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7

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Interpersonal Competence

Academic involvement in learning that relates directly to students' everyday interpersonal experience—that develops not just their analytical, intellectual competence but also their interpersonal competence—has gained increasing currency over the past twenty years. At the same time, the notion of interpersonal competence arouses the suspicion of many members of the university community.

Interest in learning interpersonal competence is growing for several reasons:

One reason, which emerges as a repeated theme in this book, is that the population seeking postsecondary education is growing older, and older students are more motivated to learn when learning is related to practical interactional problems (see Schaie and Parr's chapter on intellectual development).

A second, related reason is that the "practical" divisions of higher education—the professional schools and continuing education departments—are growing most rapidly.

A third, more macroscopic and historical, reason may be that, with the increasing turbulence of change and the destruction of unquestioned sources and patterns of authority, people are finding their interpersonal relationships less regulated by habit or tradition and increasingly fragile—forming and dissolving in ways that seem difficult to control. They may thus be painfully aware that there is something about human relationships they do not understand and need to learn.

A fourth reason relates to ego development research (see Weathersby's chapter in this book), which indicates that the developmental level of people seeking higher educa-

tion is rising. Since people at higher ego levels increasingly assume personal responsibility for the social dilemmas in which they find themselves, rather than externalizing blame onto others, this change may also be contributing to an increasing interest in learning how one's own actions affect interpersonal situations.

Finally, academics in general and social scientists in particular have been focusing more sharply on the gaps between intellectual analysis and interactional realities in an attempt to explain the failures of social policies, institutional reforms, and leadership strategies (Argyris and Schön, 1974; Cohen and Lindblom, 1979). They are asking whether there is a mode of knowing, qualitatively different from analytical knowledge, that can help to bridge these gaps between policy and practice in personal and social life.

Through examples of classroom, faculty, and administrative interactions, this chapter moves toward the conclusion that there really is a qualitatively more sophisticated mode of knowing than the ideal of formal academic inquiry, which has guided academic life for the past several centuries, and that the primary challenge to the academy during the next generation will be to explicate and to enact this "living inquiry." But before considering the evidence for this conclusion and before defining interpersonal competence as such, we should examine some of the reasons why the notion of interpersonal competence arouses the suspicion of many members of the university community.

The idea of interpersonal competence probably arouses suspicion because we generally think of competence as the ability to accomplish some *predetermined end* through the *manipulation of materials at hand.* At least some of us, however, feel a moral revulsion at the thought of treating other people as materials or means rather than as ends in themselves. And even if others are treated as ends in themselves, the notion of applying general, predetermined rules of "interpersonal competence" appears at once absurd and dangerous.

From another angle, interpersonal competence suggests a practical ability and perhaps even an anti-intellectual orientation, which, if given a chance, might displace rigorous intellectual education by a much more limited "charm school" kind of training. This anti-intellectual connotation may be reinforced by such historical facts as the name "T-Group" or "Training-Group" for the original process invented to cultivate interpersonal competence; the preeminence of business sponsorship in early research and education relating to interpersonal competence (see, for example, Argyris, 1962); and the tendency for a concern with interpersonal competence to enter academia through "applied" professional programs and adult extension programs rather than through the core liberal arts disciplines (Torbert, 1978).

In addition, interpersonal competence may be suspect, particularly among academics, because it implies explicit treatment of personal and ethical issues rather than the impersonal treatment of ethical dilemmas such as those described in Gilligan's chapter. Formal academic inquiry tends deliberately to avoid these personal and ethical issues in order not to invade people's privacy and in order to develop students' capacity for universalistic, rational inquiry pursued for its own sake.

There can be no doubt that the development of interpersonal competence as an aim of higher education courts the dangers just described—those of *training students narrowly* in some *form of manipulation,* rather than educating them to a widening inquiry, and *invading their privacy* in the course of doing so. Indeed, a series of studies of people's interactional patterns in academia, industry, and government indicate that a narrowly goal-oriented, manipulative interpersonal strategy is virtually universal among adults in their actual practice, whatever their espoused values may be (Argyris, 1969, 1971; Argyris

and Schön, 1974). Paradoxically, however, the very studies that demonstrate the prevalence of this narrow and manipulative strategy also argue strongly that this strategy results in interpersonal *in*competence. Let us examine more closely what these studies show—and what they imply for the development of interpersonal competence as a goal of college.

Two Interpersonal Strategies

The most common interpersonal strategy attempts to maximize one's *manipulative* control over others, while keeping one's own motives and strategies secret so that others cannot easily control one. This interpersonal strategy can be called the *mystery-mastery strategy* (Bakan, 1967; Torbert, 1973), since one seeks to put a veil of mystery over one's own intentions and to master others.

Argyris and Schön (1974) have found that this mystery-mastery strategy is characteristic of virtually all the professionals in their graduate courses, whatever their fields. These professionals often espouse strategies of openness and collaboration, but their descriptions of their actual behavior in job settings (as well as tape recordings and instructors' observations of their behavior in the classroom) reveal a mystery-mastery pattern. The incongruity between what the professionals say they do and what they actually do is usually a complete (and unpleasant) surprise to them. Argyris and Schön (1974) identify four governing variables of this mystery-mastery interpersonal strategy:

1. *Define goals and try to achieve them.* Participants rarely tried to develop with others a mutual definition of purposes; nor did they seem open to being influenced to alter their perception of the task.

2. *Maximize winning and minimize losing.* Participants felt that once they had decided on their goals, changing them would be a sign of weakness.

3. *Minimize generating or expressing negative feelings.* Participants were almost unanimous that generating negative feelings showed ineptness, incompetence, or lack of diplomacy. Permitting or helping others to express their feelings tended to be seen as a poor strategy.

4. *Be rational.* Be objective, intellectual, suppress your feelings, and do not become emotional [pp. 66-67].

