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Relationship above all

Stowarzyszenie Trenerów Organizacji Pozarządowych

NGO Trainers' Association sTOP, Warszawa 2022

www.stowarzyszeniestop.pl

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Educational material financed from funds received from NIW-CRSO under The Civil Society Organisations Development Programme for 2018-2030 CSODP (PROO).



When I look back to the people in my life who have taught me the most and who have made me the person and trainer that I am, I can see that what has shaped me is the vibrant relationship between me and the trainer. By vibrant, I mean based on dialogue, listening, submitting to authority, naming one's needs, arguing, and gaining one's autonomy and opinion. The above reflection prompted me to look at the topic of the relationship the trainer/coach builds with the group.

In this relationship, what supports adults in the process of learning, and acquiring new competencies, and what hinders them in this process? Or is the relationship unnecessary? Is it important to know the methods, tools, and concepts?

As a participant in the Trainers' School, a 224-hour process of learning how to teach adults, I experienced disappointment with the school's programme: few tools, especially contemporary ones for the work of the trainer, few concrete exercises, and a lot of analysis of my experiences, facilitation, and attempts to guide me.

As a novice trainer, at that point in my work, I was expecting "specifics" and "ready-to-use tools", as those attending trainings tend to say. Instead, I was receiving lessons in relationship building and self-awareness. At the time, I was saying to the facilitators: not enough tools once again; why are we analysing so much; we are not trying enough. What captivated me then? The attitude of those guiding me: **full of empathy, and understanding, trying to hear and name my needs.** Not once did I hear that it was wrong to want a tool; to focus on getting to know myself, the relationship and the other person. I was given the space to express my doubts, which for that moment, was very important to me. Up to now, as I recall the people running the school, I feel their

warmth, closeness, and also their spirit in my work. I was introduced to the tools later, and I found places to experience, discuss and apply them myself.

What I gained at the trainers' school was, as I think about it now, far more important to me than the tools – I gained a positive learning experience in full acceptance of the facilitators and the group.

My learning experiences, many conversations about non-formal learning and hundreds of hours in the training room led me to write this article. In this article, I want to emphasise the importance and significance of the relationship between the trainer and the participants.

What are relationships?

According to the psychological dictionary, a relationship is a way of expressing feelings and attitudes between two or more interaction partners. The workshop/training/classroom facilitator relationship is a way of expressing needs, feelings, and attitudes between the trainer and the participants.

John Hattie's research and humanistic psychology show that the paramount issue in building relationships is the participants' trust in the trainer and the trainer's attitude towards the group.

TRUST PROVIDES SPACE FOR LEARNING.

Trust enables participants to learn and benefit from the knowledge and experience of the teachers, trainers, educators etc. It enables this because it gives a sense of emotional security, which is the basis for the brain to work effectively (about which more in Marta Sykut's article: **"When our brain learns best – the neuroscience perspective on conditions enhancing the learning process in a group"**¹).

¹ https://stowarzyszeniestop.pl/stop/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/When_our_brain_learn_best.pdf

So, how do we build trust? What is the trust in the relationship between the workshop participant and the facilitator? In my practice as a trainer, I have wondered about this many times – how do I do it? At first, I thought that my competencies and telling participants about them would inspire trust – the introductory “who I am, how much I know and how much I have done.” Of course, this built up my status as a facilitator, but not trust exactly. More factors were needed to gain trust – and this is where the psychological mathematical equation for trust came to my aid. It has enabled me to look at what I, as a facilitator, need to take care of to build trust between myself and the group.

$$\text{TRUST} = \frac{\text{RELIABILITY + AUTHENTICITY + TIMELINESS}}{\text{SELF-ORIENTATION}}$$

In the denominator of the trust equation, we have three terms: **reliability, timeliness and authenticity.**

In mathematics, the higher the value we have in the denominator of a fraction and the lower the value in the numerator, the higher the value of the fraction. Similarly, therefore, the equation for trust shows that the higher the reliability, authenticity, and timeliness and the lower the self-orientation, the higher the trust increases. What, then, is behind each term:

- ▶ **Reliability** is understood here as competence for the activities performed and truthfulness.
- ▶ **Timeliness** as performing certain activities at the time we have agreed on, or communicating obstacles and proposing a deadline for completing the task.
- ▶ **Authenticity** is understood here as saying the same thing to different people and also being in line with the values you are referring to by living them.
- ▶ **Self-orientation** – a focus on achieving your own goals and needs.

What does this mean for those running workshops, training sessions, lessons, etc.?

In a nutshell: be competent in the subject you are training in; tell what you know and what you don't know truthfully; fulfil your commitments to the group; bear witness to what you are teaching with your attitude. Look at the needs of the group, and adapt the programme/workshop accordingly. Following the programme only can be perceived by the group as the realisation of your needs/goals. That increases the denominator in the trust equation and consequently reduces trust and affects the decline in trust, consequently the relationship.

The attitude that fosters relationship

In the publication “**Kolb and cultural differences**”², Lena Rogowska-Lewandowska writes that the Polish culture is a high-distance and a high-context one. This means that culturally, from a young age, we learn at a distance from the facilitator of workshops/classes/training, expecting that person to have specific knowledge and to teach skills. Lena Rogowska-Lewandowska writes:

“In high-context cultures, non-verbal messages, environment, and social position are important in the communication process. The communicative ideal in high-context cultures is to speak between words. Here, the listener has an important role...(...).”

I conclude that culturally we are still anchored in learning in the teacher-student power relationship and in the student's responsibility for what is learned... And that is what I see in the Polish school. If I am confronted with a school class or teachers, more than once I face “culture shock”. When I as a facilitator invite them to express themselves, to learn through experience, to make mistakes that teach for the future, and to explore, the group often resists and says: Why should we introduce ourselves? Why should we talk about what we need? We already know each other – tell us what you know, and we go for a break/home. In this situation, I can with my attitude as the facilitator:

- ▶ not hear what the group is saying and deliver my programme, in full.
I would describe this as an attitude of “I know better what is good for you.”

² https://stowarzyszeniestop.pl/stop/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Kolb_and_cultural_differences.pdf

As a consequence, some of the group will probably leave, and some will stay and do what I ask. Most likely with many emotions such as anger, disappointment, and a sense of meaninglessness. Maybe single people will benefit from what I say.

- ▶ drop the exercise and agree to the group's proposal – give a brief presentation and go home/for a break/to work. Then, in an “I'll do as you wish” attitude, the group may feel listened to, but my classes will be mainly passive learning, so some of the group will benefit less.
- ▶ name what I hear, show my perspective and offer a solution. I would then call this attitude “in relationship with the group.” In my opinion, it carries the greatest chance for the group/participants to learn.

Relationship and Kolb

You are probably wondering after reading my article, dear reader, if relationships play a role in every educational process. Possibly if I attend a 2-hour webinar, it doesn't matter anymore? In my opinion, it does. Seeing the group, relating to its needs and naming one's calms the tension in the nervous system and also gives the participants space for more intrinsic motivation to learn and ask questions.

While working on this article, a mentor asked me a question: do relationships take precedence over Kolb's cycle in adult learning? In my opinion, YES. When there is no relationship between the facilitator and the group, it will be a challenge for the participants to learn and engage in the various stages of the Kolb cycle. Kolb gives us, as trainers, a structure for adult learning. And the relationship? The relationship gives space for effective learning.