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Toward Community: A Tentative Theory of Group Process, and its Implications for Teachers

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TOWARD COMMUNITY:

a tentative theory of group process, and its
implications for teachers

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NEGATIVE ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have carefully avoided resorting to the authority of published authors to support my ideas, for the same reason that I have wanted my students to stop depending on me and to start having confidence in themselves. I wanted to see how far I could stretch on my own, without leaning on the theories of experts. Therefore, I researched no books while I wrote this paper, as an experiment in taking full responsibility for its content. The time for comparing ideas comes now, because now I have something of my own to contribute.

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INTRODUCTION

I am intrigued by process, such as the process by which a collection of strangers can become a group of individuals who have come to care about one another, and to act not just for themselves but also for each other and for the group. This group I will call community. During the past year I have studied this process at work in two types of groups, each of which sheds light on the functioning of the other. The first kind is the foreign language class. The examples used are drawn mostly from my teaching at Caminemos, a storefront learning center for Spanish-speakers in Hartford, Connecticut. The second type of group is an Experiment in International Living Outbound Group, one of which I led to Sweden during the summer of 1973.

The intense nature of the six-week group experience in Sweden makes it easier to spot the progression of the path toward community than in a class where we spend so few hours together in an essentially unchanging environment. So although I am concerned here primarily with community in the classroom, for the sake of clarity I have often used the Sweden group to illustrate phases that class groups also go through.

By examining the evolution of each group I have worked with, I have arrived at a tentative outline of stages that groups go through in their path toward community. In Part I of this paper I have described the experience of several groups in terms of the theory of group process that I am developing. In Part II I have focused on the role of the teacher/leader in influencing the establishment of community, with special emphasis on my own style of leadership.

I find that my concerns as a teacher lie in nurturing the potential

that people have for creating a community. It is only through membership in a community that people can take on the world with the doubly-rich and efficient perspective of the individual plus the group experience. Part III of this paper is a report on an experiment I am now conducting to try to make my teaching more congruent with these philosophical concerns of mine, applying the lessons I have derived from my experiences and from my embryonic theory.

Throughout the paper I have spelled out for fellow-explorers the discoveries I think are crucial to consider. Here are some things I have done, some conclusions I have reached, and some things I think work. I want this to be a useful document to others. I want to encourage consideration of the merit of seeking a community in the classroom, and to suggest a way to get there by illuminating significant landmarks and pitfalls along the way.

ASSUMPTIONS

At the core of my interest in groups as communities and of my belief that community is a good thing to seek, is my assumption that participation in group situations is a fundamental human need. Social interaction provides a means for people to satisfy their needs for security, self-esteem, status, and a sense of identity. But every group situation is also an entity in itself, with its own dynamic. Within any group, regardless of its purpose, people are compelled by the situation to deal with their own needs and with the needs of the group. I am concerned in this paper with the application of this assumption to students in a class, to members of groups bound for a foreign country, and to the teachers or leaders in charge.

I further assume that it is necessary to concentrate on the group members' needs as well as their wants (less intrinsically necessary "needs" such as to learn a foreign language or to learn about a foreign country). I believe that the basic needs must be dealt with first, in order to free people to concentrate efficiently on their wants. In other words, people have to focus on themselves before they can turn their focus outward. If the first does not happen, I am convinced that the second will not, either.

THE COMMUNITY-BUILDING PROCESS IN OUTLINE

STAGE A: When a group is formed, each stranger establishes an individual identity by revealing an easily identifiable facet of himself or herself, and labels the other group members in a similarly one-dimensional fashion. Some common first labels are the clown, the dummy, the know-it-all, the serious one, and the I-couldn't-care-less one.

STAGE B: While a comfortable routine is being established in the group's activities and as the stresses of newness are easing, people are beginning to fill out their original roles and to see beyond their first facile judgments of others. The clown may become the summarizer as well; the sensible one may reveal a penchant for mischief.

STAGE C: As the group members get to know each other within the context of the group, alliances form and shift, both to include and to shut out. Whom people help and whom they laugh or shout at reveal the boundaries of the alliances.

STAGE D: At times of stress, the group becomes a refuge to shut out the stress-producing element. For the sake of the shelter that the group identity provides, the members become willing to relinquish for a while the individuality that had until now been so important to them. While a seeming abdication of individual responsibility, this stages helps to cement a group identity and sense of belonging.

STAGE E: In flashes of increasing frequency and duration, the group members begin to function well both as individuals and as a group. They understand and act upon the idea that every person has something to give to and something to learn from every other person. The group, now a community, aids instead of inhibits a focus on the tasks at hand.

THE PROCESS IN DETAIL

STAGE A: When a group is formed, each stranger establishes an individual identity by revealing an easily identifiable facet of himself or herself, and labels the other group members in a similarly one-dimensional fashion. Some common first labels are the clown, the dummy, the know-it-all, the serious one, and the I-couldn't-care-less one.

