

Action Process Teaching: A Multidimensional, Experiential, Learning Approach*

LAURA J. SINGER AND JULIUS WEISSMAN**

Action Process Teaching is an outgrowth of more than a decade of teaching a course in "The Psychodynamics of Family Relations" at Columbia's Teachers College. The basically experiential and dynamic methods include group discussion, role playing and video-taping of significant events in the family life cycle of the students. In this particular course, the family is used as a paradigm. The relationships within the family provide the prototype for subsequent relationships. It is hypothesized that if the dynamics of familial relations are understood, it should be possible to perceive analogous dynamics at work in other relationships. An underlying assumption is that this can be achieved through a re-experiencing of some significant events in the personal histories of the students.

Background

The educational framework provided by the humanist ideology which sees man as a creative, dynamic, evolving, and self-actualizing being is clearly opposed to Skinner's notion of technological man. In the latter view, man is no longer an active participant in democratic decision making but is programmed and shaped by outside forces to develop certain skills and perform certain behaviors. There are serious questions being raised today whether it is possible to cull from both ideologies some methodological approaches which do not violate the principle of man's capability for taking responsibility for his own life, growth and development. The two contradictory views seem almost by definition to be irreconcilable, yet our age

of technology may demand some degree of accommodation and integration of both conflicting trends in our society.

If the humanist view of man is valued, dare one also hold the view that there is an urgent need in providing role models for him to identify with and to internalize? The very act of presenting role models might well give rise to justifiable claims of "shaping." It would appear that as we present ourselves in our roles as educators or parents or therapists we do provide models for internalization or "shaping" for similarity, or differences. Might there in fact be some value in assuming responsibility for the roles and consciously and deliberately structuring them?

Coming from a psychoanalytic tradition, the authors have been involved in attempting to formulate and devise methods of teaching that would be theoretically sound and methodologically impelling in terms of some of the questions raised above. Action Process Teaching (APT) is an outgrowth of more than a decade of teaching a course in "The Psychodynamics of Family Relations" in the Department of Home and Family Life

*To: Ernest G. Osborne, Ph.D., (Lank) on the Tenth Anniversary of His Death: Mentor, Friend, and Early Role Model for APT

**Laura J. Singer, Ed.D., is former Adjunct Associate Professor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Julius Weissman, Ed.D., is Assistant Clinical Professor in Psychiatry (Psychology), Albert Einstein College of Medicine, New York, N.Y.

at Teachers College, Columbia University. It is a course that was offered to graduate students in nursing, education, guidance, social work, psychology and related mental health areas (Singer, 1969).

For one of the authors, this approach represents a continuous though sharp change in an evolving method of teaching the course which she inherited ten years ago. Each year the course was modified and altered. The course topics reflected variations in students' concerns as well as the changing theoretical foci of the instructor. Three years ago, the addition of another teacher as a team member represented a change in philosophy and methodology and a wish to test the hypothesis that if the dynamics of familial relations are understood, it should be possible to perceive analogous dynamics at work in other relationships. Underlying this hypothesis were the assumptions that this can be achieved through a re-experiencing of some significant events in the personal histories of the students. A further assumption was that an understanding of the dynamics could be facilitated through the inclusion of co-teachers of both sexes.

This innovative approach was begun in 1970 as an ongoing experimental method open to a continuous process of change and development. Action Process Teaching utilizes action and experimental forms of learning coupled with dyadic and group processes of interaction and relationship. Its paradigm is the family system and all members of the class are involved in simulated nuclear and extended family groups with role-playing, group discussions and video tapes used for the recording and play-back of significant personal family experiences in the lives of the students.

"To use students' own life experiences as source material for these courses in learning, cognition, and child (family) development would give the student a deeper understanding of child (family) psychology as well as a deeper insight into themselves as people and teachers." (Silverman, 1970, 508)

Personal life experiences are related to the content of assigned literature and research material and become an integral

part of the structured topics for each class session. This article is intended as an introductory exposition of some aspects of this method of teaching and learning.

