



Developing Open Communication Across the Generation Gap

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"For the first time I really felt close to adults. I never realized before just how human they really can be. I felt beautiful about the whole thing. It helped me to understand my parents much more. Now I feel that I can be more sympathetic."

The 17-year old girl who wrote this evaluation attended the Sex Education Workshop in Honolulu in the summer of 1967. Her response is typical, affirming that communication across the generations is not only possible but desirable.

The generations are bewildered by their apparent isolation from one another. In some cases battle lines are drawn. In others, the interaction is more formal than feeling, more rigid than free. The alienation between the generations may be more apparent than real, more a matter of maturity than of age, for

even communication within peer groups can be highly unsatisfactory particularly at the feeling level.

The generation gap can be closed when people want to really work at it. It happened in the Workshop. It takes time, energy, but most of all a willingness to try.

Communicating across the generations is equally difficult among the peer group. The lonely person has trouble in both areas, but by looking at himself in the Workshop he can begin to take the steps he wants to. It is the person who is in touch with himself who can begin to bridge the gap. He knows his feelings. He is a total person no matter what his age. He is understood and accessible.

The seventy persons who attended the Sex Education Workshop found that you can learn to bridge the generation gap if you are really committed to learning. The growth made

by the participants was in direct proportion to the degree to which they invested themselves. Some found insights that contributed to their understanding of themselves; others got in touch with their own sources of feeling; others found areas of their lives, previously closed, opening up.

Evaluations at the end of the week were enthusiastic. Was the experience any more than an ephemeral one? The evaluations six months afterward show that the Workshop experience was a strong force in helping the participants realize the potential within themselves.

The Urgency of Communication

We communicate in verbal and non-verbal ways—we can't help it. Even the isolate communicates. Painter, poet, and writer — each

uses his art in a desperate attempt to communicate what he feels. If not, what is the purpose of the painting? What poet is there who wants to keep his picture of the world hidden? What writer is there that does not want to be read?

The mature person communicates. He is open, in touch with himself and his own feelings — not selectively as only through a work of art — but with his total being. He is an entity, solidly integrated. His feelings and intellect are congruent. With perhaps more than a little bit of luck and lots of work he moves toward maturity. Not all make it. A child who has to censor and submerge his feelings may eventually lose that part of himself entirely. His body movements may become awkward, his thinking prescribed, and his defenses high. Little wonder that this person cannot communicate with others; he can't even communicate with himself.

Any experience that helps a person get in touch with himself is a maturing one. He may go the route of mooning meditation and look within alone. But he can also see himself in relationship to others and how he interacts. As an outgrowth of experiencing himself in the presence of others at a Workshop, he may begin to look with active, loving concern toward others. In the creative interdependence of a group of the concerned, he may find himself.

Why Sex Education?

Sex is a subject of interest to all. It is an area of life in which each person's being is clearly expressed. Not in the sex act alone, for that takes little talent, but in the committed relationship to another that helps make one human. This is our sexuality in which we experience the fullness of life.

However, sex is an area of human endeavor that is laden with ignorance, guilt, fear, and anxiety. Experience with sex does not necessarily set one free. Attitudes toward it make the difference. What one learns about it from the peer group may be unreliable; that from the parents, loaded with tabus. As a result, he may gain a full measure of hang-ups. Or the open attitude toward sex and his deep feelings about it that he shows at a young age may close with the seeming openings of dirty jokes.

Even adults are ignorant of many of the physiological details of sex. Their information may be meager, faulty, and based on biases of superstitions and repressed feelings of desire for tabu experiences. They may overcompensate for their feelings, too, as in *Tea and Sympathy* and become over-masculine to screen out latent feelings of homosexuality.

The fears that beset us seem unique. They are for us, but they are common fears. The darkest secrets in the innermost recesses of our being are known by all. When one shares his fears in the Workshop, they diminish. When he can talk openly about them and find out that others, too, have such concerns he feels support, not condemnation. What a relief to be able to talk about them with sympathetic persons!

As the Workshop proceeds the concern of the group moves from sex toward the emotional experiences of living; toward the existential question, Who am I?

How It Happened

The idea for the Workshop was developed by the Committee on Sex Education under the Oahu Committee on Children and Youth. Rather than talk about what was needed, the Committee determined that it would show what could hap-

pen. The interest generated was so great that it was not difficult to find participants.