Ironically, the very effort at unilateral control, winning, and being rational results, in the long run, in lack of control over one's own time and in feeling emotional about, and victimized by, external pressures. Admittedly, the more institutional and charismatic power represented by the individual, the longer it will appear that his unilateral strategy works—with Hitler perhaps the extreme example both of the possible scope of unilateral control and of the resistance it ultimately crystallizes.

But why, in educational settings, should attempts at unilateral control ultimately result in loss of control? Here is what happens: First, the mystery-mastery strategy engenders strong competition among all participants at an administrative, faculty, or class meeting to control the limited air time, with the result that most people most of the time will feel that they do not have the kind of control they want. Second, the "mystery" part of the strategy prevents participants from clarifying purposes and discovering to what degree they can work cooperatively toward shared purposes, to what degree they can work separately toward different but nonhostile purposes, and to what degree they can resolve conflicts among purposes. The result is an increasing sense of isolation and mutual distrust. Third, both the "mystery" and the "mastery" parts of the strategy keep partici-

pants from publicly noting or personally acknowledging incongruities among purposes, strategies, practices, and effects, thus preventing any valid learning from experience (Torbert, 1973).

As Argyris and Schön argue and demonstrate, the effect of the mystery-mastery strategy on individual and organizational patterns of action is to create a self-sealing, or defensive, rather than a self-correcting interpersonal system of behavior. The very premises upon which the system is built are defensive, in that they effectively exclude the very data that could challenge them. If nobody is willing to take the risk of sharing how he or she really feels and thinks about others, about problems, issues, or the system, the result will be decreasing levels of trust, less risk-taking, less interactive learning, increasing interpersonal incompetence, and increasing sense of victimization by external pressures.

That these problems are not merely hypothetical but rather widely characterize higher education today is suggested by two studies of college presidents. One study reports that college presidents themselves testify that they are unable to direct their major efforts toward the area they perceive as their greatest responsibility—providing a sense of purpose for their institutions (Perkins, 1967). Another study of college presidents gives a concrete sense of why this should be so:

> The president's time is clearly rationed, but very few presidents with whom we talked had a serious sense that *they* were doing the rationing or that there was any particular logic to the resultant distribution of attention. . . . They felt themselves to be the victims of the pressures upon them and the limitations of time and their own energies. . . . Too many "trivial" activities that had to be engaged in. No time for thinking or reading or initiating action [Cohen and March, 1974, p. 134].

But how can a person achieve freedom, control, and fulfillment in the social world without attempting to control situations unilaterally and rationally? Argyris and Schön suggest an alternative interpersonal strategy, the inquiring strategy, which encourages learning from experience and increasing interpersonal competence and which helps to generate a community of inquiry in a given situation. They find that virtually none of their students initially uses this strategy and that learning it is very difficult for them. Argyris and Schön attempt to model this second interpersonal strategy in their own teaching and consulting. They outline the three governing variables of this strategy as follows:

> *Maximize valid information.* The actor provides others with directly observable data about their behavior and correct reports [about his or her own experiencing] so they may make valid attributions about the actor. It also means creating conditions that will lead others to provide directly observable data and correct reports that will enable one to make valid attributions about them.
> *Maximize free and informed choice.* A choice is informed if it is based on relevant information. The more an individual is aware of the values of the variables relevant to his decision, the more likely he is to make an informed choice.
> *Maximize internal commitment to decisions made.* Internal commitment means that the individual feels that he, himself, is responsible for his choices. The individual is committed to an action because it is intrinsically satisfying—not . . . because someone is rewarding or penalizing him to be committed [Argyris and Schön, 1974, pp. 86-89].

This inquiring interpersonal strategy makes designing and managing the environment, as well as protecting each person's freedom and privacy, shared tasks. Argyris and

Schön argue that this inquiring strategy creates the conditions for oneself and others to learn not only specific new ways of behaving that fit one's existing interpersonal strategy but also, and more important, entirely new strategies. In other words, the inquiring interpersonal strategy is actually a kind of meta-strategy, which permits a continuing interactional inquiry, a continuing clarification of purposes, and a continuing reformulation of strategies, as well as a continuing adjustment of specific behaviors to accomplish specific goals.

Problems in Learning a New Interpersonal Strategy

It is important to note that Argyris and Schön's work represents an early, exploratory probe into the unknown territory of interactional inquiry and that many fundamental issues remain unresolved. For example, their concept of valid information focuses heavily on behavioral descriptions of persons' actual practice. This emphasis on actual practice is extremely valuable, since most persons speak and think about action in sloppy, prematurely evaluative terms (for example, "brilliant" or "weak") from which it is difficult to learn how to improve one's practice. At the same time, however, the focus on behavior and the very precept "maximize valid information" cloak the difficulty of determining what aspects of experience (including memories, anticipations, and other texts) deserve to stand out from a given spatial-temporal context as information in the first place. Put differently, the governing variables Argyris and Schön propose for the inquiring interpersonal strategy are offered in universalistic analytical language that provides no clues about timing, about when and how to focus one's attention as they suggest.

Another set of unresolved issues concerns the difficulty of unlearning the mystery-mastery interpersonal strategy and learning the inquiring interpersonal strategy. Argyris and Schön carefully describe the difficulties their professional students have in their one-term course: first, in recognizing the incongruities in their behavior and their general interpersonal incompetence; second, in inventing genuinely alternative kinds of behavioral experiments rather than other variants of the mystery-mastery strategy; and third, in learning to produce these new behaviors fluently in everyday life.