The establishment of separate identities happens automatically. Until people have given and formed first impressions, little other business is accomplished. A fine example of Stage A at work can be found in what happened during the three days of orientation that the Sweden group had before leaving for Europe. During the introductory session, I directed them to pair off and interview each other, and then to introduce the interviewee to the rest of the group. The boys primped and loudly struggled for top-dog positions; the girls appeared alternately giggly and coolly sophisticated. No one displayed much interest in anything I had to say. During the next few meetings, the topics I had chosen for discussion rarely received more than cursory attention before the ten returned to what I now see as the really important matter: finding out who these other people were, and where they stood with each of them.

Since I did not yet perceive the forces at work, I was at first really annoyed at this disruption of my plans for orientation. However, circumstances had prepared me somewhat for what was happening in my group. For two weeks before my ten had arrived, I had had the opportunity to watch other leaders in action at the language camps. I had seen a seriousness that disturbed me. I had observed leaders who seemed too tight, too earnest and too intent upon employing all the latest techniques for interpersonal growth, to let themselves see people clearly. Since

such heavy-handedness surfaces easily in me, I found it unsettlingly instructive to watch its appearance in other leaders. There seemed to be a clear connection between the leaders' approach and the Experimenters' alienation from the leaders and from all attempts to force a concern with interpersonal relationships.

So, primed by my reaction to the other leaders' earnestness, I quickly noticed that my group was far more interested in establishing a pecking order than in anything I had planned for them. So far, no problem. But what about the business at hand? I was painfully conscious that the Experiment expected far more than a pecking order to be established during orientation. I read and reread the paragraphs in the Leader's Handbook, which clearly indicated deep discussions and serious focusing on issues of cross-cultural sensitivity and how to behave and not to behave while in one's homestay family or on the informal trip.

After a few earnest and unhappy attempts to follow the Handbook and try to be a regulation leader, I became convinced that something had to change. Handbook or no, my group was whipping through topics such as culture shock and behavior while abroad, in half the time I had anticipated. With the desperation of a teacher whose lesson plans run out with half the class to go, I gambled and started to follow my intuition. When we had concluded an activity, I let them go. When something unscheduled came up during a scheduled activity, I let it happen and watched where and how they would go with it. During the first full day of orientation, there were two vociferous political arguments, one of them a spontaneous combustion back in the dormitory.

People spelled out where they stood on idealism, and what one can do or if one can do anything at all about the problems of our country. The discussion was conducted with emotion and verbosity and with no regard for Robert's Rules of Order, but in forty minutes they straightened themselves out on where they all stood, and decided that they were essentially on the same side. It was the most productive session of orientation, and not accidentally, the only one I had not planned.

Although I didn't understand it at the time, in opening up our schedule I was responding to a simple reality: that the members of a group must orient themselves to each other before they can turn to other business. At most, the "other business" (meaning the topics the teacher or the situation has dictated) provide a stage on which to conduct these preliminary tasks. In the light of this discovery, I have come to prefer facilitating the process rather than trying to thwart it. By thwarting, I mean punishing people's attempts to establish a working relationship within the group. In this sort of power struggle, the teacher is sure to lose, since the role-establishing part of the process is so powerful. By facilitating the process, I mean providing opportunities for the group members to begin getting to know each other. In the Sweden group, the opportunities were such things as the paired interviews, the free time and the shared activities. In the first days of any language class, I find out the sorts of questions the students have about one another, and then teach them how to ask and answer their questions in English. Such activities make it possible for the group to move quickly on to the next stage.

STAGE B: While a comfortable routine is being established in the group's activities and as the stresses of newness are easing, people begin to fill out their original roles and to see beyond their first facile judgments of others. The clown may become the summarizer as well; the sensible one may reveal a penchant for mischief.

The more opportunity the group members have to confront each other in various situations, the sooner they will expand their roles into a more multi-dimensional representation of who they really are. Within a class, the further embellishment of identities can, however, be inhibited if the teacher fights for rigid control of interaction patterns. If students are permitted to address only the teacher, the interaction pattern is teacher-student, student-teacher. With the absence of significant student-student interaction, a community in the classroom will never be achieved. The students will nonetheless follow the natural flow of the process during breaks or outside of class, and during any gaps in the teacher's control. I suspect that ~~the~~ teacher who tries to exert total control in the classroom is simply written off by the students and excluded from membership in any budding community. In any case, it seems certain that these first two stages will happen no matter what the difficulties. Since so much of value can come ~~of~~ the process, I am convinced that I as the teacher should join it, not struggle against it.

The teacher is not the only person who may struggle against allowing the establishment of a pecking order. I am referring to the "well-trained" students who sit silently in class and do not try to interact with anyone but the teacher. In this situation I need to take a more active role in encouraging people to reach out to each other. With few exceptions, however, I deal with the reverse situation in my classes. New students are invariably so interested in the other strangers that they plunge

right into Stages A and B regardless of any plans I might have. So I simply structure this exploration within the framework of the class and the subject matter. Foreign languages lend themselves nicely to such, since language exists to be used. Given this approach, a significant use of the students' native language during class shows me that I have failed to provide enough means for communication within the foreign language lesson.

