

MR/SJG/46

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Ruth Wajnryb



Australia

Dear Ruth,

I enclose the article promised in a recent letter. I hope it makes reasonable sense.

Yours sincerely,

Mario Rinvoluceri

Enc

HLA DIGITAL
Humanizing Language Teaching

Taking time to notice your map

By Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims. UK.

A man from Algeria is saying goodbye to a man from UK. The Algerian kisses the Englishman hard four times on the cheek: left, right, left, right. The Englishman lives an instant of homosexual terror between kisses two and three. The one act provokes totally different mappings within each man's head.

A husband is convinced that someone is slipping into the house and stealing small items like pullovers, dishes etc... Time and again his wife finds the objects he believes have disappeared and shows them to him. He will say: "yes, you're right about the blue dish, but what about the pullover; where's that?" The woman feels he is being unreasonable and yet she has no idea at all as to how he sees and feels the presence of the thief. She condemns him and labels him paranoid without knowing what internal state she is writing off. She has not read his map, not even a solitary corner of it. How understandable her behaviour is and, equally, how absurd!

These are examples of people each seeing quite different maps of the same territory. It is hard for them to communicate meaningfully unless each sees the other's map as a reality. This is tritely easy to write on a page but very hard to achieve in my own staffroom and in my own classroom. I know I have often sincerely believed that a student's understanding of his problem was the same as mine, on the grounds that he was a reasonable person, like me! Crude and stupid but this happens frequently between teachers and students.

I would like now to outline an exercise that can help a training group to come to grips with these ideas experientially. The activity falls into three parts:

- written role-play
- discussion, observed by a minority of the group
- the reports from the observers

1. Written role play:

Give the participants the following information:

It is your job to counsel John and one day you meet him to hear his account of his work. He is David's supervisor and has been told by top management that he has to help David improve his performance and change his attitudes. John gives you this account of what he told David:

1. Your performance is not up to standard.
2. You seem to have a chip on your shoulder.
3. David, it appears to me that this has affected your performance in a number of ways. I have heard words like 'lethargy', 'uncommitted' and 'uninterested' used by others in describing your recent performance.
4. Our professional staff cannot have those characteristics.
5. Let's discuss your feelings about your performance.
6. David, now you want to talk about bad treatment you have been subjected to in the past. I don't know the details of these problems and I don't want to spend time discussing something that is several years old. Nothing constructive will come of it. It's behind us.
7. I want to talk to you today about your future in our system.

Ask each person in the group to take a pencil and paper. Remind them that they are John's counsellor. Ask them to write a response to what he has just told them. The response should not be more than three or four sentences long. Give them a couple of minutes to formulate what they want to say.

Now ask each person to pass their sheet of paper to the person on their right. Each person now writes what she imagines John's answer might be. Then she passes the paper back to the person on her left. A diagram may make this clearer. As you look at the page you are standing behind A, B and C:

A B C

B first writes her reaction to John and passes the paper to C. C becomes her 'John'. B receives a paper from A and becomes A's counsellor.

Each member of the group is now involved in two written dialogues, one to her right and one to her left. In one dialogue she is in role as John and in the other as the counsellor. You will need to allow 20-30 minutes for the dialogue writing if it really gets going.

Ask people to read as many of the dialogues as they can. They do this in silence.

2. Discussion, observed by some in the group

Ask the participants to split up into sub-groups of 4-6. Ask for a volunteer from each group to do an observation task. Take the observers outside and brief them. Tell them to take detailed notes of exactly what each person in their group says in the discussion. Ask them to try and feel each contribution in the way the person offers it and not to allow their minds to evaluate and pigeon hole each contribution. Tell them to take notes on the first person:

'I.....' 'rather than.....' 'she.....'

The observer's task is to feel and listen as much as possible from the group member's point of view.

Ask the observers to also note down thoughts they have that do not correspond to what you have asked them to do - they may well have a lot of these.