The difficulty of learning a fundamentally new interpersonal strategy becomes more comprehensible if one compares it to the task of learning a new musical instrument or learning an entirely new approach to formal scientific research after one has mastered one methodology and used it for years. One can easily imagine that it may take years of intensive practice to become fluent in the playing of the new instrument or the implementation of the new methodology. In India, one studies the sitar twenty-one years before one can be considered a master. Learning a new interpersonal strategy is more difficult because the old strategy is even more intimately a part of one's sense of identity than an instrument. Furthermore, one is constantly reinforcing one's old strategy in every passing encounter with others, whereas, at least initially, one is likely to set aside only occasional times to practice the new strategy. Moreover, since the inquiring interpersonal strategy is really a meta-strategy, one is called upon to learn not one new strategy but many.

The task of learning the inquiring interpersonal strategy requires more than just a course or two, though courses can certainly help to initiate such learning. What is needed is a community of inquiry—a lifetime circle of friends who can help clarify, and when necessary challenge, each other's purposes and actions. Teachers of interpersonal competence must encourage dedicated students to cultivate such lifetime friendships in inquiry.

Granted, this is a difficult task in an age of mobility, dispersonal, and short-term relationships.

The foregoing comments bring to the surface still another issue—the power and ethical responsibility of a teacher of interpersonal competence. Argyris and Schön discuss the importance of openly acknowledging that the teacher is likely to be more competent interpersonally than the students and is therefore likely to be treated as a model. At the same time, they discuss the importance of the teacher's acting in ways that minimize students' continuing dependence. Argyris and Schön also make the general point that the more teachers use their power to encourage an inquiring interpersonal strategy in others, the more their class learning systems become self-correcting rather than self-sealing, and therefore the more likely is any abuse of power to be confronted. Yet they also appreciate the fact that to use power in a way that forces students to adopt the inquiring strategy is to contradict the governing variables of the inquiring strategy itself. How to maintain the paradoxical balances implied by these dilemmas of power requires continuing study by anyone who takes leadership responsibility in an organizing process that includes among its aims the development of interpersonal competence.

One way of approaching the question of what kinds of inquiry are relevant when is to think of human interaction as occurring across three "layers" of reality: (1) task, (2) process, and (3) purpose. Ordinarily, discussion focuses on the particular task at hand, taking for granted the process, or norms and structures of appropriate behavior, and the purpose, or general definition of the situation (Torbert, 1976b). Indeed, in general, the mystery-mastery interpersonal strategy treats the doing of a given task as the only layer of reality appropriate for public discussion. (Certain theories of family therapy are based on the "tangles" among layers that can result from this interpersonal strategy [Bateson, 1972; Laing, 1962; Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, 1967]). Strategies to change the norms or the definition of a situation are pursued privately and covertly. But one can well imagine that different persons in a given situation in fact take different norms for granted, or that a situation in fact has no clear, shared definition. In such cases, the whole group might benefit by temporarily turning its attention from the *task* itself to the *process* of the group (for example, the norms one can infer from members' patterns of behavior), or to the *purpose* of the group (for example, the personal, political, or epistemological presuppositions that frame members' sense of purpose and define the situation for them).

Thus, an inquiring interpersonal strategy requires developing skills of observation, formulation, and expression at all three "layers" of interpersonal life. It also requires a sense of timing, to be able to gauge when it may be beneficial to the group to refocus discussion on another "layer." (The literature on group dynamics offers many insights into process issues likely to require attention at different periods of a group's history. See Bennis, 1964; Bion, 1961; Culbert, 1968; Dunphy, 1968; Mann, 1966; Mills, 1964.)

In general, most ongoing groups can best learn how to manage the "process" and "purpose" layers of their interaction by beginning with the "process" layer. For, as Argyris and Schön (1974) point out, the patterns of behavior inferred at the process level are based on evidence directly available to other members of the immediate group, so that conflicting interpretations can, to some extent, be resolved through closer inspection of the behavior in question. (Argyris, 1971, presents the most systematic discussion of process intervention strategies currently available. See also Beckhart, 1969, and Schein, 1969.) By contrast, discussion of the "purpose" layer often requires reference to longer-term, more abstract personal career patterns and institutional histories, and the evidence

tends to be less accessible both to individuals themselves and to the group as a whole. A fruitful exploration of this layer requires the ability to shift focus between layers as necessary, and a high level of trust in a group.

Obviously, narrow training in a few interpersonal skills can become the basis for "one-upping" others rather than seeking a genuine collaborative inquiry. Erving Goffman (1974) sees this danger in *all* academic efforts to develop interpersonal competence:

> In several of the social sciences, instructors have come to occasionally turn their classes into arenas for the display of "group processes," the understanding being that live demonstrations are better than organized lecturing on related topics. In the manner of group psychotherapy, various roles (or "games") can be defined, the instructor directing attention to actual illustrations. The social organization of classroom activity can thus be uncovered, as well, perhaps, as features of discussion groups in general; the trouble is, of course, that that is *all* that can be done. Every topic becomes reduced to one. And incidentally, a lecture does not have to be prepared, nor need criticism of what occurs be treated at face value, since it becomes a topic of consideration, too [p. 411].

Goffman's fascinating analysis of how persons frame situations, from which the foregoing quotation is taken, reinforces the thesis advanced here that the socially prevalent mystery-mastery interpersonal strategy leaves the norms and frames of situations publicly undiscussed. Under these conditions, the norms and frames are susceptible to accidental breaks and private manipulations, but not to collaborative control. Interestingly enough, Goffman himself evidently does not recognize the possibility of collaborative control over purpose, process, and task, with appropriate shifting of attention among these layers in order to enhance *whatever* is at stake. Instead, he proposes that once group process becomes a legitimate topic, that is *all* that can be discussed. Clearly, the conclusion of this proposition does not necessarily follow from the premise. Nevertheless, it is certainly true that focusing on group process *may* be used as a way to avoid more serious inquiry and criticism.