In a sense, the first two steps of the community-building process occur independently of the leader, whether or not the leader tries to help or hinder them. I have seen these steps happen in every group I have been a part of. This means that some humility is in order for the person in charge, to accept his or her relative lack of importance. I find it helpful to recall that these stages are natural. Too often I have tended to view the role-taking and the pressuring and the competing as obstacles to what I want to happen. Indeed, at one time or another I have regarded each stage but the last as an enemy of my dream of community. It seems far more realistic to accept the stages rather as necessary steps along the path toward community. Things are getting worked out. People are learning where the others stand. To try to squelch these phases is simply counter-productive. One's expectations of a group must be in tune with the stage of group development. Failure to follow this commandment results in frustration, anger and a sense of failure, which is a waste of psychic energy. For example, I see a problem in the implicit expectation conveyed by the people who trained us EIL leaders in 1972-73, that Outbound groups should be functioning as communities after three days of orientation. First a group must have the opportunity

to become a community, and this takes time, not to mention patient nurturing. In reality, a community can emerge only when a group has passed through the first four stages of community building.

STAGE C: As the group members get to know each other within the context of the group, alliances form and shift, both to include and to shut out. Whom people help and whom they laugh or shout at reveal the boundaries of the alliances.

A group member tends to identify first only with himself or herself, and then with a chosen sub-group. From first contact with the strangers in the newly-formed group, people sense whom they feel a special kinship with and whom they would like to be allied with. There is a time lag, however, between noticing these first inclinations and then acting upon them. People in a new situation wait a bit to collect evidence to support their first reactions to the other people before they commit themselves to their reactions. This alliance-forming stage, therefore, occurs only when the purposes of Stages A and B have been accomplished.

A clear example of alliance formation is again provided by the Sweden group. After the first day of orientation meetings, I suggested we play some volleyball. The idea of being outside and getting some exercise appealed to everyone. So a game of volleyball ensued, minus, however, two group members who played badminton with each other instead, alongside our volleyball court. Somehow this struck me as the theme of the summer to come: that we were not going to be one happy, inseparable eleven-member family. The two badminton players were the one Black and the one Cuban, who later told me about their immediate sense of kinship with each other that first day, since they were the only obvious minority group members in our group.

Alliances are both a result of and a cause for conflicts within a

group. A common phenomenon at this point in a group's history is the alliance of the serious ones against the comedians, both competing for control of the tone of the group. But the stress of a new situation is usually enough to alter the boundaries of the original factions. People's responses to stress align them into new configurations, of, for example, the dominant versus the passive, or the old versus the new. When a group feels invaded by newcomers, the conflicts which had fueled the original alliances yield to the newer threat, and people now order themselves according to tenure in the group. No matter what disagreements divided the old group members, they now find themselves on the same side, fighting to maintain control of the group in the face of the threat posed by the outsiders.

About the only time the alliances unite at this stage is when an individual is rejected by all the factions. The presence of an outcast can serve to merge the alliances into a single force shutting out the pariah. It will take a powerful stress from outside the group to make even this division unimportant.

The formation of alliances, like the earlier establishment of roles, largely occurs independently of the teacher/leader. But the strength of the boundaries between the alliances is easily influenced by the person in charge. The degree of helpfulness within and across alliances, especially in classes, is at the mercy of the teacher. One can drive it underground by punishing any signs of aid-giving, and by fostering competition and one-upsmanship. This effectively eliminates the possibility of achieving community in a class. Each new group of students needs to be specially trained to help one another. It is as if

I must clearly give them my permission, in order for them to overcome all the previous prohibitions against helpfulness. And since there are several varieties of help, such training is not easily accomplished. What I see as the insidious sort of help is the dependency-creating variety, which does more to bolster the ego of the helper than to aid the helpee. What I aim at in my classes is the friendly interdependence of a community, where people feel free to learn from one another. The great threat to such relaxed interdependence is the reaction of the pre-community stages: "Omagod, I made a mistake, everybody is laughing." I have been powerfully influenced by Caleb Gattegno's Silent Way because it emphasizes and encourages precisely this easy exchange, this intent working together on learning something. When I refuse to jump into every pause with the correct answer, the students have more time and more reason to think. Eventually each component of the sentence in question is remembered by someone. And invariably, the slowest member of the class supplies something that nobody else did, and becomes the resource person for that item. I find this approach extremely valuable, since it leads the group members to recognize their need for each other. The class goal becomes one of communal exploration, with its necessary trial and error, supplanting the old competitive goal of always having the right answer.

Earl Stevick's term lathaphobic aphasia, inability to speak for fear of making a mistake, pinpoints the traditional end result of many people's experience in language classes. The end result I am after in my classes is exactly the opposite: a delight in speaking the foreign language, and the courage to experiment with it and to discover its possibilities.

STAGE D: At times of stress, the group becomes a refuge to shut out the stress-producing element. For the sake of the shelter that the group identity provides, the members become willing to relinquish for a while the individuality that had until now been so important to them. While a seeming abdication of individual responsibility, this stage helps to cement a group identity and sense of belonging.

