

Practical Consideration for Running Teenage Interpersonal Relations Workshops

Dick Huddleston

Lyle Meeres

Phil Kennedy

During the last few years, communication workshops and other forms of interpersonal relations training have been initiated in both school and business. A positive outcome of these programs has been a heightened awareness of social interest among participants. Since 1973, the authors have worked together to stimulate the social interest of groups of high school students. Our work began with the development of a community based social studies program, called SCORE. The program, for eleventh grade students, was designed to develop students' sense of community service, concern for others, trustfulness, and self-awareness. Regular features of the program included daily community service projects and weekly interpersonal relations training. A unique feature of SCORE has been the development of a weekend communication workshop. The first workshop was held in the Spring of 1974 and the pattern has continued. Now we have offered both Spring and Fall workshops.

This article will focus on some practical considerations to be made while planning and running weekend workshops for teenagers. Each leader, no doubt, has goals he wishes to accomplish and a theoretical rationale to support such work. The practical needs of the teenagers and their leaders, however, are common to many groups, regardless of the specific "theoretical" goal of the workshop they attend. We have found that basic needs, such as food, shelter, transportation, recreation, and rest can be met efficiently with a minimum of planning.

Taking 35-40 students, representing a cross-section of both socio-economic and academic backgrounds, away from the city, has worked best. We selected one of two church lake camps about 25-30 miles outside the city. Both camps were self-contained (winterized) structures with a central meeting

Dick Huddleston is an instructor at Red Deer College, Red Deer, Alberta. Lyle Meeres and Phil Kennedy are instructors at Lindsey Thurber Comprehensive High School, Red Deer, Alberta.

hall, a large kitchen, 3-4 washrooms, and sleeping facilities. Costs usually were approximately \$3.00 a day for accomodation plus an additional \$5.00 to cover food and transportation expenses.

Many of our students have cars and were quite willing to drive other students to the camp. We'll never forget one chilly November Friday night in 1974 when we were waiting at the camp for all the students to arrive. The last driver finally arrived but minus one car and one passenger. The driver was soaked up to the knees. She had taken the wrong turn and had driven the car right into the lake. (We did not lose the passenger). Since then, the students have ridden in the school's bus to and from the camp. Riding together has fostered a good community spirit and has certainly added a measure of safety.

Parents of students have lent excellent help as cooks at the workshop. No delays have been necessary to prepare meals and students have been able to devote themselves fully to the workshop activities. Usually 2 or 3 sets of parents have prepared the Saturday lunch and supper, while another group of parents prepared the Sunday breakfast and lunch. Their cooking could not have been better. The selection of a good menu has been important to all participants. Group discussion and activities in the camp atmosphere help develop hearty appetites.

During their stay at the camp, our parents (including local school board members) have been able to see our organization and program in action. Thus, we have had few complaints about what a group of teenagers might be doing on the weekend.

Developing workable sleeping arrangements at our workshops has been an interesting task. For the first two or three workshops, our leaders felt the only workable arrangement (one which was insisted on by one or two parents) was to separate the boys and girls and chaperone them closely. We found, however, that this arrangement provides little sleep for anyone. The boys would raid the girls' quarters, and the girls would investigate the boys' quarters and so on. The next morning we would all be irritable, tired, and generally not ready to pursue the goals of the workshop. Our solution was obvious—we'd sleep together. Students always brought their own sleeping bags, so we decided that these would be laid out on mattresses in our central meeting hall. The girls changed into their night clothes in the washroom and with little fuss came out and got into their sleeping bags. The boys simply got into their sleeping bags. Each small group in the workshop slept near one another with their leader. A quiet word or two by their leaders brought conversation to a near standstill. Only in one workshop have we seen a boy move his sleeping bag to gain attention. In that instance, we picked up his bag and transported him back to his group. He must have been shocked to have this quiet action taken. There was no more demand for attention. This reminds us of Dr. Dreikurs' advice to parents' "Action, not words will bring this about." (Dreikurs, 1964)

Usually our students request to stay up late Saturday night. Our reaction has been to inform them that bedtime will be at 11:00 p.m. (certainly early for grade 11 students, but not for a camp schedule that runs from 8:00 a.m. until 11:00 p.m.) Students in one group lingered outside the sleeping hall at our last Spring workshop. The leaders were amazed at their cooperation for when one leader entered the room, and said "time for bed," the students went to their sleeping bags so fast one would conclude they were waiting to be sent to bed.

The intensity of the workshop discussions and activities has changed dramatically over the last four years. We began our workshops (scheduled from Friday evening until Sunday afternoon) with concentrated sessions in small groups with little time for recreation and relaxation. This was a mistake. At the end of these workshops, we were exhausted. Now we schedule much more time for games and free activities. We also spend more time in discussion activities that include the total group. We begin the workshops on Saturday morning and end around 3:00 p.m. Sunday.

We have found the recreation activities and group walks refreshing to everyone. So many of our teenagers do not take walks at home, so they find this experience very relaxing and a rewarding opportunity to talk with everyone. Through all these activities, our leaders have learned to "take it easier" in group discussions, instead of trying to rush or force development of communication skills. The students have reacted much more positively to this unhurried pace.

Planning for these workshops usually begins with a leader meeting about two weeks before the workshop. Part of that planning includes getting interested and knowledgeable group leaders. Former students in the SCORE program have been excellent leaders, as have been students from Red Deer College's Social Service program. At this early meeting, the program is planned for Saturday morning and afternoon. We try to develop a major theme for the workshop and activities that will promote its development. Example themes have been the development of trust, support, and sharing.

The second leader meeting is held at 9:30 on the Saturday morning of the workshop. We review our starting plans and method for dividing students into small groups for discussion. Students are divided into such groups as randomly as possible, allowing for an even distribution of boys and girls in each group (we have fewer boys in the program). Leaders working in pre-assigned pairs are then randomly assigned to groups. This process of assigning groups is integrated into the morning's workshop activity. Additional planning meetings are held after each meal. These meetings have offered an opportunity to comment on the general tone of the workshop, to receive reports from each small group, and to plan the next session. Student representatives from each group have made excellent contributions to our planning sessions.

Getting these workshops started has had a parallel to starting a physical education class. Some type of warm-up activity has been necessary to get leaders and students ready to participate. A short burst of physical activity (like running on the spot, yelling) has livened up some of us dramatically. These activities somehow provide a ritualistic break from free-time activities and signal the start of something significant. Students' ability to concentrate has improved tremendously after these warm-ups.

The subjects for discussion and related activities are themselves a subject of another report. Each group of leaders must decide what best fits the needs of their students. Certainly there are many ways to stimulate the social interest of young people. But regardless of what is discussed, we have learned that a little intensive discussion goes a long way and the results are rewarding. As one group of students said:

Our small group got much closer than ever before. I feel that we all know each other much better and feel more comfortable with each other. Also, many of our personal views and feelings came out. We have a better idea of where we stand on matters or how we feel about each other, other people, or other things.

References

Dreikurs, R. *Children: The Challenge*. New York: Hawthorn Books, 1964.