Definition and Illustrations of Interpersonal Competence

The foregoing discussion of two interpersonal strategies—the prevailing mystery-mastery strategy and the alternative inquiring strategy—sets the stage for a formal definition of interpersonal competence. This definition strives to avoid the dangers of confusing interpersonal competence with a narrow manipulative skill.

Interpersonal competence can be defined as the capacity in one's work and play with others:

- To clarify, to formulate, and to do what one wishes
- To test for and correct incongruities among wish (purpose), formulation (theory or strategy), action (interactive process), and effect
- To help others do the same, given the limits of mutual commitment

Several implications are crowded into this short definition. First, the phrase "in one's work and play with others" suggests that interpersonal competence is an interactive social competence and not merely a kind of intellectual competence. Second, the phrase "to clarify, to formulate, and to do what one wishes" suggests that interpersonal competence is not merely skill in accomplishing predefined tasks but rather includes the practices of discovering what one wishes and defining (formulating) the tasks to be done.

Third, the phrase "to test for and correct incongruities among wish, formulation, action, and effect; and to help others do the same" suggests that interpersonal competence depends not so much on wielding social influence over others as on creating a social climate of inquiry, a social climate in which one can increasingly count on receiving truthful information from others about one's effects on them, as well as exploratory criticisms about possible ambiguities or incongruities among one's purpose, strategy, and action. Fourth, the phrase "given the limits of mutual commitment" suggests that no one particular kind of interpersonal behavior is always better than some other. Rather, one's choice of behavior must be guided by a concern for the boundaries and rhythms of the particular relationship in question—as well as by the foregoing principles. In short, interpersonal competence, by this definition, is not at all a matter of manipulating others successfully in order to achieve one's unexamined ends. Rather, interpersonal competence is a matter of creating a social climate of inquiry, which aids in clarifying both personal and communal purposes and relationships as well as in accomplishing specific tasks.

That the inquiring interpersonal strategy can result in the shared control of a situation and the clarification of purpose is illustrated by a classroom situation in which faculty members confronted one another, rather than "one-upping" students, and initiated first a "process-focusing intervention" and then a "purpose-focusing intervention," while not excluding further work on predetermined tasks. This classroom situation was the first meeting of an introductory undergraduate business course dedicated to preparing students to become self-directed, quality-conscious entrepreneurs. The challenge to the four-member course faculty and the twelve undergraduate teaching assistants was heightened by the scale of the course: 360 students. (How does one "batch process" 360 students toward self-direction?) As the course proceeded, students broke into small work groups and eventually contracted to do collaboratively determined projects as they gained sufficient skills in self-management. The introductory meetings were held in a large auditorium, with all 376 course members. The following description of the first meeting is offered by one of the four course faculty members:

> The staff had organized a multimedia "show" in an initial attempt to convey the special qualities of the course. This show included not only the usual media—such as music, movies, and slide-tapes—which render the "audience" passive, but also such additional media as conversation and decision making, which render everyone participant. At some point in the sequence—after the laughter at the Frankenstein slides that accompanied the interviewed student's description of the previous term's course as monstrous, after the groaning that greeted the announcement of an exam on the assigned reading next week, and after applause for the Alleluia chorus accompanying a movie about the raising of a plastic, student-built coffee house the previous spring—one of the faculty members, using an overhead projector, introduced a series of statistical tables as part of his explanation that active, experimenting students enjoyed and learned more from the course than passive students.
>
> Perhaps the incongruity between the message and the medium was too great in this case, although I seriously doubt that any of the students consciously analyzed the discrepancy. In any event, the previous balance of tension and excitement quickly began to dissipate into irate confusion, inattention, and side conversations as the faculty member talked. After questioning what was appropriate for what felt like an eon, I interrupted my colleague, causing an immediate, shocked stillness among all 380 persons in the auditorium. But the other faculty member said he would finish briefly and continued, to growing grumbles of discontent. I interrupted again, more forcefully, and this time he actually listened to

what was going on and stopped. One of the teaching assistants began to introduce the film of the steel foundry research team of which he had been a member the previous spring, but this time a third member of the faculty interrupted to suggest we discuss the previous incident for a few moments, since he saw it as symbolic of the courage, skill, and mutual trust required to learn in action.

While the rest of the evening was entertaining and informative, a skeptical person might dismiss it as slick public relations. This incident, by contrast, could alert students to the possibility that they were encountering a rare sort of social system dedicated to something beyond short-term goals, easily definable objectives, and saving face. In their first learning paper two weeks later, more students spontaneously referred to this incident than to any other event in the course [Torbert, 1978, pp. 122-123].

In the foregoing classroom scenario, the narrator's first two interventions seek to shift the focus of attention from the content of the statistical tables to the process of the class (on the grounds that most persons' attention has already shifted from the content). Then, the next intervention by the third faculty member seeks to shift the focus of attention from the ongoing agenda to the way in which the previous incident symbolizes the overall purposes of the course. In both cases, the comments are qualitatively different from the presentations they interrupt in that they tie the issues being discussed into what is actually happening in the discussion itself. Thus, to the degree that these comments are accurate and timely, they represent not so much interruptions in accomplishing the evening's task as shortcuts to accomplishing it. In both cases, also, these comments move, not in the direction of accomplishing a predefined external task in a particular way, but rather in the direction of encouraging a shared awareness and responsibility for what is actually at stake in the first place. Such comments, although they are primarily educational rather than visibly productive, may well lead to profound changes in visible patterns of accomplishment.

In the case of the foregoing scenario, the story seems to end happily: the two interventions do seem to increase the effectiveness of the occasion—that is, the degree of congruity between purpose and outcome, if only by gaining the students' attention. Of course, the narration is not detailed enough to allow us to make any conclusive judgments about the effectiveness of the interventions. Nevertheless, it is just such partial perspectives with which the person acting in any ongoing situation must work. Thus, the first intervenor in the foregoing scenario could not know what the response would be to the intervention, nor that another intervention would shortly influence the meaning of the first.

