

## Provoking Personal Meaning: An Essential Process in Communication Skills Learning

Marcia D. Hills

*University of Victoria*

Many counsellor training programs are built on the assumption that the learning process is essentially one of skills acquisition. Questions about the adequacy of this assumption have come from a number of sources. Carl Rogers (1980) concluded that "appalling consequences have resulted from focusing on the techniques of the therapist" (p. 39). Mahon and Altman (1977) observed that counsellor training programs have not provided for transfer of the acquired skills primarily because the personal qualities underlying these skills have not been emphasized appropriately.

Our concern is not whether certain skills are desirable, but rather with the process used for developing them. In our opinion too little is yet known about what differentiates an effective process from an ineffective process. It seems possible that too many trainers are making the jump from skill *description* to skill *development* without fully understanding how to most effectively complete this transition. (p. 43)

Their emphasis on the process used for developing the skills leads them to recommend that the impact on trainees be considered so that the skills can be used with meaning and flexibility. However, this recommendation was not accompanied by specific instructional guidelines which would have given clearer direction to trainers.

In a provocative article, Plum (1981) considered that teaching people to communicate by prescribing specific behaviours has led to "the displacement of the interpersonal by the technological" (p. 5). He presented the reminder that "the essence of personal communication is the understanding and expression of meaning, not behavioural skillfulness. . . . Learning certain behavioral skills guarantees nothing about the meaning this behavior will have in actual interpersonal situations" (p. 7). The provision of three characteristics of training programs is proposed to restore the emphasis on the interpersonal. First, general communication principles should be presented with encouragement to participants to experiment with them "to allow their own means to emerge" and "to think more carefully in regard to the specifics in their lives" (p. 16). Second, a perspective should be developed about the reason the various techniques are considered to contribute to human communication. Third, participants should be given experience with the behavioural

skills in the learning setting with encouragement to “notice and talk about the emotional reaction to their partners and to themselves which the assignments arouse in them” (p. 17). In fact, the experiences recommended in this third point could be used to achieve the objectives described in the first two characteristics.

The attainment of this personal meaning for each of the participants could become the focus of communication-skills training. Following from the argument presented above it would be expected that achievement of this meaning would provide for more effective learning and personal integration than achieved by approaches which emphasize behavioural skillfulness.

The learning theory of Arthur Combs (1982) has focused directly on the importance of the discovery of personal meaning in order to understand the impact of information on a learner. Further, Combs presented clear statements of the conditions which provide for this discovery of personal meaning; an application of Combs’ theory to communication-skills training is provided by Hills (in preparation).

This rationale about communication-skills training was put to test in a doctoral dissertation entitled “Improving the Learning of Parents’ Communication Skills by Providing for Discovery of Personal Meaning” (Hills, 1984). Parents were chosen as the participants in the training program so that a meaningful test of the transfer of skills to a natural setting, namely interactions at home with their own children, could be made with minimum complications about professional ethics and confidentiality. An innovative program called the Integrative Approach was developed to present communication skills (empathic responding, I-messages and questioning) and awareness-raising activities (parenting styles and values) in a way that applied Combs’ learning theory. The learning experiences were designed to provide for the discovery of personal meaning. The learners were encouraged to explore the meaning of content as it was presented by the group leader and, following principles of effective communication, to derive their own ways of responding to situations occurring with their own children.

Parents of 10-12-year-old children were recruited and randomly assigned either to the Integrative Approach Group or to a group which focused on behavioural skillfulness, the Technique Group. The two programs had such similar features as program objectives, content, meeting places, and length and duration of sessions. Each group was conducted by a woman leader who had relevant experience leading groups and was committed to the particular approach that she applied. Parents in the two groups were pretested on several attitude measures (e.g., Parental Attitude Research Instrument) and behavioural measures (e.g., Guernsey’s Empathic Behaviour Scale) based on a videotaped interaction with their own children. After a five-week training session, posttesting was conducted. To assess the retention of the learning,

follow-up testing was carried out six weeks after the program ended. Few changes in attitude occurred, due in part to the presence at the beginning of the program of attitudes considered to be appropriate to a parenting style which was consistent with the skills being taught. Marked improvement in the use of communication skills occurred for parents in the Integrative Group. In contrast, behavioural scores of parents in the Technique Group showed less improvement and, further, decreased during the follow-up period to the pretest level. Further information about the empirical support for these general results is reported in Hills (1984) and Hills and Knowles (in preparation). The retention of skill learning which occurred only in the Integrative Group supports the conclusion that attempts to provide for the discovery of personal meaning facilitate learning.

The central issue in communication-skills training which was addressed in the study was the process of moving from "skill description to skill development" (Mahon & Altman, 1977). An effective transition was accomplished in the Integrative Approach by involving learners in the process of discovering the personal meaning of the skills in their lives.

The study is considered to have the following implications for communication-skills training for such other groups as counsellors and teachers:

1. The integration of specific communication skills into a person's own interpersonal style should be addressed at all phases of learning. The assumption that integration will occur naturally or should be included as a final phase of training (Ivey & Gluckstern, 1984; Gordon, 1970; Adler & Towne, 1984) has not given clear direction to ways of providing for the retention of skills.

2. Valuable information about communication-skills training is available by attending to the process by which participants come to acquire and use skills. Awareness of the process might very well provide alternatives for enhancing learning and opportunities for appreciating the resources and style individual learners bring to the training situation.

3. In planning training programs, leaders should be aware of the learning theory they are implementing and should consider the possibility that more appropriate theoretical guidelines might be available.

4. The recommendation that skill training focus on attitudes rather than behaviour (Plum, 1981) seems incomplete. In the Hills (1984) study, pretest attitudes of trainees were at an appropriate level; what seemed necessary to learn was how to put these intentions into practice.

These ideas are intended to give direction to ways of improving training sessions and to generate continued systematic inquiry into the process by which skills are learned and applied.

*References*

- Adler, R. B., & Towne, N. (1985). *Looking out/looking in*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Combs, A. (1982). *A personal approach to teaching: Beliefs that make a difference*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Gordon, T. (1970). *Parent effectiveness training*. New York: Wyden.
- Hills, M. D. (1984). *Improving the learning of parents' communication skills by providing for the discovery of personal meaning*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Victoria.
- Hills, M. D. (in preparation). The learning of relationship skills: Providing for personal integration.
- Hills, M. D., & Knowles, D. W. (in preparation). Clarifying and improving parent skill training programs by applying Combs' learning model.
- Ivey, A., & Gluckstern, M. (1984). *Basic influencing skills* (2nd ed.). Amherst, Mass.: Micro-training Associates.
- Mahon, B., & Altman, H. (1977). Skill training: Cautions and recommendations. *Counsellor Education and Supervision*, 17, 42-50.
- Plum, A. (1981). Communication as skill: A critique and alternative proposal. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 21, 3-19.
- Rogers, C. (1980). *A way of being*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.