Action Process Teaching

Action Process Teaching is an approach to help influence the direction of educational change and practice towards an emerging, developing humanism in man. Self-actualization through the educational process, exemplified in the modern theories of Goldstein, Rogers and Maslow is still a primary aim and source for the meaning and relevance of education:

"Self-actualization is defined in various ways, but a solid core of agreement is perceptible. All definitions accept or imply, (a) acceptance and expression of the inner core or self, i.e. Actualization of these latent capacities, and potentialities, "full functioning," availability of the human and personal essence. (b) They all imply minimal presence of ill health, neurosis, psychosis, of loss or diminution of the basic human and personal capacities." (Maslow, 1968, 197)

A related major component is in the critical need to *actively experience* the processes of education and learning. "Growth is action, not mere accretion" (Litt, 1973, 72). The traditional school-room situation in which information is handed down vertically from teachers to students, who store knowledge for credential passage through the educational system makes for the 'technical,' diminished man, and defeats his thrust and drive towards individual human growth.

As an alternative to the vertical school-room, Action Process Teaching has evolved. Among its multidimensional components are the structured processes of interaction and relationships of teachers and students, the peer group student process, the role of students as teaching associates, the content of the course of teaching-learning, and the adjunctive techniques and tools, borrowed from technology, to give added zest and meaning to the educational process. All of these dimensions will be described, evaluated and reported in forthcoming articles by the authors. The focus of this article remains with the action components involving

teachers and students as the primary sources for the teaching-learning experience.

We started with the collaboration of the two teachers and a teaching assistant responsible for the course. Today's knowledge explosion with its flood of research information and studies make it virtually impossible for any one individual to keep abreast of all the developments in a field. Two teachers, it was felt, would provide twice the knowledge and insight of one. The authors felt the need for mutual support and stimulation in the implementation of this innovative, more self-demanding approach to education. Furthermore, the authors are strongly convinced that teachers today have an imperative responsibility to act as role models in a rapidly changing society where students have few models to internalize and to identify with. Educators need not be merely transmitters tied to computers, but may foster a hospitable atmosphere for the exchange and interchange of ideas in a setting which provides for respect between teacher and student, for nurturance and challenge in the total educational process. Educators must transcend the protected power of the teaching role to become persons to the persons of the students as equal people involved in the educational experience. The two leaders revealed themselves in their authority roles as co-teachers, as persons, and significantly, as male and female openly able to cooperate, to differ, and to remain uniquely human.

Since the communication of emotions related to concepts are relatively absent in the traditional educational setting, the teachers frequently acted as role models in initiating this form of communication. Thus the students were able to see the teachers as persons engaged in an interpersonal exchange and dialogue as they verbalized personal and emotional experiences relevant to the course. The importance of these two core elements—emotional expression and meaningful dialogue in the classroom setting—cannot be overrated.

“Martin Buber has insisted that human life is life in dialogue. Sullivan's interpersonal em-

phasis on consensual validation also shows the central importance of dialogue and has the merit of emphasizing the experimental side rather than mere discourse or lecture” (May, 1969, 17).

This modeling of dialogue between the two teachers as “authority” figures and as persons set the tone and spirit of the climate for the involvement of teachers with students and students with their peers.

A complementary phase to the team collaboration of the teachers is in the formation of a broader team of students as teaching-associates with responsibility for leadership in the development of curriculum and classroom teaching methods and practices. Margaret Mead in 1958 pointedly stated that “we are no longer dealing primarily with the vertical transmission of the tried and true by the old, mature, and experienced teachers to the young, immature, and inexperienced pupil” which was characteristic of a system of education in a stable, slowly changing culture. The teaching-associates, formed into a practicum group of approximately ten to twelve “graduates” of the course, became responsible for reviews and evaluation of the latest research studies and information as well as for the operation of the class sessions. The classroom setting became a living laboratory for the role modeling of teachers and students and for training in leadership of the action-process structure of teaching and learning. Early in the Spring semester of 1973, we were able to get some feed-back as to the effectiveness of the practicum experience. Both teachers were ill and unable to attend class. The teaching-associates who had been participating in the practicum since September were able to conduct the class so effectively that the students voted the session one of the high points of the semester.