In the absence of the kind of public discussion here exemplified—discussion that can move back and forth dialectically, testing for and increasing congruity among original purposes, present practices, and future task goals, particular tasks will tend to become dissociated from ultimate purposes. Such dissociation between purposes and tasks confuses, lowers, and externalizes participants' motivation to perform (see Argyris, 1973; Bowles and Gintis, 1975; Torbert, 1972) and eventually generates institutional results that contradict the original purposes (Warner and Havens, 1968).

For example, in the following classroom scenario a seminar is studying one of Plato's dialogues. The teacher would almost certainly say that one of the purposes of the class session itself is to generate an educational dialogue among the class members; yet the teacher's mystery-mastery interpersonal strategy precludes such dialogue.

The Chairman lays his coat down carefully, takes a chair on the opposite side of the large round table, sits, and then brings out an old pipe and stuffs it for

what must be nearly half a minute. One can see he has done this many times before.

In a moment of attention to the class he studies faces with a smiling hypnotic gaze, sensing the mood, but feeling it is not just right. He stuffs the pipe some more, but without hurry.

Soon the moment arrives, he lights the pipe, and before long there is in the classroom an odor of smoke.

At last he speaks:

"It is my understanding," he says, "that today we are to begin discussion of the immortal *Phaedrus.*" He looks at each student separately. "Is that correct?"

Members of the class assure him timidly that it is. His persona is overwhelming.

The Chairman now directs a question to the student next to Phaedrus. He is baiting him a little, provoking him to attack.

The student doesn't attack, and the Chairman with great disgust and frustration finally dismisses him with a rebuke that he should have read the material better.

Phaedrus' turn. He has calmed down tremendously. He must now explain the dialogue.

"If I may be permitted to begin again in my own way," he says, partly to conceal the fact that he didn't hear what the previous student said.

The Chairman, seeing this as a further rebuke to the student next to him, smiles and says contemptuously it is certainly a good idea.

Phaedrus proceeds. "I believe that in this dialogue the person of Phaedrus is characterized as a *wolf.*"

He has delivered this quite loudly, with a flash of anger, and the Chairman almost jumps. Score!

"Yes," the Chairman says, and a gleam in his eye shows he now recognizes who his bearded assailant is. "*Phaedrus* in Greek does mean 'wolf.' That's a very acute observation." He begins to recover his composure. "Proceed."

"Phaedrus meets Socrates, *who knows only the ways of the city,* and leads him into the country, whereupon he begins to recite a speech of the orator, Lysias, whom he admires. Socrates asks him to read it and Phaedrus does."

"Stop!" says the Chairman, who has now completely recovered his composure. "You are giving us the plot, not the dialogue." He calls on the next student.

None of the students seems to know to the Chairman's satisfaction what the dialogue is about. And so with mock sadness he says they must all read more thoroughly but this time he will help them by taking on the burden of explaining the dialogue himself. This provides an overwhelming relief to the tension he has so carefully built up and the entire class is in the palm of his hand [Pirsig, 1974, pp. 385-388].

A keen awareness of the interplay between content, process, and purpose is necessary in order to penetrate the meaning of Plato's dialogues, for the dramatic situations and the relationships among the speakers all bear on the issues at stake (Anderson, 1976). For example, in the *Lysias,* a dialogue about friendship, the speakers end the dialogue without a shared definition of friendship, yet the process of the dialogue itself has made them friendly (Brumbaugh, 1962). Thus, if we are attentive, we can learn more from these dialogues than what the speakers say. Ironically, the teacher in the foregoing situation is so dedicated to displaying his mastery that he utterly fails to generate an educational dialogue within the seminar itself wherein the purposes, the process, and the text become mutually illuminating. Thus, he offers the students no direct experience in culti-

vating the quality of attentiveness necessary to follow the interplay of purpose, process, and task. The narrator of this excerpt, however, shows considerable appreciation for this interplay by what he chooses to describe, and by his capacity in the seminar itself to enact the wolf's role even as he analyzes it.

Developing the capacity to carry on a public discussion that moves back and forth dialectically among purposes, processes, and tasks, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, clearly requires practice. To take one very specific, microscopic example: In groups where members operate according to the mystery-mastery interpersonal strategy, members interrupt one another far more frequently than they help others to express what they are trying to say (Argyris, 1969). This pattern contributes to a competitive, threatening atmosphere in which participants hesitate to express their perceptions about what is going on. Consequently, one important exercise for someone seeking to increase his or her interpersonal competence and to encourage social atmospheres of inquiry would be to practice helping others to express what they wish to say rather than interrupting them with one's own agenda. However, a person who *never* interrupts others is not necessarily more interpersonally competent than one who does. One aim of practicing not to interrupt is to learn how to interrupt justly. Indeed, both of the interventions in the first classroom scenario are, in a behavioral sense, interruptions. These interruptions, however, are not intended to replace one person's agenda by another person's agenda but rather to inquire whether the existing process is effectively achieving the purposes of the overall occasion.

Components of Interpersonal Competence

One can identify three general kinds of interpersonal behavior that promote the inquiring mode of interaction—namely, self-disclosure, supportiveness, and confrontation (Torbert, 1973). In *self-disclosure*, one expresses and questions one's own experiencing, treating any judgment or evaluation that is offered as part of one's own experience rather than as a universal truth (Culbert, 1968; Jourard, 1968). *Supportiveness* encourages another to express his or her experiencing, not necessarily by agreeing with what the other says but simply by expressing empathy for the other's experience, sharing and reflecting their feelings (Rogers, 1961; Truax and Carkhuff, 1967). *Confrontation* involves juxtaposing two aspects of experience that seem to be incongruous with one another, such as another person's behavior compared with his or her espoused strategy or a group's use of time compared with a deadline it has set itself. The apparent opposition is posed as a dilemma that may require further exploration by all parties concerned.

