experience was not to expect to get personal closure to the experience from a final evaluation session. I would never again schedule a final evaluation meeting as the concluding activity of a group experience such as we had in our three months in Ireland.

There needs to be a non-evaluative way for students and leaders to focus on the positive aspects of their growth and relationships, a collective way to say goodbye to the experience, to each other, and to the culture, before everyone scatters in different directions. I found that a wine and cheese and song party after the evaluation served this need well in the Spring. There are also many closure exercises which could have been used. One such exercise I might try in the future with such a group is to have everyone tell (or write) what they see as the most positive area of growth made by the others in the group or what they like best about each of the others, a kind of final affirmation exercise.

Conclusion

This paper is about what I have learned about facilitating learning in an experiential, cross-cultural, group-based academic program. I have focused on areas in which I believe I had a positive impact on the development of active, resourceful, and responsible learners.

In learning how to learn in a cross-cultural setting, these students have gained skills and experience which can be transferred and applied to new situations which they will face in their complex and changing environment. In this way, the learning is a creative, on-going process, rather than a static formula that will soon become outdated.

In writing this paper, my primary resources have been myself and my experiences. My own learning has been experiential and has emerged from a fluid process in which I am still engaged and in which I expect to make changes and find new ways to apply my learning. I certainly have come away from this experience in Ireland feeling more resourceful, creative, and skilled, both as a learner and as a teacher/facilitator.

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