The observers now rejoin their sub-groups and you suggest that the sub-groups explain their reactions to the John-David situation and to the two dialogues each of them was involved in. The observers take notes.

3. Reports from the observers

Bring the whole group together (I am assuming a group of 20-25) and ask the observers to report on the discussion from their notes. When quoting participants they use the "I" form and move their chairs so that they are reporting from just behind the person being reported on. The person reported on has a right to correct the report, if she thinks it is inaccurate.

The reporters share with the group the thoughts they had which strayed away from the essence of the contributions to the discussion, the thoughts which strayed away from the speakers and back into their own world.

It is natural for the session to close with a general discussion on the whole exercise which is a pretty complex one.

Comments on the exercise

In the initial situation John spends a lot of time telling David how he sees things. He doesn't ask for David's view until point 5, by which time David can do little else but react to John's mapping. In point 6 John immediately rejects David's attempt to describe his feelings.

When the written role-play opens and the participants speak to John they face a problem: if John's main mistake was not to pay attention to David's mapping of reality it would be absurd for them to make the same mistake with John. And yet many people feel that they have to make John understand how he has gone wrong with David. How can you work on the other person's agenda when you have a strong emotional one of your own? And yet you may have little influence on the other person's agenda if you don't have a clue what it is!

In the discussion that follows the written role-play a minority of people move from being active participants to taking up an empathetic observer role. For some of them this is very hard as they want to express their own thoughts and feelings about the preceding work, and they are not ready to enter the way other colleagues lived the experience. They have to battle with their own unsatisfied self-expressive needs before they can properly notice how this same situation looked and felt to others. Right there, within the training group, they are in a situation that is emotionally similar to John's as he talks to David and to the 'counsellor's' as she talks to John in the written dialogue: how can they make room for the other person's views and feelings when they are crammed with their own?

The device of the two-way written dialogue is used to help participants to see the counsellor-John situation from both sides. Switching roles this way can be a quite powerful learning experience.

Cannibalising the activity

There are plenty of things you may want to pick from this article for use in your training room or your language classroom, even if you decide not to try the exercise in its entirety. Here are a number of suggestions:

Training exercise 1.

Give the trainees the John-David situation to read out of class. Ask them to take on the role of counsellor talking to John and to write the dialogue they imagine between the counsellor and John. Suggest that they write the dialogue down the right hand side of the page, keeping the other side for their hidden thoughts, in role, that they do not express openly to John. In the following class people share what they have written and discuss the counsellor's problem. This is also a perfectly valid activity to do with a group of students learning business English.

Training Exercise 2.

You may have a training group with three or four fairly dominant people in it, the sort who tend to take over discussions and hog feedback. Sometimes such people don't realise they have behavioural options open to them - they act as they do a bit compulsively. A way to give them a new experience is to ask them to take empathetic secretarial notes in the way described above. When you offer them the task it is important do it in a positive way - it won't work if they feel you are deliberately muzzling them!

Language exercise

The two way written dialogue is an excellent language exercise from lower intermediate up. Outline any conflict situation to the class and then ask them to write the opening lines of the dialogue in role as one of the parties (e.g. worried/angry/relieved) parent talking to a returning 14 year old child at four in the morning. The exercise continues as already described. You can also use the two way writing idea to get an exchange of letters going. Suppose you're teaching business English, the initial letter could be a complaint over a late delivery, the second letter is then the supplying company's response and so on.

Acknowledgement

The John-David situation is taken from the work of Chris Argyris as quoted in Donald A. Schön's *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, Jossey-Bass Inc, 1987. I owe the idea of empathetic note-taking to Sue Leather, who gave me this task in a staff meeting at her school. I got to know people in the group with an intensity I had not expected.

Feed-back

If you use any of the ideas presented here you will surely modify, alter and improve them. Totally new ones may well arise. If this does happen, why not send them in to Ruth Wajnryb for publication in the magazine?