The fluid and timely interplay of these three kinds of inquiring behavior permits a group to gather the data and make the judgments necessary to control its destiny. Indeed, the inquiring interpersonal strategy gives a person or group access to information about, and judgments bearing on, not only the technical issues relevant to the accomplishment of some predefined task but also the political issues relevant to defining that task. Thus, the inquiring strategy increases the potential range of control of a group. But because these three inquiring kinds of verbal behavior are so different from the more familiar mystery-mastery behavior and because collaborative control is so different from attempts at unilateral control and the resulting competitive bargaining, attempts to learn the inquiring mode may often make people feel as if they are losing control altogether.

Instead of taking part in a social game that seems completely predefined because the rules and the incongruities remain largely implicit, persons may find themselves in a situation where the rules of the game and even the very name of the game may be explic-

itly questioned. How disorienting this experience can feel is suggested by the following comment of a T-group participant two hours after the beginning of the group. Having early on vigorously proposed a program for the evening that met with little enthusiasm and having then lapsed into silence, he was later asked why he had ceased participating:

> I'm trapped. I kind of see what you are doing, just discovering where your immediate feelings, responses, and changed feelings are leading you, what kind of pattern is growing. I can see that my proposal was really a game for structuring our time so I wouldn't have to worry about what we were doing. But that's how my mind works—in games, and I can't say anything now because saying a feeling seems so artificial to me—like a game [Torbert, 1970, p. 10].

Such ambivalent and often awkward attempts on the part of persons accustomed to the mystery-mastery mode to understand the inquiry mode can be called *exploration of structure* (Torbert, 1973). Each particular event that invites existential social exploration becomes a confrontation of the entire mystery-mastery structure of reality. Such exploration reveals vulnerability (anathema to the mystery-mastery strategy) and requires inquiring relationships of tested trust (impossible to develop through the mystery-mastery strategy). To help another pass through this difficult transitional process requires a most compassionate and intelligent interplay of supportiveness, self-disclosure, and confrontation.

The following scenario illustrates these three kinds of inquiring behavior. Many of the early comments in the conversation are parenthetically identified as self-disclosing, supportive, or confronting. The scenario portrays a meeting of the seven-member, interracial administrative staff of an educational project. This administrative staff has agreed to several such "research" meetings in order to plan a faculty recruitment process, develop sufficient interpersonal competence to be able to choose interpersonally competent faculty, and clarify tasks and relationships within the administrative staff itself.

> Each member of the staff filled out and shared a job application form being developed for potential new staff members. One of its questions asked the applicant to describe the strengths and weaknesses of his or her interpersonal style. This question led to a conversation about Valery's style, when Grace asked how the rest of the staff reacted to a phrase Valery had included in her application, to the effect that "in general I am silently agreeable."
>
> Tim responded, "My reaction was that I agreed she was silent, but I wondered whether she was agreeable. To mention something I feel guilty about: in the past most of her time has been spent with books, forms, etc., and my feeling was, how easy to let her do it." [self-disclosure]
>
> "I was comfortable on that point, Valery," continued Patricia, "because I thought you were hired to do all those things, to be a sort of secretary, and I couldn't understand why you were dissatisfied." [self-disclosure] [This latter point referred to a meeting the past week, when, in redividing jobs for the winter and spring, Valery had said she would prefer not to continue handling all the bookkeeping.]
>
> Valery laughed nervously, as Patricia finished, "So now, months later, I don't know what you were hired for."
>
> A pause yielded no further response from Valery, so Tim asked, "Do you expect to continue to be silent?"
>
> "No," she offered. Another pause. "You are being," from Tim. [confrontation] Another pause.
>
> "What I can't imagine now" [this from Jim] "is not so much your being silent as your being agreeable. That is, I hear a number of conflicting things being said about you. I don't see how you could agree with all." [confrontation]

"I thought I'd made that clear: I said in general I'm agreeable, but then there's this." [confrontation]

"Yes, that's a good point," Jim replied, somewhat uncomfortable because his rather patronizing attempt to help her see a pattern in her behavior had misfired. "I'd be interested in hearing what you saw yourself hired for, what you saw as our original agreement, and how you felt about me." [self-disclosure]

"When I was hired, it was really unclear," she replied immediately, as though liberated by the specificity of his questions. "You were out there, I was in here—it had to be done—there was no one else to do it. But I thought this was just a matter of beginning, as I think I told you. Then, partly because we had no secretary . . . and I had started it, and no one else really wanted to do it, and who *was* going to do it? Now I'm working with the students . . . How I feel about you? Well, I guess I answered that." [self-disclosure]

"No, I don't feel you did. I heard you say 'I was stuck with it' and I can infer 'I was stuck with it by Jim.' But that's not the way you put it. I wondered what your feeling was towards me." [confrontation]

"Well, initially yes, by you, but other people came in and could have done it—little things. . . ."

"Yes?" [supportive]

"Valery," began Grace.

"I'm sorry, I want to hear *this*," Jim cut in. [supportive interruption]

". . . it was so strong, and no one else would do it, and it was necessary to do it. There's some things that you just have to do."

Grace reentered: "I wanted to ask how did you feel when I came into the office and said could you teach me this stuff. You probably thought I was unteachable. I was anxious to take some of it off your shoulders."

"Well, at that point, well, it was about the same thing, Grace. There were some things you were less interested by, and you said let's do them together. Which is about the same thing as doing it by myself, because that's just how I see it."

Now Patricia: "I want to apologize first of all because I have certainly treated you as if you had this job. Specifically last week, for instance, I made a request of you about changing my check."

"Right."

"You know why I'm sorry, Valery? That you couldn't say to me, Patricia, that's not my job, but here's who you contact and you do it."