Once again, the evidence of this stage at work is most spectacular in the Sweden group. Whenever we were encountering difficult situations during the summer, I had the strong sense of the group as having regressed to an early stage of human evolution, one predating the emergence of individual differences. It seemed that the ten group members sought each other out at times for the specific though unrecognized purpose of shutting out Sweden. Alliances were at such moments unimportant; any group member would do. My reaction each time was one of disapproval. In mid-summer I wrote to a friend about my feeling that groups in a foreign country are too often just a crutch, and that I didn't much believe in crutches. It was not until months later that I began to see this group-as-crutch phenomenon from a larger perspective. Yes, a community should not shut out but rather include. But that is just the point: that a group at this stage is not yet a community, and that people have to shut out the world occasionally, and forge a common strength within the group before they can open up and deal with the world as a unit. Instead of refuting the possibility of community, this stage affirms the need for it.

Until Stage D is reached, people fight the idea that they are part of a group, and they rebel against having to function as a unit. They jealously guard their separateness. Time after time I have heard people (and foremost myself) declare, "I hate groups, I hate being subjected to

group pressure, I hate being labelled as merely 'a member of such-and-such a group,' I want to be seen as an individual." I suggest that a reason why community is such a rare thing is precisely that the community-building process is easily bogged down at this stage. I have spent years misinterpreting this stage, and berating myself and scorning others for being so weak and dependent that at the first sign of difficulty we scurry to the protection of the group. And my distaste for this "weakness" has usually polluted my esteem for the group enough to destroy any chance to feel part of a community. I suspect that an understanding of the forces in control here might salvage a lot of soured potential communities. This leads me to believe that the actual construction of a community (Stages D and E) is far more at the mercy of the person in charge than is the earlier, more straightforward gathering of the raw materials (Stages A, B and C).

People must face during Stage D their need for the security of a group, but the group cannot yet satisfy their needs more than superficially. People must still turn to the narrower sanctuary of the alliances for comfort and understanding. At this stage only the sub-groups provide an adequate haven from tension. But in the process of trying to help one's allies, an interdependence and caring is emerging that may later form the core of a community.

Stage D seems intrinsically unstable. When the stressful situation has passed, people either progress into a feeling of community or they retreat back to a mutated version of the alliances. The alliances will never again be the same as they were before the crisis of Stage D, because people have now revealed a new and deeper part of themselves. These

revelations have a lasting influence on how people are now seen, and on how they see themselves within the group context. Whether or not the group now becomes a community, the mere fact of having lived through Stage D together creates a new intimacy. To be able to leap beyond the alliances on any firm basis requires the leader to be beyond the alliance stage in his or her own dealings with the group. It becomes crucial here that the leader avoid the role of buddy, just as earlier he or she has to avoid being a tyrant. If the person in charge pretends to be just another member of the group, then he or she is abdicating responsibility for the group. Without careful and patient guidance, it is likely that the group will merely stall at this point.

STAGE E: In flashes of increasing frequency and duration, the group members begin to function well both as individuals and as a group. They understand and act upon the idea that every person has something to give to and something to learn from every other person. The group, now a community, aids instead of inhibits a focus on the tasks at hand.

The key to community seems to be the incorporation of the two identities: the individual and the group. At the beginning of a group's history, the two seem mutually exclusive or at least incompatible. Until this stage, people have functioned well only as individuals or as members of a small, hand-picked sub-group. Only with great difficulty has the group been able to accomplish anything as a group. But the two identities are really just opposite sides of the same entity, and both are needed to form a whole. A community is simply the integration of seeming opposites. Without both, people are crippled, although they do not realize it. By my definition, a community opens outward, having come to terms with itself. The members of a community are receptive to the world, which they can now perceive through multiple sets of eyes instead

of being limited to their own meager set.

At the end of the summer in Sweden we were occasionally functioning smoothly with both identities. But except for those flashes of community, the group managed to progress only as far as a consolidation of alliances into two solid sub-groups. Within the two groups, people acted as members of a community. It was only during our final evaluation session that we had a discussion that the whole group participated in. On that last day, on the way to the airport, I wrote, "Maybe we could be a community now."

Very often the realization that the end has come or is coming soon will catalyze a brief brush with community. The feeling of at-oneness that so often comes right at the end of a group's time together is but a taste of community. I am trying to learn how to speed up the process so that its benefits can be enjoyed for a time. For arrival at community is as much a beginning as an end. It is only after it is achieved in some stable fashion that certain things become possible. For as long as it has taken to work out the internal issues, people's energies have been largely diverted from other tasks. Once a community is established, people can return with a new and doubled strength to the reason why the group was formed in the first place. Until this point in any group's evolution, my focus as the person in charge is on nurturing the embryonic community by providing support and encouragement and a model during its gestation. Once the community emerges, its ever-increasing self-sufficiency frees us members to turn to other matters, such as exploring a language or a country.

*

MY ROLE IN THE PROCESS

In Part I I developed a theory of the community-building process, with occasional reference to my role as the person in charge. In this part I shift my emphasis to focus on the evolution of my kind of leadership, and on the part I play in the creation of a community.

I have suggested that the leader is powerless to prevent Stages A, B, and C from happening. I have also implied that in another sense, the leader is of utmost importance during these beginning stages. If I aid in the accomplishment of the tasks of the role-taking phase, for example, the group can more quickly move on to the next level of interaction. The steps are progressive, so anything I can do to facilitate each step will accelerate our arrival at community.

