

## PERSON-CENTERED TRAINING: RESPONSE TO DAVE MEARNS

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In Vol 4, Issue 1 of this journal Dave Mearns says, “With the exception of the contribution of the Chicago Counseling Center, formal, qualifying training courses in client-centered therapy have not been prevalent over the past 20 years in the USA”. He also hopes “that this paper and further publications will stimulate the growth of person-centered literature on training”. I respond here to Dave’s “hope” with alacrity and appreciation.

The invitation to dialogue with Dave and others who are currently engaged in training is important. In Mexico in 1982, Rogers gathered a number of us together and strongly urged us to share ideas, training developments and progress. I made some effort to do that to no avail. I appreciate Dave’s nudge years later and hope it will breed more discussion. In addition, it gives me an opportunity to describe a training program that has existed in the United States since 1980 and whose success has been well documented in a research project done by an unbiased researcher.

What follows here is a glimpse into the history of the *Indepth Training Program in the Person-centered Approach*, a program that has prepared over 100 client-centered therapists and person-centered facilitators to function with integrity in their various professions. The discussion will include the origin of the program, an overview of the educational process and content that we consider crucial to the training of person-centered professionals, some conclusions from a study conducted among former participants by an independent researcher, and an explanation of the obstacles to “qualifying” (Mearns, p.31) learners in the United States for licensure in the fields of counseling and psychotherapy. Those obstacles led the staff of *The Indepth Training Program* to leave accreditation and qualifying in the hands of the learners along with other responsibilities for their education.

### HISTORY

In 1980, Curtis Graf, Ruth Sanford and I, in consultation with Carl Rogers, launched the *Indepth Training Program in the Person-centered Approach* in Port Jefferson, New York. Our decision was a response to Roger’s gnawing concern about the lack of intellectual rigor demonstrated by people who identified themselves as “person-centered facilitators”. That concern resulted in his support of formalized person-centered training – something he had resisted since his resignation from academia. He explained his change of heart in an interview in 1981.

*I am a person who is reasonably sensitive emotionally, fairly intuitive, but I also like the fact that I have a brain, and I like to use it. This new direction is an attempt to discover ways in which people would both experience and learn a person-centered Approach as whole persons with experience and emotions involved, but with their intellects also involved.*

The new direction to which Rogers referred first came to fruition in 1980 as *A Learning Program in the Person-centered Approach* in LaJolla, California. Our *Indepth Training Program in the Person-centered Approach* began the same year. Our first purpose statement read in part:

*To offer serious learners an opportunity to study, experience and practice the skills that are central to the person-centered approach.*

*Carl Rogers outlines the cognitive aspects of this experience. "The purpose is to generate the excitement of new learnings about the person-centered approach, its current trends and its implications for the future. It seeks to give a solid grounding in this approach. To this end, it will include such elements as the basic hypotheses; past and present research studies; the underlying philosophy; the major theoretical formulations. There will be study and practice of the attitudinal skills; especially empathy. There will be presentation of some of the new modes of science which would completely change our concept of research. There will be consideration of the implications of this approach to our social future." The experiential aspect is based on the person-centered approach which involves trusting and empowering the unique person rather than relying on the expertise of another.*

After Ruth Sanford resigned in 1985, the *Indepth Training Program* continued in its original form and intent until 1990. At that time, Curtis Graf and I took several years off and in 1992, in response to professionals' requests to offer more training, began to convene four- to six-day residential meetings each year. We called them *Person-centered Training Experiences*. Last year, as a result of both ongoing formative research and an indepth study we conducted with all graduates of our early programs, we devised a new format for the *Indepth Training Program in the Person-centered Approach*. I will explain the recent development later under "New Program Design".

## ORIGINAL PROGRAM DESIGN

### *A Decision About University Affiliation.*

At the outset of The *Indepth Training Program*, I was a frustrated full-time faculty member in a Human Development graduate program in a major New Jersey university. The faculty in our department was strongly versed in and committed to the tenets of person-centered education. Students in our program participated in the creation of their own curriculum within the boundaries of the field, engaged in self-assessment, carried much responsibility for the design and documentation of their own learning. Our program was one of the most sought after and cost effective in the graduate section of the University. Many more students than we could accommodate were beating on our admission door. Student enthusiasm is not generally the norm in American graduate education and it made the administration very suspicious. At one school-wide faculty meeting, the Dean of the College of Education referred to the program's faculty as "The Manson Gang" (named after Charles Manson, murderous cult leader).