"That's because you needn't apologize," replied Valery, "because you're not the only one, and I didn't really correct that."

Then Tim: "What bothered me was that I just carved out my job as I wished it and I couldn't say I didn't know what Valery's job really was."

And Rob: "As a matter of fact, when Greg interviewed me for the job he asked could I type, and I said not well, and he said *would* I type, and I said I would, and he said because we don't have a secretary, and that's the basis on which I first came. I do remember that I did some typing, but you clearly were doing more work on the books."

And Jim: "Other members of the staff *have* carved out jobs for themselves, and I guess I feel more comfortable with that than I do about the situation with you because I feel that your attitude invites us to impose on you, when you say, 'Some things have to be done.' I don't regard the world that way. I don't think anything *has* to be done. I mean that in the broadest possible sense."

Reflectively, Valery concluded the meeting with, "I didn't set a path for myself when I came. It was there and I took it, and I guess it should have been my responsibility to say to Jim, 'I want to change it.' "

After this meeting, her job did change. During the spring and summer she

coordinated work on the books rather than doing it all herself, and she took on primary responsibility for student admissions in the spring and for contact with parents during the summer [adapted from Torbert, 1976a, pp. 96-98].

In the foregoing excerpt, a number of purposes are being clarified and served simultaneously. The administrative staff is learning how to use the application forms to generate interview material with potential applicants. The staff is also clarifying and re-solving some of its own relational dilemmas. Moreover, the group is attentive to its own living process, finding examples of the issue at stake (Valery's "silent agreeableness") in the conversation itself. The modes of self-disclosure, confrontation, and supportiveness help the conversation to gain focus and to keep a space open for Valery to enter it more actively than she customarily has. Gradually, all the members, including Valery, come to see how they interact to reinforce Valery's sense of powerlessness. In the second half of the conversation, Valery ceases to be "silently agreeable" and comes to take responsibil-ity for the role she has played in structuring her job as it is. As a result of the meeting, she begins to redefine her job in collaboration with the rest of the staff; the staff as a whole gains experience in how to work with a job applicant in an interview; and the staff as a whole gains more control over the political process through which it works. It is worth noting that there is little discussion of abstract principles in this excerpt, yet members are obviously thinking abstractly about when to say what and how in a complex collaborative inquiry.

Compare the foregoing, relatively inquiring conversation with the following, much more dogmatic one, in which abstract principles are bandied about like weapons rather than used to discipline one's own behavior intelligently and to help others to learn. The following conversation is taken from a meeting among students and faculty at Black Mountain College in the 1930s. Two faculty members have just been fired, and a number of students and other faculty are arguing for a more democratic decision-making process against the founder of the school, named Rice:

Rice's reply was curt—and revealing: "There are also some people who are incompetent to have opinions." He went on to make acid reference to "the sud-den rise of democrats" at Black Mountain and to state unequivocally that he didn't believe "democracy in the sense of counting noses is right." When he had referred earlier to a majority of the community agreeing with the recent decisions of the Board, he had meant, of course, a majority of the "intelligent."

"*You* determine that?" George Alsberg, one of the dissident students, shot back.

"I do," Rice answered. "I can only test intelligence by intelligence."

Alsberg persisted: "How do you determine how a person is intelligent?"

"I could not make you understand, George."

"Do you understand?"

"Yes."

James Gore King, temperamentally unsuited to confrontation, tried to bring the meeting back to some neutral ground. "Ought we not," he asked bland-ly, "to find a criterion for gauging 'the majority of intelligence?' " Rice was short with him: "You're not going to get to it by any mechanical means."

At this point George stepped in to say that he agreed "a vote does not necessarily represent the best solution" for establishing community opinion. But he then added—lest Rice think he had an ally from an unexpected quar-ter—that voting "had no more disadvantages ... than the method of trying to sample intelligent opinion. If I sampled it, it would not agree with Mr. Rice's sam-pling."

"That is true," Rice acknowledged, the tongue just slightly noticeable in his cheek.

"So I think," George went on, "there are objections to both methods. But this group is one in which people have a certain amount of intelligence. I would be more willing to rely upon a majority decision of the group, after proper discussion, than this hit-or-miss sampling."

Rice picked up the last remark and turned it to his own purposes. The device of majority vote, he said, was in fact the embodiment of "mere chance." The two important functions which the Board performed—appointments to the faculty and college finances—could not be left to the judgments of those who might lack the capacity to make them. "In any kind of society you should try to get the best people to perform the jobs which they can perform. The matter of judgment of people is a very delicate thing and one which also requires experience, as a rule. Some people are born with a gift for it, others never acquire it."

"But I believe I've heard you say," George Alsberg answered, "that the students are very good judges of their teachers . . . that as a rule, the students, taken as a group, were usually right about a teacher."

"Yes, George, about his teaching ability," Rice replied. "But there are much more important things which enter into this question."

Alsberg had no trouble shifting gears: "Do you think that teachers are better able than students to judge people as personalities?"

"I have not said that," Rice answered. He had only meant, he explained, that he would want to know who the judges are. "If you want a specific instance, I would say that I am a better judge of who ought to teach on this faculty than you are."

All that Alsberg managed to get out was, "Well, I disagree" [Duberman, 1973, pp. 129-131].

Rice may be perfectly right, in a formal sense, in some or all of his pronouncements. He is also self-disclosing and confronting in a conventional sense (for example, "I would say that I am a better judge of who ought to teach on this faculty than you are."). But his behavior is profoundly unintelligent and ineffective from the point of view of encouraging inquiry into who is more or less intelligent or how decisions at the school are or ought to be made. Instead, he provokes a highly polarized and defensive debate, seeking, or so it would seem from his behavior, to win points rather than to create a mutually educative climate. His behavior is not at all self-disclosing and confronting as these terms have been defined above because he does not describe his own experiencing but only his evaluations (for example, "I am a better judge"). Nor does he describe others' behavior by comparison with any standards. It might be fair to infer from his behavior here that one way he measures intelligence is by "quickness and sharpness of verbal retort." If only someone present at the discussion had had the perceptiveness to make this inference, the courage to confront Rice with it, thus testing its validity, and the perspicacity to ask whether such a definition is really intelligent! From the point of view that sees the encouragement of inquiry as the most convincing expression of intelligence, the answer to such a question would clearly be no.