It may seem paradoxical to say that the person in charge is at once unimportant and crucial. However, I believe that it is precisely by accepting that the process is more powerful than I, and by changing my approach accordingly, that I can become important. If I refuse to go along with the natural flow of things, then what I do instead is not going to have much positive effect on the group. But if I choose to become a servant of the process, then I can have a lot of influence in speeding it up.

Superficially, the summer's experience as a leader was not at all like teaching. Indeed, a clear danger signal for me was when I began to feel like a teacher (in the parental sense). As should be evident from the preceding pages, however, my kind of leading bears a close resemblance to my kind of teaching. I am a foreign language teacher who believes that other things can and should happen through the vehicle of the foreign

language. My goal is to learn how best to allow human things to happen while enhancing the learning of the foreign language. Each seems to aid the other. Learning how to ask and answer, "Do you have a boy friend?", "Are you hungry?", "Do you have to cook tonight?" deal with both facets of my goal. From the beginning days of a class, the students use English to say things they want to say to each other. And since they are saying things which have a point to them, there seems to be a point in learning them. Meanwhile, they are forming the habit of asking questions and exchanging information about themselves. This greatly facilitates Stages A and B.

My goals as a leader were essentially the same. I wanted the members of the group to do more than merely learn about Sweden and the Swedes. I consider the learning from each other and the looking within oneself to be just as crucial. I wanted to aim at all three things during our summer together, but I refused to force any of the three to happen. I didn't push at all unless invited, unlike what I felt I should do. Since the Experiment's goals were the same as mine, I was rather unnerved by the staff's and the Handbook's emphasis on heart-to-heart talks with each group member. Nonetheless I didn't pry, partly from fear of being told "None of your business" (which never happened), but mainly from personal style, based on a respect for their privacy. As it happened, I did get to know most of the group members fairly well, and people did feel freer and freer over the summer to open up to me and to each other about personal difficulties or changes. But I sense that the real looking inward is happening right now back in Birmingham and New York and Newton. I did little more than share with my ten young companions my own looking inward,

to let them know I find it important in my own life. Most responded to that at first with silence or by changing the subject, and only later with hesitant thinkings aloud. As I grow more calmly sure of myself, I worry less about how to encourage other people to open up to themselves and to others without forcing my priorities on them. It simply happens, and I suspect it happens more because of the example I set than because of the words I say.

I was still in the worrying stage, however, last summer. During orientation I mentioned to another leader that my group was not willing to participate in theater games or group soul-searching. Furthermore, I told him that I wasn't demanding that they participate. Instead, I was changing my approach and opening up our schedule. He replied, "Well, that depends on what your goals are." I did have definite goals about arriving at a sense of community, and I felt like a failure because I hadn't been able to accomplish this during the first two days of orientation. Why couldn't my group be like the others, who appeared to be behaving as the Handbook said a group should? The implication of the other leader's comment seemed to be that it was I and only I who was responsible for the identity and fate of my group. Even in the midst of serious self-doubts I balked at that idea. It smacks of "I'm the only one who knows what's good for you," and I reject that. Instead, more on a visceral than an intellectual level, I chose to assume until I saw evidence to the contrary, that all of those ten people knew more about themselves and what they were after than I did. Accordingly, I claimed no right to try to force them into a different direction. Try to influence, yes, but force? Emphatically not.

The issue of force proved to be one of the major lessons of the summer: what not to do with a group, and why not. Heavy-handedness emerges the villain. The temptation to force a direction may derive from the tendency that we teachers and leaders often have, to take responsibility for that over which we have no control, and which we have no right to control. I am talking about people's souls, I guess. I find it useful to remind myself occasionally of the essential powerlessness of a teacher/leader over his or her charges. I have an impact and a voice, but so do they.

So the question now becomes how to use that voice in a way that is compatible with my philosophical rejection of coercion. After a year of confronting the question, I have only the glimmerings of some possible answers.

The teacher is not exempt from the mandates of the community-building process. I am as concerned as the students with establishing an identity and finding a comfortable place within the group configuration. First I have to accept the other group members and prove that I accept them before I can expect them to let me influence them. That means, for instance, exploiting situations where my students can teach me something. Acceptance means to me a recognition of the uniqueness that each person has to offer me. While I was student-teaching in Mexico, I asked my students about elements of Mexican society that confused or disturbed me. I am trying to master Spanish, so I ask my students' help when I don't know how to say in Spanish what I have just taught them in English. In addition, I reveal myself as a real person, with joys and interests and difficulties. When I am preoccupied about something, I warn them of my

mood instead of leaving them to speculate on why Teacher is such a grouch today.

In the Sweden group I established an atmosphere of acceptance in similar ways. I chatted with them as people (as opposed to teenagers). I consulted them on their needs and preferences, and I tried to be sensitive enough to their moods and fears to adjust our schedule accordingly. The message that I was sending, and which they later told me they had received, was that they were more important than any schedule.

