



CLERICAL IMPROVEMENT TRAINING COURSE,
CAREER INFORMATION CENTRE:
STUDENTS' MID-TERM EVALUATION.

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LIST OF CONTENTS.

	<u>PAGE.</u>
1. Introduction	1
2. Structure of the Evaluation	2
3. Practical Skills Instruction: Students' Evaluation of Course Content	3
4. Particular Issues of Concern to Students	5
5. Student Recommendations	7
6. Evaluator's Comments	9

1. INTRODUCTION.

1.1 The Careers Information Centre is an independent, non-racial and non-profit making organisation with its own constitution, Board of Trustees and Executive Committee.

1.2 In May, 1982, the Training Department of C.I.C. launched a pilot training course, the Clerical Improvement Training Course (C.I.T.C.). "The Training Department does not intend to offer the course on a permanent basis. The intention is to devise a course, which is not offered elsewhere, implement it, refine it, and when it has been evaluated, disseminate it to other training centres and institutions". 1)

1.3 The duration of this course is three months. It was designed to bridge the gap between practical training, as offered by conventional secretarial courses, and the demands of the realistic office environment.

1.4 Its objectives are: 2)

- 1) To ensure that the women participating in such a course would be in a position to complete effectively for positions in the clerical field.
- 2) To defuse the frustration and develop the skills of a group of women who are both matriculated and trained in basic clerical skills, but unable to procure employment.
- 3) To develop a training program that could be used by other training institutions and agencies in an attempt to close the gap between a severe skills shortage and a high unemployment rate.

1) Minutes, C.I.C. Executive Committee Meeting, 25.2.82.

2) "Application for Financial Assistance for Clerical and Improvement Training Course", p.12. C.I.C. December 1981.

1.5 According to a memorandum ¹⁾ produced by C.I.C., the course is unique in that "its orientation is particularly towards the development of social and personal skills such as language competence and interaction with the public, development of confidence, telephone manner, independence and initiative".

1.6 The course was designed to simulate a realistic office environment in which training could be conducted.

1.7 Evaluation formed a strong component of the training program. In addition to the evaluation exercises planned for the end of the course, it was decided to hold a mid-term evaluation by students, to ascertain

- 1) students' attitudes and opinions of first half of the present course,
- 2) students' suggestions for possible alterations in the latter half of the present course and
- 3) students' suggestions for improvements to any similar future courses that may be planned by C.I.C.

This report describes the mid-term evaluation.

2. STRUCTURE OF THE EVALUATION.

2.1 The evaluation comprised:

- 1) an introductory session of half an hour with the whole student group
- 2) individual interviews with each student
- 3) a group session with all the students
- 4) a feedback session with all staff members involved
- 5) the writing of this report, for C.I.C. and other interested organisations.

1) C.I.C. memorandum, undated.

2.2 The student group was addressed briefly by the evaluator, during which the following points were outlined:

- 1) the aims of the evaluation
- 2) the purpose of bringing in an outside evaluator
- 3) the confidentiality of the interviews
- 4) the use which would be made of the information given by students.

2.3 Each student was then interviewed individually, for approximately half an hour. Interviews were partly structured, partly open-ended. Discussions focussed on:

- 1) What expectations had there been of the course? Had they been met?
- 2) What practical skills had been acquired?
- 3) Which aspects of the course had been most and least satisfying?
- 4) Students' feelings about the structure of the course, attitudes of staff members, and human relationships in the course.
- 5) Students' recommendations for improvement of this and future courses.

2.4 The evaluator summarised the main themes and recommendations arising in the individual interviews, and these were then the subject of a group discussion of one hour. The purpose of this was to check with the students that the recommendations to be conveyed in the evaluation report were indeed an accurate reflection of what students had expressed. In addition, the evaluator attempted in this group discussion to elicit further recommendations which might not have been mentioned during the initial interviews.

2.5 A meeting with staff was arranged, during which the students' opinions and recommendations were conveyed and discussed.