Developing Interpersonal Competence Through Living Inquiry

Whereas formal inquiry is for the most part concerned with theoretical and empirical knowledge about phenomena occurring outside of the present moment, living inquiry begins with attention to one's experiencing in the present moment. To be lost in thought, no matter how profound, is not to be engaged in living inquiry. Living inquiry

requires an attention that includes simultaneously what one is focusing on in the outside world, one's own perceptions and actions, the conceptual-emotional-political patterns at play in the present situation (including memories of the past and projections into the future), and the movements of attention itself (Torbert, 1973).

Living inquiry includes theoretical and empirical inquiry, but it focuses on the participants' own actions and purposes. Only through an inquiry that includes one's own actions can one possibly learn how to act more effectively. Only through an inquiry that includes the very movements of one's own attention can one learn what one's purposes are. Only through an inquiry that includes one's wishes, strategies, actions, and effects can one possibly become interpersonally competent, according to the definition offered in this chapter. Only through an inquiry this broad and this immediate can one explore the relationship between purposes and outcomes.

Socially, living inquiry generates a community of inquiry, a community in which the reigning definition of any situation (the myth or purpose, for example), the social norms and practices of the participants, and the value of outcomes are all subject to question (Torbert, 1976b).

Epistemologically, living inquiry generates an action science that

- Includes the inquirer within the field of observation
- Creates a structure for inquiry into axioms, theories, research instruments, and data as the study progresses, rather than starting with a predetermined method whose axioms are taken for granted
- Treats interruptions and conflicts as opportunities to test the validity of existing structures and axioms of inquiry
- Is interested in general, universalizable knowledge only to the degree that such knowledge aids in the development of a personal, social, and ecological knowledge uniquely relevant to the time and place of the ongoing study and action (Torbert, 1977a)

These three aspects of living inquiry—the kind of personal attention necessary, the kind of social community necessary, and the kind of scientific inquiry necessary—each require and foster one another. Moreover, all three of these aspects of living inquiry both foster and require interpersonal competence, as it is defined in this chapter.

Although formal education at present occasionally permits students to develop beyond dichotomous ("right-wrong") thinking (see Perry's chapter in this book) and beyond equally dichotomous ("good-bad") conventional moral judgments (see Gilligan's chapter), it generally reinforces dichotomous thinking and judgment in students, faculty members, and administrators. Formal education has this effect because of its fundamental assumptions about individual intelligence and learning, its fundamental axioms of logic and scientific methodology, and its myths about what constitutes institutional effectiveness. Individual intelligence itself is defined, through IQ tests and most other classroom tests, in terms of a student's competence at instrumental reasoning. Students are given predefined, cognitive problems with right and wrong answers, not ambiguous, experiential dilemmas with a variety of unique solutions.

Institutionally, the vast preponderance of higher education is currently organized in the bureaucratic, predefined productivity mode (Torbert, 1974, 1976a), with dichotomous criteria of success and failure, symbolized in the everyday life of students by the omnipresent bivariate grading system (whether in numerical, alphabetical, or categorical terms). Epistemologically, formal reasoning in philosophy and the sciences tends still to be based, not on temporally dynamic, dialectical logics, but on Aristotle's explicitly static

and dichotomous logic, with its Law of Contradiction and its Law of the Excluded Middle (Mitroff, 1974, 1978). Thus, in psychological and pedagogical terms, in sociological and institutional terms, and in logical and epistemological terms, formal education as we now know it tends to inhibit persons from developing beyond Piaget's "formal operations" stage—beyond dichotomous thinking to dialectical thinking in action (Arlin, 1975; Gilligan and Murphy, 1978; Perry, 1968; Riegel, 1973).

The development of interpersonal competence, as it is defined in this chapter, requires a dialectical transcendence of formal education, not its rejection. Interpersonal competence involves a continuing dialogue between theory and practice, between the objective and the subjective, between the personal and the political, between the eternal and the timely. Interpersonal competence requires a commitment to inquiry far beyond that involved in facing up to logical contradictions; it requires the commitment to face up to existential and political contradictions in one's own life with others and to work toward a methodology for resolving them, rather than beginning with a predetermined methodology. Higher education can aid in the development of such an interpersonal competence only to the degree that it transcends both the ideal and the practice of formal inquiry for the still higher ideal and the far subtler practice of living inquiry.

Conclusion

The application of the sciences and their various technologies to social life during the past two centuries has transformed civilization, arming humankind with awesome powers. We now recognize that knowledge itself is a source of wealth and power (Loebl, 1976). But we can also see that such knowledge, wealth, and power can be used for either good or evil. Now the question facing humankind is whether we can discover a kind of knowledge directly related to our own practices with others—not a disembodied, technical knowledge but a personal, political knowledge that can help us to act more responsibly and humanely. Both Marxian and Freudian analysis represent early attempts in Western social theory to move beyond formal inquiry to living inquiry, but each focuses more heavily on a particular theory of social process than on the path by which people can come to see social process for themselves. Whereas in earlier times humankind sought to domesticate nature through technology, today technology is itself part of the environment we seek to domesticate, and we recognize that we ourselves are the most dangerous and least appreciated members of the world we seek to know. Past social theories and practices have imprisoned humankind in too narrow arenas. Only living inquiry opens us to realms wide enough to encompass our higher education in the age we now face.

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