As necessary as setting my own example of consideration for other group members is approaching intimacy gradually. People who have just met each other and know they are committed to spending a lengthy stretch of time with these other strangers are not likely to burst into confidence-sharing right away. Whenever I push my group members too fast, they let me know by refusing to cooperate. In terms of the community-building process, people must first find out whom they can trust (Stages A and B) before they dare to reveal themselves in any depth to their chosen allies (Stages C and D).

Of crucial importance all along is to practice eternal vigilance, so that one may recognize the signs that the group has arrived at any particular crossroads. When I notice people starting to withdraw, then I should provide a chance for withdrawal, without berating the group for faltering in the face of a stressful situation. People need to shut out stress at times. I am beginning to accept that this is natural and does not preclude dealing directly with the stress. I now view this stage as a temporary retreat while people gather their forces. When I can, I draw people's attention to what may be happening, to reassure them that

their reaction is natural and not a horrible end product of weakness. At the very least I can understand the need for this stage and cease tormenting myself for failing to forestall what for years seemed a very undesirable reaction.

The tactics I have mentioned so far are examples of my belief that we teachers need to be beyond the first stages of the process ourselves before we can expect or help our group to grow beyond them. Our own need for alliances and for the security of the group can blind us to what is happening and what could happen. Our power lies in setting an example of a more peaceful, trusting, cooperative way to live.

My leadership in the classroom has always been active, whereas with the summer group I acted more subtly in guiding our path toward community. I intuitively knew that a community was more likely to happen anyway in a group that was traveling and living and experiencing so much together. A class is a self-contained group, formed for an activity to be carried out exclusively within the group. A further difference in the two groups lies in their nationalities. My students have been Latin Americans, who see the teacher as a strong leader and an authority figure. Since I believe that I have to begin where my students are, I have taken on the traditional teacher role at first. I want to emphasize the importance of beginning where the students are. If I don't, then they have no way of knowing where I am, and in the resulting confusion I am sure to lose them. But if I first act in a way that they can comprehend, then I have their attention and can gradually change into the more non-directive style that I feel most comfortable with. First I must win their respect, on their terms, and only then will they be willing to give my way a try.

Now it might be said that American sixteen-year-olds who are fresh from parental control should have the same attitude about a leader's role as my Latin students seem to have. I didn't feel the same thing, though, for reasons that are not yet clear to me. They didn't seem very concerned about me at all, at least during orientation. And when we arrived in Europe, they were so scared that their need for me was clear. I no longer had to worry about asserting my authority over them. My authority was self-evident. In a class as well, the teacher's authority, meaning his or her command of the subject, is implicit in the situation. But here my comparison collapses, because in a classroom there is no compelling reason for the students to recognize their need for the teacher's expertise. So the teacher tries to impose this need, and the battle begins. I am still trying to work my way free of this quandary.

A common thread in both my roles as teacher and as leader is my attempt to avoid telling people what to do. Especially in a classroom, I often find myself playing dictator. Since that is what my students expect, it is tempting to stagnate at that point and not try to wean them from my control. When I am functioning in tune with my beliefs, however, I make lessons as open-ended as I can, with clear room for student invention and control. I am currently grappling with my present students' reluctance to take the initiative I make available to them. Such a situation indicates that we are still far from community, since I still have more faith in them than they do in themselves. The closer the group members come to having faith in themselves and in each other, the closer we are to community. My present job serves to remind me how long this may take to

happen, depending on the individuals involved. I must cling to my faith and my patience, and not be defeated by initial failures. If I expect a group to act as a community and they don't, I should not give up on whatever activity they failed at, but try again when they have a better chance of succeeding. I reiterate, one's expectations of a group must be in tune with the stage of the group's development. More important than any method is to develop the sensitivity to see the group (and each individual) as it is, as opposed to as we want it to be. This includes noticing what background and expectations people bring with them, and accepting their actions and fears and merely-mortality as what is.

THE THEORY IN PRACTICE

After many months spent examining the experience of past groups, I came to the point where the lessons of these experiences ordered themselves into the theory I have now described. The clear next step was to apply the implications of the theory to my current teaching. Part III, The Theory in Practice, relates what has ensued from that decision.

A teacher who decides, "Today we are going to do a values clarification exercise" is just as authoritarian as the teacher who decides the class will do a grammar exercise. In neither case do the students have much to say about what they do; their major options are rebellion and apathy. I am as guilty of "liberal authoritarianism" as the next person, but I am trying to break myself of the authoritarian habit, since I disagree with it philosophically. As the first step of an attempt to make my teaching live up to my ideals, I asked the members of one class at Caminemos what they wanted to get out of having taken an English class. Our conversation took place in a mixture of English and Spanish, since the point was to communicate important things and to understand one another. I had asked the same question at other times, but this was the first time I was given an extensive answer. I think that is because it takes people a while to decide whether to trust me, and whether I really want to know the answer. In terms of my theory, this requires that we be beyond Stages A and B. At this point, the group and I had gotten far enough into the community-building process to be able to begin to talk honestly with each other.