Our efforts to maintain the principles of person-centered education within that autocratic system led us to elect one of our faculty every two years to interface with the university administration. His/her role was a political one requiring continued justification for our immensely popular educational process. Shortly after my own 1982 decision to resign in frustration and protest, the university closed down the program, along with a number of other departments all having to do with the helping professions. The reason given was "financial efficiency". The huge outcry from students and alumni failed to change the decision.

Needless to say, I was not particularly interested in having The *Indepth Training Program in the Person-centered Approach* affiliated with a university – especially the one where I was teaching! Ruth and Curtis, who had their own stories about traditional authoritarian education, were also not hopeful about integrating our program into a graduate school in the New York area. Even

then, the trend in the United States for the fields of psychotherapy and counselling was toward uniformity and exclusivity. Only those who attended American Psychological Association approved schools were allowed to sit for the psychology licensing examinations. The requirements were, and continue to be, stringent and inflexible. Even if we had affiliated with a university, our learners would not have access to licensing.

However, we did negotiate for accreditation of *The Indepth Training Program* with the New York State Department of Education over a year-long period. The end result of *winning* accreditation would have forced us to seriously misrepresent what we were doing and would still not have qualified our learners to sit for any examination. All of us valued the integrity of the program too much to compromise both content and process, so we decided to remain independent. In keeping with our philosophy of empowerment and responsibility, we turned the matter of individual accreditation over to our learners. Many of them were graduate students who, with our support and documentation, approached their own institutions to earn credit for their educational experience and integrate it into their own graduate programs. Most of their negotiations were successful.

We do not regret our decision not to affiliate or qualify, nor did we ever consider overturning it. Learners in our program now are able to earn the continuing education credit needed to maintain standing in various helping professions, but we do not qualify them to sit for a licensing examination. In the United States such preparation requires years of graduate education conducted under the umbrella of a university, in programs tailored to the licensing exam. Those exams have very little to do with the mission or vision of client-centered therapists or person-centered facilitators.

#### *Staff of the Training Program.*

Ruth, Curtis and I had diverse backgrounds and experience. Each of us had a private practice. Ruth taught in a graduate Counselor Education program. Curtis was a doctoral candidate whose dissertation compared the theories of Rogers and Kohut. I was a Human Development Consultant, nearing the end of a doctoral dissertation focused on the nature of learning in the person-centered approach, and a faculty member of a graduate program in Human Development.

We all shared a common dedication to the person-centered approach. Together with Carl Rogers, we had staffed a number of in-depth, person-centered workshops as well as a four-day seminar designed for study of the theory. Our personal and professional relationships had deepened through our experiences together on person-centered staffs. We considered ourselves to be co-learners with other participants. In keeping with that philosophy we had our own learning goals, shared serious issues between us with our fellow participants so there were no "family secrets", received feedback regularly, and participated fully in community meetings.

#### *Participants.*

Our interest was in training any helping professionals who sought to facilitate the development of others in the person-centered approach – not just counselors and psychotherapists. Our original community consisted of 18 learners from the fields of social work, university and secondary education, nursing, psychotherapy, counseling, and business. Successive communities have reflected the same diversity.

We had two categories of learners. Those who wanted a certificate documenting that they had *indepth* training had more rigorous accountability in writing papers, bringing tapes or written reports of their work for supervision and feedback, consistent journal-keeping, and a total of three years in the program. (Other adjustments were made regularly as a result of a formative research project in which we were engaged.) Other participants – usually well-established professionals – chose to come only for a year or did not want or need a certificate. They were free to validate their

own learning in whatever way they wished, although we always asked for a synthesis paper at the end of the year.

Those professionally established learners lent a significant degree of intellectual maturity to the cognitive aspect of our program. Their professional and educational experience resulted in more challenging and rigorous theoretical sessions than I have experienced in other training programs I have visited. That group, along with advanced learners who had been in the program for two years or more, took a significant role in peer supervision and facilitation, and had the opportunity to apply as staff members for other projects we were convening. In one Training Program group, the learners developed a workshop on gender issues from the ground up. They took the entire responsibility for setting the focus, writing a brochure, nominating staff, negotiating fees and physical site, marketing the project, and inviting a Training Program staff member to facilitate the workshop with them.

#### *Individualized Learning.*

Beginning with the initial letter of application, learners were expected to set individual learning goals that were consistent with their professional aspirations and their commitment to developing the self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-responsibility, congruence, and the ability to forgo control of those with whom they were working – crucial aspects of the training in our value system. However, the individualized learning was always set in the larger field of person-centered theory and practice.

Toward that end, we laid out an initial curriculum that was absolutely consistent with our purpose statement above. Each group of learners met the components of that curriculum, but the process of fulfilling it differed each year.