The youths were all leaders in the schools they represented — presidents, class officers, student body leaders. They came from the islands of Kauai, Maui, and Hawaii as well as Oahu. They were students who were verbal, who could express themselves effectively. They had achieved a good deal of success in life with self-images that matched. Students who are leaders help teachers who are trying to communicate honestly and openly.

The adult participants were people whose work generally brings them in contact with youth — teachers, ministers, doctors, youth workers, housewives, college professors, administrators.

The Department of Education cooperated with the Oahu Committee on Sex Education by giving teacher credit for the course, as well as moral support to the idea.

The YMCA of Honolulu released several of its staff members from regular duties to serve as staff members in the Workshop. The YMCA also provided secretarial help to handle the office work.

A local foundation offered support to the Workshop which made possible the appearance of Dr. Mary Calderone for one day of the workshop. She also appeared on the ETV program, *Medically Speaking*. Dr. Calderone is the founder and director of SIECUS, the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States.

Daily Sessions

The first session consisted of non-verbal games. The purpose was to acquaint the participants with the many ways we communicate and that we sometimes give mixed-

signals. After a morning of this, the frustration level was in the order of, "I came to learn something. Is *this* all we do here?"

On the afternoon of the first day the participants were divided into four groups: men, women, boys, and girls. The importance of single-sex groups will be discussed later. In the single-sex group of peers, the participants learn to communicate openly in matters of sex. The interest in the Workshop increased to the point where some could say, "I may be back tomorrow."

The youths were a half-hour early the next morning, eager to continue the discussions. They again met in single-sex groups of peers. That afternoon and for the rest of the small group time they met with their *primary* groups, each including men, women, boys, and girls. Only first names were used in the groups so that status would not become important. An evening lecture-question period on contraceptives was held.

The third morning the adults and youths were separated. The youths saw slides on slang terms that produced a lively discussion. The adults discussed how to answer the moral questions, stemming from their fear that sex was being separated from ethical considerations. That afternoon the interest was at such a level that the participants would no longer allow separation from their primary groups.

The interaction became more intense on the fourth day and communication at the feeling level produced many insights. A party that included non-verbal games was held in the evening. The adults were shown the slang term slides that the youths had seen.

The last day was a tapering-off day. In the afternoon wrap-up session, suggestions were made on

how to return to "normal" life. The changes and growth that some individuals had made might not be understood by those at home. It is hard to tell others of the experience and what it means if they were not involved.

Single-Sex Groupings for Youth

It helps to be able to communicate with peers about sex before trying to level with adults about it. Teenagers are often overconfident about their ability to talk openly in a mixed group about sex. Experiences in openness in peer groups facilitates communicating with adults.

Open communication on sex does not usually extend much beyond the junior high level, particularly on such topics as homosexuality and masturbation. Jokes about sex cover up the deep-felt need for adequate information and the sharing of feelings and attitudes important to the emotional maturity of teenagers.

Boys acquire their knowledge of sex from less reliable sources than girls. They are also likely to be more active sexually. They worry about "being normal" and their own adequacy. The staff member urges the boys to talk openly; he supplies information when needed and corrects misinformation.

At first the boys are ill at ease and the conversation stays on a superficial level. But as they become more accustomed to the group the questions become more basic. "Why can't we get frank information about contraceptives?" "What are the best solutions for early pregnancy?" "How about abortion?" "I'm not really sure what '69' means."

Still a lot of testing of the staff continues. Then the boys become a little more honest about their own curiosity. "Do any of you know what a homo does?" The personal fears are

first expressed in a bravado manner, "I don't think there is a thing wrong with masturbating, do you?" "How can you tell if you're doing it too much?" "How many of you still have wet dreams?"

As they press the staff for answers, the suggestion is that it may be good for them to continue to talk about it. They see that this is a new experience — talking honestly to their own sex about fears and problems and getting honest answers to their questions. Even best friends don't confide in each other. "You couldn't just ask your buddy, 'How big is yours when it's hard?' Or, 'How often do you masturbate?'"

One of the boys shared an experience he had had with a homosexual who was a friend of the family. Other boys talked of being approached in public places. The highlight of the discussion was how they felt about the problem and what to do if they were approached.