The five class members began with the topic of buying things. They

wanted to learn how to exchange inferior merchandise, how to use layaway plans, and how to open and use charge accounts. Then another important category emerged: appointments. Each person told of frightening experiences with appointments. The Welfare Office, the doctor, the dentist, and the courts were all mentioned as places where they cannot cope in English, and where they are dependent on a bilingual friend or stranger to interpret for them. One woman said that as her English improves, she is discovering that the interpreters do not always interpret things correctly. So we hit upon a double goal: first, to be able to understand what is going on, even if only between the interpreter and the official person; and then to be able to dispense with the interpreter and handle things for themselves. Only the bolder of the group mentioned the second goal. I told them in turn that I wanted them to be able to do both things: learn enough English and grow brave enough to use it when needed.

They went on to list a few other situations where they flounder in English, and which they would like to know how to handle: giving and taking directions on the street; formal introductions; how to complain at work; traffic rules and signs; and just general conversation. One person with a fourth grade education announced she wanted to learn verbs, since without verbs she couldn't use the other words she knows.

What they did was create a curriculum for our course. My part of the bargain was to figure out how they best can learn what they want to learn. In asking them to shape the content of our course, I committed myself to a far-from-easy task, the development of a tailor-made set of activities to help them toward their goals. No longer could I muddle through a two-hour session using some old dittos I had found in the files, if I had not taken the time to think up a new approach to the past tense. I directed

their learning for a while. I taught them the past and the future tenses and some social amenities; personal expression verbs such as I want, I like, I have to, I can, I hate to, I would like, I need to, I am afraid to. I made sure they could ask questions as well as they could answer them. All this propelled us through Stages A and B.

I also set the tone for sharing, through a de-emphasis on competing and an emphasis on helping one another explore this new language and its possibilities. I like to think that I provided them with some tools to pass through and beyond the alliance phase on our way to community. I let them know that I had faith in their ability to take charge of their own learning, and that this was an acceptable thing to happen in a classroom. I think also that I had a lot to do with their greatly diminishing fear of speaking English, and with their increasingly relaxed manner in class. In any case, given the point we six had arrived at after one month together, I decided it was time to relinquish much of my control, and to encourage them to become more actively responsible for our class.

A digression: I hope to learn how to speed up the process of community building enough so that in future classes we can come more quickly to the point where the students are willing to act as a group. I am still hazy about what stages must happen first. Perhaps I have intuitively waited until I saw the group beginning to reveal flashes of community before I have started in on the kind of community project I am talking about now.

I find it intriguing how hard it is for me to remember to relinquish my old power. It is easy to neglect to ask again and again what they want to do, and easy just to give up when no one says anything the first five times I ask. And then once the students do start talking about the things they want to learn, I then have to remember always to provide a chance to

evaluate what we have done, to think together about what was and wasn't helpful of the things we did last week. I keep forgetting to ask what they would now like to add to our curriculum, and just generally to remind them that it is their show, too. And if I have a hard time changing my habit of being in total charge, so must the other members of the class be having difficulties breaking their habits of passivity within the classroom.

None of my students comes from a tradition of student responsibility for one's learning. Indeed, the fact that I don't act like a "normal" teacher is obvious to the members of this particular class community, and has provided us with one of our many group jokes. They often tease me about how nicely I treat them, and they instruct me, "No, no, Liz, you're not supposed to say 'please,' say 'DO THAT!'" The issue of the role the teacher takes illustrates my previously stated emphasis on finding out what the students' expectations are and starting there, where they are. Then I gradually subvert their ideas about what a class and a teacher should be like. By the time the group has become a community, my preferred way of teaching is at once surfacing more and making more sense to the others.

But back to the experiment I was explaining. One thing that pleased me and made me realize how far along the path to community we had come, was the amount of personal revelation intertwined with the listing of situations. We spent one day talking about the different courts in Hartford. They have all had dealings with at least one of the courts, so they explained to me which court handles which cases, using their own experiences to illustrate the jurisdictions. That marked the first time that people had revealed something as private as trouble with the law.

In the next few days I devised and told the others about a five-step

sequence we could try out, to see if it met their needs. Step one would be a pooling of information about an agreed-upon Topic of the Week, e.g., an appointment with the doctor. They would provide the specific situations they encounter and want to work on, such as making an appointment, changing an appointment, arriving at the doctor's office, and the session with the doctor. I would then investigate the vocabulary and the grammatical structures necessary for handling such situations.

Step two would be for the class members to learn the necessary words and structures, and to try them out in the safe environment of our group. A good way to do this would be to move quickly into role-playing and informal skits as a means for mastering the new material.

Step three would be to bring in a person whose job involves the Topic of the Week. The class members would first interview the person, both to find out something about this stranger and to put everyone (including the outsider) more at ease. Then the guest would take on her role of, in this instance, medical secretary, and each student would make or change an appointment with her. People could either stick to the previously rehearsed material or improvise as much as they dared.

Step four would be to visit the doctor's office where this now-familiar medical secretary works, and go through the routine on location.

Step five would be to evaluate the week's activities and to decide what topic to pick next.