Although the staff, and increasingly the learners, were devoted to rigorous work in the person-centered approach, we welcomed participants trained in other orientations. Always, we were stimulated by the challenges their presence provided to staff and other learners to refine and strengthen our own belief system. The intellectual sparring saved all of us from becoming true believers, followers, or parrots – an accusation often leveled at person-centered communities. The research we conducted documents that most learners of different persuasions changed the nature of their work quite radically as a result of the training. (See research conclusions below). Their feedback demonstrated that it was the consistency and integrity of the educational *process* rather than the theoretical work that convinced them of the value of moving in the direction of less control, increased authenticity and empathy in their relationships and more trust in allowing clients/students/patients to find their own directions to growth and healing.

#### *Group Process.*

The life of the learning community itself generated an interactive process that contributed profoundly to the development of psychological maturity called upon for person-centered facilitation. Learners were constantly receiving feedback on the quality of their relating, their facilitative skills, their sensitivity and perception, and their written work. The community became a laboratory for confronting all aspects of personal, intellectual and group development – power issues, conflict resolution, responsibility for self versus other, goal setting for individual and group learning contracts, cooperation versus competition, intellectual understandings and theory building.

Rather than a staff-established agenda, the community made creative decisions about its process of learning. For example, when one learner came into unexpected contact with traumatic early childhood abuse, the group stayed with her for hours responding in all sorts of ways to her pain and fear. When that session came to an organic close, a participant asked her whether she could agree to a group review of the audiotape. The idea was that anyone could stop the tape at

any time and ask for feedback on their response. The learner who had done the work said she would also like to stop at those points where she had felt helped, understood, facilitated or impeded in her work. We spent the rest of the day working with that session, with particular emphasis on the facilitative conditions, the wisdom of the client and the impact of client-directed rather than therapist-directed therapy.

Generally, after the community had gone through a group session (and those were often very intense), we would process the experience with the intention of illuminating person-centered theory. The groups became very skillful in integrating the experience and the intellectual understanding/articulation of what had occurred in person-centered terms. In reviewing the session, learners were given more feedback on their ways of interacting, listening, or expressing their feelings and ideas.

The learning community would sometimes break down into empathy labs or learning partnerships. Those decisions came quite spontaneously or in response to learners resisting the larger group, wanting a change, or becoming aware of specialized interests they wanted to explore. Often learners who had particular areas of expertise would offer or be asked by other participants to conduct a seminar for those interested. Peer learning and teaching was a highly valued aspect of the Training Program.

#### *Curriculum.*

Staff commitment to rigorous cognitive work was strong. Sticking to that commitment without directing the group, honoring personal processes and trusting that they would not impede intellectual engagement, and facilitating the integration of intellectual and affective learning required skillful balancing. Our increasing adeptness in fostering integrated learning was reflected yearly in the growing ease with which learners were able to move fluidly between intellectual and affective modes.

Before the group met for the first time, each learner received articles that laid the theoretical foundation of the person-centered approach. We provided a carefully wrought bibliography for learners who wanted to receive a certificate documenting indepth training or wanted to go beyond the discussions and resources used during our meetings. We offered a library of books, articles, and videos that were available for borrowing, and use during the weekend meetings. We audiotaped every meeting during the weekend, and learners were encouraged to sign out tapes, with promise of confidentiality, and review some of the seminars or group experiences through the lens of person-centeredness. Many learners reflected on their personal work and theoretical discussions during community meetings, and said these tapes extended the cognitive and personal meanings of their experience enormously.

During the first meeting, we brainstormed lists of learning expectations and goals. Those lists were typed, handed out, and referred to during the year to monitor our progress. The staff contributed ideas by referring to their own work in progress, and new areas of interest we were exploring. We believed that we taught best when we recognized our own opportunity to learn, and we genuinely saw other learners as facilitators of our own pedagogic efforts.

We recommended that each learner keep a journal, and we did the same. The three major areas of learning we stressed and recommended for review in the journals were 1) Theoretical understanding of the concepts in the person-centered approach and other systems of personality theory, 2) Personal development, i.e. self-awareness, self-acceptance, congruence, self-responsibility, personal empowerment and 3) Improvement in the skills and attitudes of the facilitative conditions. Often excerpts from personal journals were shared in the community to reveal additional meanings gleaned from reflection on our own processes. Learners who wanted the certificate usually chose to hand their journals to one of the staff for feedback.