3. PRACTICAL SKILLS INSTRUCTION: STUDENTS' EVALUATION OF COURSE CONTENT.

3.1 English/Listening skills.

There was a very positive response to the six hours of English a week. The fact that it is discussion-based was commented on: "we need this practise". Most pointed out that the quality of English instruction in the black educational system is extremely poor, and that good English

is a major requirement for getting a job.

The exercises in listening skills have also been enjoyed because of their practical nature, and because realistic exercises were simulated.

3.2 Typing.

All felt their typing has improved. With the range in typing ability at the start of the course, it is inevitable that there is a split in the group as to whether more or less time should be spent on typing. Some expressed resentment that typing is what is fallen back on if nothing else has been planned in the program.

3.3 Health education.

There were strong feelings about the irrelevance of the content of these sessions to a clerical course. Two people thought that the information might be of use in the future, and two felt the health education should be dropped altogether. The rest felt either that the course may possibly improve, and/or that the sessions should continue but be made more relevant to their needs.

3.4 Movement/Socio-drama.

With one exception this course is enjoyed and felt to be worthwhile by all — "I need the exercise", "I learn better posture", "it was good to learn about choosing clothes".

3.5 Video.

Most students found the video exercises helpful - it had enabled them to "see themselves" more objectively, regarding their use of English, their shyness, or their nonverbal communication.

4. PARTICULAR ISSUES OF CONCERN TO STUDENTS.

4.1 Anxiety about future employment.

The greatest concern expressed by students was how far C.I.C.'s responsibility stretched in assuring job placement. This problem was mentioned by all who do not have definite job prospects, as they enter the third month of the course.

In a fund-raising document ¹⁾ it is stated that "candidates would not be promised a placement on completion of the course, although it is hoped that sponsors would consider employing the candidate they are sponsoring".

Students have detected the ambiguity here, and three mentioned dilemmas they have encountered: during the course they saw posts advertised which they would like to have applied for. If successful, they would have had to withdraw from the course - and if they finish the course, they might get a better job, but are not sure of that.

The extent of the confusion was demonstrated by one student who did not know, if she withdrew from the course for another job, whether she would owe C.I.C. half the cost (i.e. R375) of her training.

4.2 Different levels of ability in the group.

The fact that it is a very disparate group in terms of typing, English and other skills was perceived by all to be a problem. Some felt they are slowing the pace of the rest of the group, others get bored when a lot of time is spent on, for instance, typing.

4.3 General atmosphere.

There is a split in the group between those who dislike what they perceive as the "school" atmosphere prevailing, and the majority who feel the discipline is good, and creates a proper learning environment. Some saw and appreciated the dilemma of C.I.C.: to create a realistic office environment, an emphasis on discipline is needed; however, that means

1) "Application for Financial Assistance for Clerical Improvement Training Course", C.I.C. December, 1981. p.14.

people are treated more like pupils than adults (see Evaluator's comments later in the report).

4.4 Attitudes to staff teaching methods.

This is linked to the above, in that the different 'styles' of staff members are related to how disciplinarian they are perceived to be. The group is completely divided on this matter - the two or three more advanced students find the "teacher" attitude of some staff difficult to swallow, while the majority had strong feelings that such a didactic approach is necessary: "we must learn discipline"; "we must learn to obey"; "we must be scared of X - she is the principal".

However, limits to this are realised by them, and the over-harshness of one instructor was criticised by nearly all students. The more informal discussion methods elsewhere in the course seem to be enjoyed.

I must add that in most instances where negative feelings about staff members were expressed, they were covered with supportive statements such as "but I suppose it is difficult for the staff when they are so busy"; "I'm sure she is trying to help us"; "it must be difficult if you haven't worked with blacks before".

4.5 Expectations of the course.

Several students said that they had thought, after the screening process, that there would be subjects covered in the course which have not yet been dealt with. Specific mention was made of commercial subjects, bookkeeping and switchboard operation.

