

GROUP PROCESS IN SEMINARS

Groups of people working together go through a developmental process. This is especially true in seminars where people work for long hours during an intense training program.

The beginning developmental phase is called the parallel phase. As this phase begins, seminar members find themselves in a new environment in which their sense of identity, coping mechanisms and control devices have not been proven. This makes the seminar member feel insecure and somewhat fearful. The seminar member will be very dependent on the seminar adviser for both direction and feedback. Members of the seminar interact primarily with the adviser rather than with each other. Unplanned discussion during this phase centers around "safe" topics that are not likely to elicit judgmental comments from other seminar members. The seminar adviser needs to take a very active role during this phase if the seminar is to move on to more effective phases of group process. The adviser will model the leadership role with the expressed intention of allowing students to assume this role later. Using the leadership role, the adviser helps the seminar discuss its expectations for the school and helps them to develop operational guidelines for the seminar to meet them; establishes an open, caring atmosphere in the seminar sessions; and takes them through their first successful completion of a seminar activity. It's very important that the adviser be sure the initial introductions during the first seminar session not be rushed or omitted. These introductions provide each member of the seminar with an opportunity to establish his/her identity and credentials. Failure to do this at the beginning will interfere with later progress because the members will seek to establish their identities during other seminar discussions.

The length of the parallel phase will vary according to the seminar members and adviser, but normally ends with an authority crisis sometime during the first two days of the school. Keep in mind that moving out of this phase is an important and necessary step for an effective seminar to take, so don't take the questioning of authority personally. The authority crisis can best be described as the situation in which the student feels comfortable enough to start asking, "Who made you the boss?" This crisis will manifest itself either during discussion in seminar and lectures or possibly when students decide to hold their own meeting without staff present. Staff fear not, if the correct foundations have been laid in the planning and early conduct of the school, the students will eventually come to the conclusions about the school that you want, and the seminars will become more productive.

During the inclusion phase, which starts as authority issues begin surfacing, the members of the seminar begin to check out each other. The discussion will start to comfortably move from strictly "safe" topics. Individual members will be testing to see if they can trust the seminar with their true feelings and opinions, not just their "Sunday best" ones. Members will be trying out new roles — formally when assigned as leader, recorder or observer, and informally as the dominator, jester, compromiser, etc. The seminar adviser must support seminar members in their newly assigned roles and provide feedback, especially positive feedback, to let them know how they did. Remember that the student leader may never have been in charge of a group before, and the adviser may need to inject thought-provoking questions or comments to keep the seminar on track. The adviser needs to be very careful not to dominate the seminar with personal opinions or lectures. The adviser should also monitor process during seminar sessions to insure uniform participation.

It's appropriate for the adviser to share process observations with the seminar at the end of the session. The seminar adviser must also deal constructively with any conflict which may appear as a natural consequence during this developmental phase. Acknowledge that the conflict exists, don't allow it to degenerate into fighting, don't take sides and let the seminar know that it's O.K. to accept and value someone even if they disagree with that person. As this phase continues, the seminar adviser will be able to and should slowly relinquish more of the overt control of the seminar.

The seminar will move out of the inclusion phase after facing the intimacy crisis sometime during the middle of the school. The intimacy crisis may occur gradually as individual members of the seminar affirmatively answer the question, "Can I trust the rest of the seminar with my true feelings and opinions?" This resolution of the intimacy crisis is characterized by the seminar seeming to "jell". Observer reports become repetitious in describing uniform participation. The dominator stops dominating and the quiet member begins contributing. Another way seminars resolve the intimacy crisis is by constructively handling a conflict which arises in seminar. In the seminar session following a conflict, the members suddenly seem more relaxed and open with each other — no hard feelings remain as a result of the conflict.