*Opportunities for individual learners to work on a person-centered staff.*

In planning the *Indepth Training Program*, we had decided to respond to the often expressed need for experience in facilitating on a person-centered staff. We had written into the brochure the passage that follows:

*Opportunities for Staff Facilitation*

*Opportunities will be open during the year to facilitate as a staff person in a variety of person-centered experiences:*

*Learners will be encouraged to initiate workshops in their own communities or professional settings. The staff and learning community members will be available for consultation on the design and for formal processing at the conclusion of the experience.*

*There will be a limited number of openings for co-facilitation on the staff of person-centered workshops sponsored by The Center for Interpersonal Growth. The selection of learners for staff experiences in facilitation will be determined by a self and peer evaluation.*

The selection process was consistent with the person-centered system. We did not believe that the staff should exert power over the choice of co-facilitators, and we wanted the selection process to be worked out by the community of learners.

The group devised a system whereby learners who felt ready to serve on staff could raise the request. They would receive feedback from everybody in the community, including staff, on their readiness to facilitate based on the experience together in the learning community. In preparation for giving feedback we did readings about person-centered facilitation, the principles of giving and receiving feedback, and discussed at length the difference between “facilitative”, “facilitator” and “facilitate”. During the third year, at the suggestion of a learner, we added a staff position for an advanced learner on the next year’s *Indepth Training Program*. That proved to be wonderfully rich for us as a staff and for the continuing development of the training program.

The facilitator selection aspect of the training program had a huge impact on learning to give and receive feedback, on understanding the importance of self-assessment and openness to hearing others experience of one’s self, on exploring the distinct meanings of person-centered facilitation, on being responsible for oneself and to the group in making a final decision, and on providing actual experience in group facilitation. The final decision rested with the learner who had asked for the staff position. Only once did we have a conflict between the communities’ feedback and the learner’s decision to pursue the position.

## **RESEARCH ON INDEPTH TRAINING PROGRAM**

In 1992 Curtis Graf and I commissioned a highly experienced researcher to design and conduct a study that would objectively measure the effectiveness of the *In-Depth Training Program in The Person-centered Approach*. The study sought to identify and measure those selected learnings that participants encountered as group members in the learning community, and to what extent, if any, the concepts of empathy, congruence, acceptance, trust in others to solve their own problems, and personal empowerment had an effect on members’ self, work and personal relationships up to the time of the study.

Conducted by mail, a universe of 80 questionnaires was fielded on March 9, 1992 to past participants of the training program whose addresses we were able to trace. The study closed on April 10th, yielding a return rate of 63%. The mean number of years that had lapsed between the study and respondents’ participation was 5.16. Of the respondents, 60% had masters degrees,

10% had doctorates, and 2 % had some college education but had not earned undergraduate degrees.

Below is a copy of the researcher's Conclusion section.

### Conclusion

*Based on the findings from this study, it seems the Indepth Training Program has been a great benefit to and has had a very positive impact on participants' lives.*

*Following are some of the more primary findings obtained from the data collected in the Indepth Training Program study:*

- *After their experience in the learning community, 90% of the participants would not have liked the more traditional approach to learning*
- *Reasons include: "I learn more from non-directed, interactive experience" (40%), "learn much about myself by being more active" (36%) "more interested in learning when I do it interactively" (11%)*
- *94% feel their participation contributed something, however small, to the development of the learning community*
- *44% feel their participation contributed greatly to the development of the community*
- *All respondents (100%) feel they contributed something, no matter how small, to their own development*
- *80% feel their participation contributed greatly to their own development*
- *82% feel that staff facilitators provided enough interaction*
- *88% feel the staff's openness/involvement in the community promoted their own (member's) participation in the group*
- *88% believe the staff's openness/involvement in the group promoted the group process*
- *86% experienced theoretical learning. Of these 95% utilized that theory to understand their own experience within the group (98 % use that theory today in their work)*
- *Respondents have incorporated the conditions below into their work as a result of their participation in the Learning Program: empowerment (98%), congruence (92%) empathy (90%), acceptance (88%), and trust in others to solve their own problems (86%)*
- *96% feel that learning can integrate ideas and feelings for reasons that include: "theory and practice allow mind and soul to work together" (42%), "you must have both to make the process work (successfully)" (29%), "it enhances the learning experience" (29%), "that's the way I learn best" (23%)*
- *92% were generally satisfied with the Training Program*
- *86% would recommend the Program to a friend/colleague*
- *12% would like to see some staff/program related changes made*
- *10 would like to have seen more of these items included in the Training Program: videotapes, taped interviews, handouts/psychodrama*

*The researcher's recommendation for responding to learners' input was:*

- *Integrate these tools in the same interactive format as in the Indepth Training Program: audio/visual aids, handouts, book lists, taped interviews and a step-by-step analysis of learnings.*

- *Using this method may help some participants through an easier transition for learning in the person-centered approach. For some, traditional methods may help them better identify the theories that are being introduced through largely non-traditional means.*

Although we felt edified by the results of this research, we decided to redesign our *Indepth Training Program*. The new format attempts to respond to learners' apparent need for more in-depth and self-designed theoretical work and for reduction of the residential requirements. In addition, it gives our learners access to the extraordinary pool of academic and supervisory talent in this country.