The girls are generally better informed than boys, but they are more reserved and hesitant to open up in their own group. The Birth Atlas was sometimes used to motivate discussion. The double standard has some effect on their ability to share personal feelings as openly as boys. They talk easily about menstruation and their own bodies. They were most interested in having an adult share her feelings with them about birth.

The girls found it hard to ask questions about slang terms. Arleen asked to see one of the staff privately and then tried to find words to ask what the term "69" meant and "blow job." Her boy friend had used them but wouldn't tell her what they meant because he "respected" her too much!

Girls are also interested in homosexuality and ask, "What

causes people to be homo?" They also have questions that center about the hymen: "Can it be broken by being athletic?" "Will a Tampax break it?" "How else could you prove you are a virgin?" This line of questioning led into a closer examination of our attitudes and the social pressures that make the idea of virginity important.

After the single-sex sessions the two groups are combined for a co-ed session. The open discussions characteristic of single-sex groups suddenly disappears. The boys read their questions in an embarrassed way, their eyes kept rigidly on the paper. The tension is high and communication does not seem possible. The feeling is, "This will never work." The slides with the technical terms followed by the slang expressions were used here. It provided an excellent vehicle for dialogue to begin. Soon remarks such as, "I thought I knew everything but I certainly didn't know that!" were heard. The tension decreased and frank and open expression on sex problems and attitudes took place. Some took pride in furnishing the local term for the expressions.

The adults were eager to meet the youths in direct contact. The students were at first ready to tell the adults directly but inhibitions slowed them down. The adults pumped the youths for information but did not want to divulge their own problems, "They want to ask us all kinds of questions but they don't seem to be willing to invest themselves in the group."

The single-sex sessions enabled the co-ed sessions to be effective. And so the purpose of the Workshop was served at this point: to take a serious look at factual sex information. In the remaining sessions the participants would experience looking at themselves in interaction with

others, and work on bridging the generation gap in communication.

What Was Learned

Hostility is a factor in any group where people try to be honest. It is not hidden but dealt with openly in the Workshop. The participant sees it rise and sees its resolution.

The sight of two angry adults is disturbing. Two adults, call them John and Mary, got involved in a good deal of hostility toward one another. "Why don't you just tell me if you're mad!" screamed Mary. "You don't have to be so preachy about it. Just tell me how you feel!" But John's quick reply, his face boiling red with anger, was "I'm not angry at all."

A youngster who was upset by this action begged them to stop. "Please . . . I just can't stand to see you two do this to each other. I like you both." Immediately the tension slackened and John said, "Why are you so upset? Mary and I can forget this and be friends later."

Then the conversation turned to our ability and inability to show hostility and what it does to others. One of the boys saw his parents as covering up their mutual hostility by diverting it to the children. "That's when we get it. They're afraid to confront each other."

But along with the display of hostility is the manifestation of love and affection. In our ordinary life we are afraid to put forth a hand in understanding for fear the action will be misunderstood. However, within the group where people are expressing honest emotion, then the arm-around is understood for what it is. Feelings of spontaneity that are denied in ordinary situations are accepted here.

When a person really sees himself he becomes brutally honest, pretenses fall. A boy who had been

dating a girl for a long time in a half-hearted way realized that he had not been honest with her, that he was using her. He was quite emotional when he blurted out, "You know, it really isn't fair to her what I've been doing. I'm really just scared to face what it would be like to tell her the truth." There was freedom in his agony. Who knows what can happen in relationships when they are faced honestly? They might just grow.

Each becomes more aware of the responsibility of his own actions. He may put someone in a bind or tie him up with a look. One adult began to see the agony of her husband when she closed-out on him. For years she merely tolerated him. "OH, I now see what I'm doing. I'm expecting my husband to succeed like I want him to. I'm really not accepting him. I often withdraw and leave him without anything to respond to."

Responsibility within the group takes many forms. It changes as different persons respond. With the response goes the leadership. The leadership is fluid. One assumes it. Old habits of looking toward staff as leaders led one member to ask, "Why didn't you do something when Sue was in trouble. Couldn't you see she was having a bad time?" The staff member quietly asked, "What did you feel like doing?" The reply was, "Well, I really felt for her and I could understand her feelings. I wanted to go and sit by her." At this point he could see himself and what had happened. He might have responded to her with his warm feelings but waited for someone else.

Evaluation

At the close of the last session the participants were asked to write their responses to the three questions that were based on the goals of the

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