4.6 Personality conflicts in the group.

Three students discussed the fact that the group was divided - that one student sowed dissension by encouraging the group to complain about issues not felt to be a problem by all students. Intense disquiet about what is perceived as destructive behaviour was expressed.

5. STUDENT RECOMMENDATIONS.

5.1 In this section, practical suggestions made by the students for improvements to this and/or future courses are presented. I have monitored them in good faith, without knowing

- 1) which may or may not have been attempted already
- 2) which are realistic in terms of staffing and financial constraints
- 3) which suggestions are already planned and built in to the remainder of the course.

5.2 Time-table and planned program.

Almost all students expressed the wish to have a clearer structure to the course. They would like to know in advance

- 1) what the content of the course will be on a daily basis
- 2) what the content of the remaining six weeks will be.

5.3 Clarity about course content at the outset.

This is linked to the first point: it appears that sections of the proposed course, such as bookkeeping and switchboard operation, have not yet been covered, and students do not know whether they will in fact be covered.

5.4 Feedback on job possibilities.

All who do not have a definite job in sight expressed the need for feedback from staff as to what the likelihood of their getting a job is - even if the feedback is negative. They would like to be informed of any progress being made in this direction.

5.5 Feedback about individual progress in the course.

Apart from the weekly speed typing test, students would like some form of continuing evaluation of their performance in the course. Some suggested this should be done on a subject basis; others felt it could be simply a personal assessment by staff members.

5.6 Speed tests.

Two students, who perceive themselves to be slower at typing, asked that they could do some of the weekly speed tests on an individual basis i.e. away from the group. They feel intimidated by the sound of the faster students' typewriters, and feel their performance could improve in a quieter setting.

It was also suggested that the test not be held on a Monday morning, when people feel 'rusty' after the weekend.

5.7 Delegation of responsibility.

Some students felt that more duties and responsibilities should have been delegated from the beginning of the course - that this would have encouraged initiative and independence. One example mentioned was that delegation of the weekly duty roster could well have been arranged by students themselves.

5.8 Health education.

It was suggested that the organiser discuss with the health educators the content of their sessions, to see whether this could be made more relevant to their needs. Specific subject requests were for first aid, family planning, and nutrition and diet. In general, the sessions should concentrate more on human relations.

5.9 Need for more English practise.

With only two exceptions, students want more English practise - more time in English group discussions, on listening skills, and with the use of the video.

5.10 Certification.

Students would like to know what form of certification they will receive on completing the course - whether a diploma, certificate, or explanatory letter will be forthcoming.

5.11 Lunch.

While students understand the rationale behind the rule that they not have lunch in the office (change of environment, fresh air etc.) they feel there should be more flexibility about this, as there are not suitable places for them to go to, especially when the weather is bad.

6. EVALUATOR'S COMMENTS.

6.1 Selection of students.

One root of problems being experienced by both staff and students in this course lies in the diversity of typing skills held by students when they started the course. Students were not given a screening test, but merely stated their typing speed. Thus the course started with students whose typing speed in fact ranged from no words per minute to between 20 and 30 words per minute. This has resulted in the slower students' wanting more typing practise, while the more advanced students have felt frustrated by not gaining the wider experience they had been led to expect.

A more careful selection of students in future may partially solve this problem.

6.2 Staff/student ratio: Meeting individual needs.

However, no matter how careful future selection procedures may be, any course will have students with a range of abilities and skills. In addition, students do such courses for different reasons: some, in order to improve earning capacity; others, to get a specific job at the end of the course; others again, to fill in time (one student, for instance, wishes to attend university next year).

While no training course can fulfil every individual's requirements, it does seem that the organiser of this course needs additional staff help, if she is to be able to attend to different people's needs. At present she has been responsible not only for fund-raising and organising the course, but also for being with the students eight hours a day,

every day (with the exception of the few slots taken by other people).