Underlying and unifying the action-process structure are the dyadic and group components of the teaching method. The dyadic elements forms a beginning layer of relationship and interaction between teacher and student. It starts with the application and initial interview for the registration for the course, an orientation to the action-process method teaching, the stu-

dents' definition of their interests, goals, and reasons for taking the course, and the signing of a consent slip for the recording of all video-taped class sessions. The writing of logs two or three times a semester in which the student often chooses to write about his personal family experiences adds another in-depth link to student-teacher interaction and relationship. A climate of trust and acceptance is developed as student and teacher interact in the readings and comments on all logs, with students often seeking further personal contact to discuss particular aspects of the log. From this layer of student-teacher involvement the formation of all class members into small simulated family groups, either staying together for an entire semester, or shifting to three or four such groups, becomes a patterned structure of peer group interaction and relationships during the semester.

Group members act "as if" the group were in reality a family unit. Sharing personal family experiences becomes a group task with its focus not on content problem-solving but on releasing ideas and affect which stimulate interaction for educational changes and growth. Action Process Teaching encourages and heightens the awareness and release of emotional feelings that have become detached or repressed from their base in mental processes. The disembodied intellect of traditional education does not aid in sustained, reinforced, and in-depth learning.

"The mind encompasses feeling no less than intellect, and intellect no less than feeling. There is a false dichotomy between the cognitive and affective domain. Education must involve a fusion of thought, feeling, and action" (Silberman, 1970, 503).

The release to awareness of emotional feelings provides for an experiencing of oneself on deeper levels. The interaction and reactions of group members in an atmosphere of support, nurturance, and sometimes challenge provides for reality testing and corrective experiences. As one student put it:

"... This course has helped me to begin rummaging through my thoughts and feelings

about my family and myself. I have become more aware of certain forces that are at play in in psychodynamic situations that I never really acknowledged before. All of the psychology that one may learn and read about often leaves little personal impression as compared to acting out and viewing situations that you can identify with and discuss on an emotional as well as intellectual level . . ."

The group method also stresses sensitivity to both verbal and non-verbal communications. Learning to understand how words are used to hide feelings, and a growing awareness of the multiplicity of meanings attached to body gestures and facial movements, help the student to correct distortions and incongruities of communication messages. In addition, the employment of audio-visual machines such as the video tape recorder, augment self-perception and perception of others in more accurate terms.

"... there was a need for sympathy and support—and it was always there. I remember when I was pushed into that skit, the one I had drawn, of my mother beating me. It felt so good to get that out; I wanted it. But I was scared to death. Just seeing myself on the screen, after all the years of looking at myself the way I did, sort of stopped me from thinking of myself as the horror I had been . . ."

And another student of Japanese origin:

"Emotions (in my family) tend to be acted out silently rather than expressed verbally, and this was made very apparent to me in our class when I realized how much more difficult it was for me to participate in verbal than in non-verbal role-playing situations and how much more verbally, emotions were expressed in the families being portrayed, as compared with my own family. On a deeper level, though, the emotions of my family members are very similar to those of the family members portrayed in our role-playing situations; it is only their particular pattern and the extent of their expression that differ and are more culturally specific . . ."

The question is sometimes raised about appropriate boundaries between therapy and education and the nature of the educational setting which is considered alien to the expression of affect. The students fear that their thoughts and feelings will be censored, criticized, distorted, and that guilt feelings and threats to self-es-

teem may be heightened. Anxiety levels may be related to such fears as losing control of feelings once such emotions are opened up or perhaps there may be fears of emotional closeness and intimacy. Our culture tends toward constructing "schizoid" defenses (May, 1969, 17) in terms of appropriate protection to the self, and these fears are respected and accepted in the class so that group pressure is minimized.