### NEW PROGRAM DESIGN

The overwhelming task of coordinating, marketing, recruiting, and running the *Indepth Training Program in the Person-centered Approach* together with maintaining large private therapy and consulting practices proved to be too much for Curtis and me. So, in 1992 we developed the *Intensive Training Experiences*. These shorter residential training experiences lasted from four to six days and were far less ambitious in theoretical depth and less comprehensive than the in-depth training we had conducted for ten years.

However, judging from the number of returnees and their positive feedback, this kind of person-centered training is still very much in demand. Our question has become, "How can we offer the people interested in a more in-depth person-centered training than the two of us have the time, money and energy to provide?"

The design we are presently offering consists of three six-to-ten day residential Intensive Experiences each year, not too different from what we are doing now. Any learner who demonstrates appropriate interest and professional need will be welcome at those experiences. Curtis's and my involvement will not extend beyond the demands of these experiences unless we are asked by learners for more.

To accommodate the needs and wants of learners who require more theoretical specialization or want to integrate the training into their graduate programs, we have invited some of the seminal thinkers in the person-centered approach around the country to form the equivalent of an adjunct faculty. The response from those we have contacted has been positive. We now have an extensive list of the outstanding theorist/professionals in this country, and several from abroad who will make themselves available for participating learners. These include Jerold Bozarth, Barbara Brodley, Irene Fairhurst, Nat Raskin, Julius Seeman, John Shlien, Carol Wolter-Gustafson, and John K. Wood.

Although the demand for supervision is not as great, we have contacted some of the person-centered practitioners that consistently adhere to the values of the approach to work with learners under the same kind of contract as the adjunct faculty. Among those practitioners are Jenny Biancardi, Armin Klein, Kathy Kennedy, Dana Mann, Barbara Mautner and Suzanne Spector.

Here is how the system will work. Participants who want more in-depth learning, supervision, or mentoring can review a booklet containing biographical statements describing each faculty person. Those statements include the faculty member's major areas of interest, experience and writing. It is the learner's responsibility to reach out to the faculty member or supervisor with whom they believe they have something to learn, and to negotiate an arrangement that will meet both persons' needs. That arrangement will include consultation fee, feedback on articles or dissertations that learners might be writing, in-depth exploration of certain issues of interest to the learner, etc.

Those learners will work out a more general contract with Curtis or me in which they will spell out their learning goals – both theoretical and personal – and the way they intend to pursue and document them. The contract includes participation in at least three of our residential training ex-

periences. These, too, can be negotiated. If learners have sufficient training experience, they can substitute another person-centered event for their residential requirement. Some of these events could include international forums, intercultural meetings, the LaJolla Program, or other person-centered meetings with a focus that is appropriate to the learner's contract.

### CONCLUSION

I have attempted here to describe a training program in the United States that is operating without university affiliation or the ability to qualify learners to sit for licensing examinations. I hope I have communicated the high quality of the program – quality that our staff could not have realized if we had agreed to work under a university umbrella. We know there are many professors around the country trying to incorporate person-centered learning and values into their teaching. They provide an oasis in the academic desert, and we are grateful for their efforts. However, it is our conviction that the most honest way to offer a *complete* program of person-centered training, where process and content can co-exist with integrity, is outside the walls of the system. Fortunately, creative graduate schools where mature learners are able to take a major role in designing their own programs are gaining accreditation. Students from accredited schools like The Union Institute, Empire, Saybrook Institute, and Antioch are encouraged to seek out programs like *The Indepth Training Program in the Person-centered Approach* for incorporation into their curriculum. Learners in these programs are consistently getting academic credit for their work with us. Some faculty members from these and other accredited less traditional schools, whose graduates are also not allowed to sit for licensing exams, are spearheading a strong movement to change that ruling.

Can a program that does not qualify survive in this age of credentials? We do not know. It is, indeed, a struggle, but so far satisfied learners have sent enough new participants to keep us flourishing. If the time comes when it is no longer possible to survive, our dedication to person-centered training will have to find another cause. In the meantime, we are proud of a program that has contributed to the professional practice and personal enhancement of so many person-centered practitioners who continue to create an untold number of ripples in the large pool of human services.

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## **Policy Statement**

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