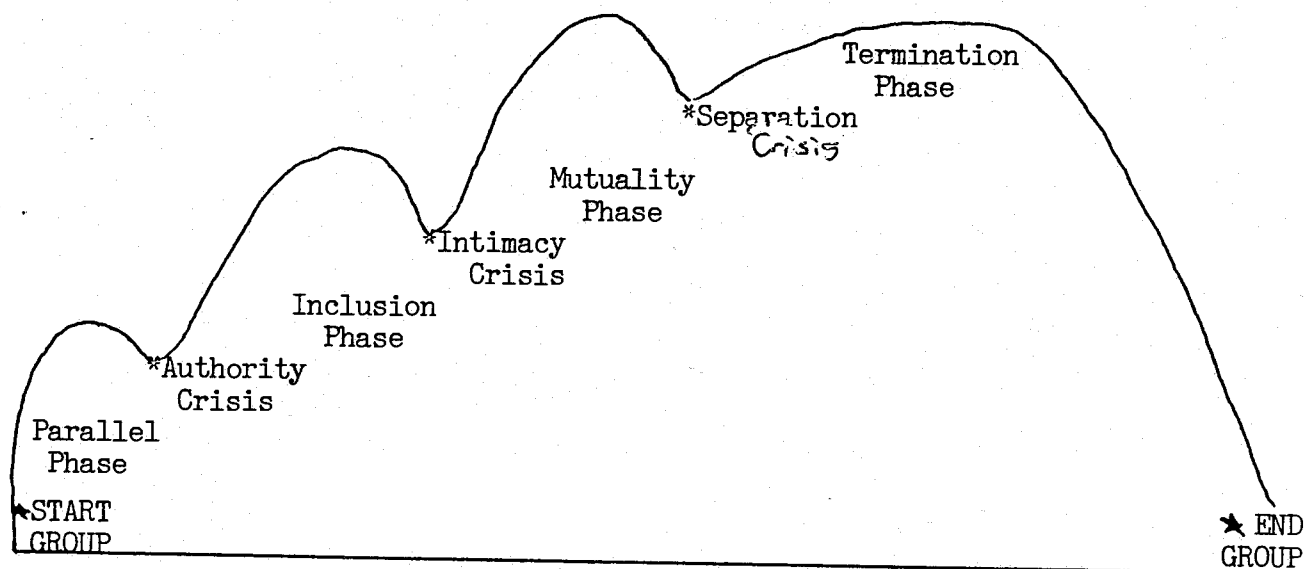
Once the intimacy crisis has been resolved, the seminar moves into its most productive period, the mutuality phase. It is during this phase that the seminar will produce its most meaningful work. Members have come to accept and support each other and their adviser. There is more give-and-take and greater tolerance among seminar members. Many new ideas and future plans are generated. A very close feeling develops in the seminar as members share a unique seminar identity. During this phase the adviser is able to trust the seminar members to handle most of the seminar's operational functions and duties. The seminar will confront and handle on its own most problems that arise. Seminar advisers need to be cautioned, however, not to relinquish total control of the seminar. It's very easy for a seminar to slip back into earlier phases of development if it runs up against a problem it can't handle on its own or if inertia sets in because it's been a very long, hard week. Generally speaking though, the adviser will not have to take as active a role in controlling the seminar as in earlier phases until the seminar reaches the separation crisis sometime during the last two days of the school.

The separation crisis involves the question, "How do I say goodbye to my seminar and go back to the real world?" This crisis manifests itself in comments, sometimes nasty, that imply that opinions and ideas being offered will have no relevance back home. It appears on the surface that the seminar is back where it started, and less progress seems to be made during seminar sessions. Members try to plan extra activities with the seminar to maximize their time together. Members feel down or sad. At this point the effective adviser will recognize what's happening and take up the leadership reins to guide the seminar through the termination phase.

The seminar first needs to be reminded of all it has accomplished during the course of the school, and encouraged to use any remaining time constructively. The speech showcase provides an opportunity to recall high points of the school. Another bridging technique is to provide seminar members with address and phone lists of staff and students so they can continue the networking when they return home. Time needs to be provided to evaluate the experience and put it into perspective; this is done by asking students to complete written evaluations of the school and their seminar adviser. Lectures on the last day should address ways in which the student can apply the new knowledge at home. That's why Planning a Conference and Planning a Training School are included then.

Seminar members need structured and informal opportunities to say goodbye. The last seminar session and the Dining Out provide informal ways, the graduation ceremony provides a very formal ending to the staff college experience.

Keep in mind that the group developmental process just described is variable and somewhat unpredictable. Some seminars move quickly from phase to phase, but other groups become stuck along the way or never make it to the last phases. Student populations change and seminar advisers' personalities and skills encompass a wide spectrum. The evaluation staff can provide valuable insights into a seminar's progress; therefore, their comments should be looked upon as a help, not a put-down. No two staff colleges will go through the growth process exactly the same way, but then that's what makes it exciting year after year!



SUMMARY OF GROUP PROCESS