This five-step sequence is designed to progress from the known to the unknown in manageable steps. The members of this class are women who have lived in the United States for up to nine years without learning more than minimal English. For them every step outside the classroom is threatening. They have come to the point where they want to learn English,

but that is not the same as wanting to use English. Only the youngest member of the class, the one who has been in this country the shortest length of time, likes to leave the protection of our classroom and go on "field trips." It was a big jump for them to accept the idea that they must practice speaking in order to learn to speak; the thought of speaking English with strangers is a whole different and scarier matter. If the sequence is adequate, it will provide them with the skills and the confidence to use those skills on new people, first on the familiar territory of our school and finally on unfamiliar ground.

The first three steps went smoothly. I gathered more information than they, mainly because I did not yet know how to structure a way for them to do more. For the first attempt, however, I was satisfied with their involvement. The second step was relaxed and fun. They have come to enjoy role-playing, and have become far more imaginative than they were when they first joined the class. So the ailments they reported to the person playing medical secretary were at times unusual and nearly always extremely theatrical. They were more subdued when the stranger took the role of medical secretary, but they used good English and without resorting to anything printed. What's more, they understood most of what the medical secretary said, even when she didn't use the words they had rehearsed with. They knew what to expect, which is as important as knowing how to answer. The next morning, one of the women had to call and change an appointment for real, and she reported back proudly that she had been able to do it fine and without recourse to the paper where she and I had written out what she should say.

They were even more subdued during our visit to the doctor's office. There were but four of us that day, which made conversation in English

possible on the way to and from the medical building. This marked the first time that English was spoken more than Spanish on one of our walks. Once at the doctor's office, the secretary showed us through the rooms. Since it was after hours, we had the run of the place. The only role-playing we did was as patients. In retrospect, I think I should have encouraged people to run through making an appointment, too, since we had the authentic surroundings to work with. Because of their timidity at this stage, it was up to me to show them what is possible and acceptable when we are exploring unfamiliar territory.

When we first began to talk about what had happened, the anti-field trip faction reiterated its preference for staying at school in the future, rather than going anywhere to visit anyone. It seemed that the week's events had not changed their dislike for venturing beyond the school building. I explained to them why I think it is important for them to leave the nest occasionally and visit new places and speak English with new people. But after that first day's chat, I realized that my experiment might end after the first round. To be consistent with my philosophy of relinquishing power, I have to be ready to give up something, even though I find it important, if I cannot convince the others to give it a try. For that very reason I find it preferable to wait until the group is far enough into the community-building process to give me a chance to be heard.

As the discussion progressed, the class members slowly began to gain enthusiasm as they reviewed for themselves just what we had done in our study of doctor's office rituals, and the extent of their involvement. After a while, even the leader of the anti-field trip faction was sounding as though she felt it had all been worthwhile. Without priming from me, they now began talking about other places it might be helpful to study and

to visit.

So one crisis passed on our path toward becoming a community of equals working together on a project. They had trusted me enough to give my crazy ideas a try even though they hadn't really wanted to do some of the things I was suggesting.

An episode that demonstrates just how far we had come occurred a few weeks before the start of the Situations Approach project. It had taken me fifteen minutes to convince two of my students that we could conduct a genuine English class at a restaurant down the street. In the end, one decided she would go, only because it was clearly important to Liz to have the whole class together, and she took care of convincing the other recalcitrant one. And immediately the strained atmosphere dissolved and the two women and I laughed our way down the street toward the others who had already left. At the end of our class, during which they had all ordered their ice cream sundaes in perfect English (we having role-played "at the restaurant" in previous classes), the leader of the No Go faction poked me and whispered, "Let's go to a restaurant again tomorrow!" We laughed together at the irony of that statement coming from her. The restaurant incident has become a part of the lore that binds us class members together. It also provides a common reference point whenever people again get cold feet over the prospect of going somewhere else new.

The hardest part for me was finding the middle ground between simply ordering my students to do what I want to do, and at the opposite extreme, letting them stagnate with the familiar things that are most comfortable for them. If I can establish a relationship of confidence with the members of a class, they will be more likely to listen to the reasons why a new

activity might be worth trying. Theoretically, once they discover for themselves the benefit that can come from stretching, they will become more willing to stretch. And since they will be more in charge of their own learning, they will be able to take more of the credit for their progress.

The history of this one class's experience with the Situations Approach can be seen as a progression through Stage D (the stress of new situations solidifying the group) into moments of real community. The five-step sequence was a clearly spelled-out task for us to tackle together, far more defined than the nebulous goal of learning English that brought the students to Caminemos. I have the feeling that there is an important clue here to the mystery of what catalyzes the jump into community. I have just decided that this jointly-tackled task was surely what catalyzed the establishment of our community. All the earlier hours of studying English in a more or less traditional fashion were a preparation for this group effort.

With this discovery I bring my progress report on an exploration to a close. I still have to think through the ramifications of beginning a class with similarly clear-cut activities which require everyone's participation in order to complete. I need to test my theory in the light of the experience of a variety of groups, and fill in the many gaps in my understanding of the community-building process. And then I need to apply the new insights to my teaching, which is the trickiest step of all. In short, the exploring continues. The ideas in this paper are the tentative beginnings of a very long search.