The climate of group discussion is regulated and controlled, to a large extent, by the contractual "rules" that interpretations, evaluation, critical judgments and confrontations are not appropriate in the communication and interaction process. The teachers and students who are part of the practicum group act as facilitators to guide the group process and intervene when the contract is being violated. Yet despite these regulations, there are occasional lapses from this climate of trust, and acceptance of the group norms and egos are inevitably shaken:

"... I would like to share something of my personal journey. Initially, there were feelings of how much can I trust this group? Who are they and what are they like? How much information of such personal nature do I dare reveal? Is there a therapeutic community here? I must admit a sense of anxiety in the first encounter with the playback techniques of the video-tape machine. I wondered what that all meant... By the end of the second session as we got into family groupings I began to feel more a sense of trust. I felt very good about the kinds and quality of responses by members of the class... In spite of the feelings of anxiety... for the first time in my academic life, a feeling that the content of the course was taking me seriously. It (the content) was not superficial or theoretical but experimental, reflecting the images, the labels, if you will, of our common life together; and how these images have been so powerful in our everyday life..."

In the three years of the development of this approach to teaching, there has been no reported evidence that this educational experience has been destructive. The contrary evidence indicates an overwhelming enthusiastic response that students have gained a great deal in terms of per-

sonal and educational professional growth through this approach.

An operational vignette of a typical class session is presented here to illustrate the action-process method in a skeletal framework. A beginning topical theme is concerned with "The Effects of Ordinal Position Within the Family of Origin upon Personality Development." During one semester, the literature and research material was verbally presented to the entire class by the practicum group members prior to breaking up into small groups for discussion. In another semester, the small simulated family groups first discussed, acted and reacted experientially to the topic and then assembled as a total class to listen and react to the summary of the literature. By varying this operational approach, it was found that intellectual stimulation when presented initially, tended to inhibit action and interaction, whereas an opening action-process approach tended to generate a more spontaneous and alive flow of ideas, affect and personal involvement.

In the above session on ordinal position as one crucial variable affecting personality development, one of the authors began the action phase of this topic with the following instructions and example:

"Try to recall what was going on in your family of origin when you were eight years old. Where did you live? Where did you sleep? With whom did you eat your dinner? What was your father's job? How did your mother and father interact? How many siblings did you have? Who was your mother's favorite? Your father's? How did you feel being the oldest? The youngest? The only? The middle?"

"I was the middle of three sisters and I'd like to share some of my feelings and experiences with you. My older sister was three years my senior and the younger sister was two years my junior. They were both beautiful, bright and outgoing. I was skinny, sallow, frightened and shy..."

Each teacher elaborated a sketch replete with feelings towards parental pressures, expectations, defenses, distortions, competitive strivings, and others in order to provide a model for this sharing of personal life events.

Following the role modeling of the teachers, the ordinal groups discussed their ideas and feelings relevant to the topic for approximately one hour. There was a high degree of personal involvement as each student contributed and reacted to similarities and differences. At times there would be an attempt at deeper probing to get at underlying related feelings which evoked some degree of tension and anxiety which accompanied the recall of many long forgotten feelings and episodes.

Out of this process the group was instructed to arrive at a consensus in choosing a representative experience that would mirror or symbolize the themes opened up in their group. This experience would then be role-played by members of the group "as if" they were members of a family experiencing the emergent themes. The role playing was then recorded on videotape. Each family group, clustered around the variety of ordinal positions, went through the same process of sharing, interacting, role playing and video-tape recording. The video tapes were then played back to the entire class for reaction and discussion.

"Pregnancy and Childbirth" was another topic which lent itself to dramatic exploration. The instructions to the class, which was already divided into simulated extended family groupings, were to:

Try to go back in time to what was going on in your family of origin when your birth was expected. Did you have an older brother or sister? How did they feel about the child about to be born? How did your mother feel about it? Was her pregnancy a happy time? A time of stress? Were you planned for? Was it an easy birth? Were there any complications? Where was your father? What was happening in your community at that time? In the country? In the world? Was your birth to be an economic hardship? A joy?

Again the group discussions customarily lasted for an animated and reflective hour, during which an experience was constructed to demonstrate some of the essential themes. During a recent class session, the role playing of one simulated family group centered around the birth of a child who thrust herself demanding and

frantically through the birth canal which was symbolized by two rows of students haphazardly arranged in a discordant and shrill "Greek chorus" moaning and groaning. The "infant" emerged finally in a state of near exhaustion.