Regardless of how carefully any future course is planned in advance, there are countless day-to-day "maintenance problems" which must be attended to - making final arrangements with guest speakers, helping individual students with particular problems, getting a typewriter fixed, attending staff meetings. The training officer has had to do these things, as well as be with the students on a full day basis, while at the same time feeling responsibility for not fund-raising for this and future courses as well. This is clearly not a viable situation.

Even if, in future, a better selection procedure is in effect, I would recommend that some of the organiser's responsibilities be delegated to others.

6.3 The learning environment.

I understand that C.I.C.'s aim was to create a realistic office environment, so that participants could learn to cope with the demands of future work situations. C.I.C. was concerned about the implications of this from the outset: is the course then perpetuating an authoritarian school-type environment? Is it saying: "here is the world of work - adjust to it"? I was struck, and concerned, by the responses to questions on the discipline in the course: 'discipline is necessary'; 'we must learn to obey'; 'the staff must act like teachers, then we learn respect'. All except two students felt that the course does feel like a school - but that this is appropriate. They felt that this is the proper way to learn.

There arises for C.I.C. the dilemma that is found in many similar development situations - does one take these 'felt needs' of students at face value, and run a course which attempts to simulate conditions and behaviours of a stereotype of a typical office and boss-employee relationships? Or does one attempt to create a more challenging, innovative learning environment in which students are encouraged to participate more, to discuss the nature of work, to question obeisance to unreasonable demands from employers?

Apart from the moral/political issue involved, which the organisers of any such course must face, there is the practical fact that creating the latter kind of environment always takes more time. Here C.I.C. is in the position where it has undertaken to sponsors that, within three months, it will have qualified nine women for clerical posts. With this constraint, and given the poor typing skills possessed by most students at the beginning of the course, how much time can be spent on the experiential learning which C.I.C. staff wish to stress more?

Three avenues which could be explored to deal with this problem are:

- 1) better selection of students
- 2) an increase in the length of the course
- 3) a change in the present process whereby sponsorship of the course is tied to a particular job for a particular person.

6.4 Staff/Student communication.

Many of the problems perceived by students are linked to a lack of feedback by staff to students. Possibly because the course has run under pressure, against time, with limited funds and with insufficient pre-planning, this aspect has been neglected.

In any pilot course, it would seem imperative that there be more sharing of information on plans for the course, progress, content and future job prospects - even if this feedback is negative.

I suggest that it may be useful to act on some recommendations in this report immediately: this would demonstrate to students that their needs and opinions are being taken seriously.

6.5 Positive evaluation.

It is in the nature of an evaluation report to concentrate on problem or conflict areas, because its purpose is to assess what can be improved in future. Apart from the improvement in practical skills experienced by students, some positive aspects came across very forcefully during

this evaluation exercise.

First, it was most impressive to hear from three students what the course has meant to them personally, in terms of losing shyness and growing in confidence. They each spontaneously said that this growth related to their communication with white people - they are now unafraid of eye contact, express themselves more boldly, speak up in discussions.

Also clearly apparent was what I would term a generosity of spirit in the group - those who perceived themselves as 'slower' wanted not to be holding the group back; the more advanced students understood that the course could not always proceed at a pace they would prefer.

With one exception only, all the students felt that, while they had criticisms of aspects of the course, their attendance had been very worthwhile.

6.6 Final comment.

With the gradual opening up of industry to all people in South Africa, the lessons learned by C.I.C. during this pilot course have value for trainers in other career centres and in business organisations. Few such exercises are documented and distributed in enough detail that they can become useful to others.

I recommend that

- 1) a full evaluation by staff members be undertaken at the end of the course
- 2) that students be asked for their own evaluation at the end of the course
- 3) that contact be kept with students and their employers after the course, to follow-up on problems encountered in the job situation. This information may then be built into future course content
- 4) that C.I.C. should share the valuable experience gained from this course with individuals and organisations working in the same area, through dissemination of reports and/or workshops or seminars.



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