In another episode depicting the process of natural childbirth, the "father," ostensibly there to aid with the birth of his son, found himself in conflict; competitive and rivalrous. Fumbling and shoving, he unwittingly pushed the "child" back into the canal. The "child" struggled to be born and finally emerged into a competitive and ambivalent family system.

In the above vignettes of class sessions, as with other topics related to the range of events within the family life cycle, all role playing skits are video-recorded and replayed in sequence for reactions and comments that are either personal or conceptual in nature. The replay of skits frequently gives the participants a "second chance" to re-experience the event and also evokes new emotional feelings and insights into the meaning of the experiment. This "second chance" phenomenon, with its video image impact and confrontation of one's self verbally and nonverbally, seems to penetrate into one's inner center with richer feelings and meanings to be further explored in a continuity of learning about the self. Each enactment and viewing of the self contains an emotional experience followed by a period of detachment, a kind of "setting apart" of the experience, viewing it from a distance, which often leads to a desire for further corrective learning about the self; to correct the distortions and some of the misconceptions and to try to arrive at a new and different level of integration. As one student puts it:

"... after presenting our skit, we sat down together and we kept bubbling over with comments. We were all ecstatic about what we did, or rather, about the unity we felt. This was the first time a role playing situation was completely alive for me. This may be because it represented the here and now instead of the past or future. Also, it was nonverbal. I'm beginning to realize how much more eloquent our actions are than our words . . ."

Following the replay of all the recorded themes, the teachers, practicum members, and the class engage in a synthesis of thematic concepts plus a review of research material germane to the topic. The participation of the total class tends to become a round-table discussion, sometimes heavy in content, but most of the time there is a flow of the personal with the conceptual generalizations applicable to family life. A few students opt for more review of the readings, of the research and literature because of its stimulating wide scope. Others have stated in their final evaluations this more common view:

All the cognitive material presented so excellently is also available in books. Anyone who is interested and has time can use our bibliographies and his own ingenuity and curiosity and find it. I found myself thinking about all the material inside each class member which is not in print and which is accessible to us only for two hours a week. I wanted to get at that material. I feel our class setting offers a unique opportunity to get information about how people act and feel directly from those people fresh and uninterpreted. It also provides an atmosphere in which people want to and are able to produce such information. If I were in the position to make the final decision about how our class time is to be used, I would opt for more action-process and less organized cognitive activity because I feel the combination of opportunities offered by the class are not easily available to individuals and at other times, as the library and standard discussion/lecture type classes are.

Summary

After three years of experimentation with action process teaching, the authors are convinced that its potential for experimental teaching and learning have barely been realized. In this particular course in the Psychodynamics of Family Relations, the family is used as a paradigm. The relationships within the family provide the prototype for subsequent relationships. It is hypothesized that if the dynamics of familial relations are understood, it should be possible to perceive analogous dynamics at work in other relationships. An underlying assumption is that this can be achieved through a re-experiencing of some significant events in the personal

histories of the students. The events must be defined and limited by the course teachers in order to get at aspects which will be of value to the entire class as well as to the particular student.

The basically experiential and dynamic methods include group discussion, role playing, and video-taping of significant events in the family cycle of the students. The group process fosters ego controls, e.g., thinking, judging, and reality testing. The role-playing "brackets" the event and allows for detached examination. Opportunity for fostering ego functions was available through video-tape playbacks. Students had an opportunity to compare their perceptions of reality with the perceptions of other members of the class. They were able to see discrepancies and lack of congruence between their verbal and their nonverbal communications.

The autonomy and dignity of the individual member was never threatened; defenses were respected. Encouragement and support were promoted. Cognitive materials including pertinent research summaries and significant articles were distributed in advance of each topic. The discussion following all enactments synthesized the cognitive material with the historically experiential and the contemporary experiential.

The most significant aspects of the course seem to be the use of the family as a paradigm for further relationships, the emphasis on experiencing as a key technique in integrating knowledge and the use of video-tape for its impact and reinforcement of learning.

While its philosophy and methods may have particular relevance to graduate students in education and the mental health fields, there is the conviction that this approach and its concepts, can be generalized to broader educational settings and practices.

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