Educational change lies in realm of human relationships

By PHIL GARON

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St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, usually evokes an image of the antiquated, ivy-covered campus where great minds are fired by the lofty thoughts derived from the "100 Great Books of the Western World."

And so it has been, at least until this past summer, when St. John's became the site of a unique experience in education and group dynamics. I was fortunate enough to be involved in this experience.

Along with 17 other journalists from college papers across the country I had been entered to spend my summer in Annapolis at a summer seminar on "Tenses in higher education" of relevance to the collegiate press.

The Group
A grant for $35,000 had been secured from the Carnegie Corporation, a foundation known for "thinking young" and taking an avid interest in student projects, by the U.S. Student Press Association, whose concerns lie not only with the problems of the college press but with the diverse changes taking place in American education.

The grant paid the transportation and living expenses for as diverse a group of people as anyone could assemble. They came from all over—the University of Hawaii and the University of Pennsylvania; from the Seven Sisters and the Ivy League; from the multiversities of Berkeley, Michigan and Colorado; and from the small liberal arts schools.

"The Group," as we became known, was housed in a small dorm on campus, boys and girls living together without hours or chaperoning. Two advisors were present, however: Eila Dardovitch, the 22 year old Director of Higher Education Seminars for USIPA, and Ken Winter, former managing editor of the Michigan Daily who is the graduate student school of psychology at Michigan this fall.

Training Sessions
The format laid out was rather sketchy, and we were told not to develop anything being made on us to produce papers for us, that all work would be done at our own initiative, using the library of higher education that had been assembled in a lounge for our convenience.

A social psychologist from the NYU staff told us during our first week, putting us through a series of "G-groups," or training sessions, designed to sensitize us to the reactions of other group members and make us aware of how much power each of us could exert over such a collection of people. This "therapy for normals" involved sitting around a table for 3 and 3 hour stretches talking about any subject, interrupted occasionally by comments from the trainer such as "Is this really what you want to be talking about? Are some of you bored?"

In time the level of conversation became increasingly personal as facades and modernity were dropped while members grappled for self-realization. After a week of what one member described as "quailing your guts on the table," we had developed a strong sense of camaraderie and group loyalty. Then we were turned loose.

Unstructured Discussion
The T-group awakened many members to the values of "unstructured discussion," which several participants thought might be highly applicable to classes in a university. It also gave us our group ethos: spontaneity and truthfulness. People were encouraged to simply walk out of a discussion that was uninteresting to them and to have no reluctance about telling anyone that he was a tremendous bore or that his ideas were inane and not worthy of any consideration.

As people became increasingly motivated a score of "manifestos" appeared, much like Herzog's "letters" to the outside world. These lengthy dissertations were on a variety of subjects about which an individual felt strongly opinionated. Some examples:

On grades: "Grades should be disposed of entirely. It is unfortunate, that in our educational system, they are given for all the wrong reasons: anxiety-ridden parents, graduate school and the army."

IBM Persons
On lecture courses: "They really aren't worth a damn. At my university (a state school with overcrowded classes) there's no contact between professor and student. You're not a person, you're an IBM card, and your ideas become meaningless."

On required courses: "If required courses are not done away with, a person at the college age should not be bored down with required courses which are neither interest nor helpful. You can cram education down anyone's throat."

On dorm hours: "Colleges have no business playing in local politics. The college years are supposed to prepare the student not only for living in an adult world, and dormitory hours don't encourage this type of independence."

Riverside Seminars
These mimeographed manifestos were handed out to the group and were sometimes rather caustic. This "This is a lot of garbage," This was usually taken for constructive criticism by the accused, who sought to understand why others imputed his motives as they did.

Groups formed and met by a small campus to hold "riverside seminars" on topics which had aroused interest such as a "non-university" which seemed so nebulous as to require non-people.

Several resource people were invited to visit, but on the condition they would come to discuss problems and not pontificate. Answering the call were people such as Harold Taylor, former president of Sarah Lawrence College and a man with ideas about a possible world university; Paul Lauter, a former English professor at Smith who had taken his ideas about unstructured discussion into the South, where he spearheaded the establishment of Freedom Schools; Howard Nemerov, the White House Fellow for Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare John Gardner; Christopher Jencks, of the New Republic and the Institute for Policy Studies; and Joe Ruskin, the 23 year old education editor of Newsweek magazine.

More on Vietnam
With Washington, D.C., only 30 miles away, the group also scheduled interviews with notable government officials, among them Senator Wayne Morse, who discussed his sentiments about Vietnam with a concerned segment of our group. John Gardner gave a private hearing to the group in the HEW office. Defense Secretary John F. Kennedy was a sought to explain the implications of the federal spending in the new National Educational Development Act.

As a seminar on education we had not achieved most of what we had set out to do. Yet, it was in the realm of human relationships that the seminar had the greatest impact on each participant. Members achieved an understanding about themselves and their own problems that might have always eluded them.

Humanistic Reality
James Barrie's "The Admirable Crichton" deals with a class-conscious British family and their Butler. When they are stranded on an island, the rules reverse and the Butler, who has true leadership qualities, becomes the dominant group member. But, when the family returns to the civilized world, they revert back to their original master-servant roles.

Eighteen of us were on such an "island" this summer. Now I urge you to try and imagine such a Crichton-like reversal, with a subsequent loss of everything we gained in awareness of self and others.

For if the educational experience is to be changed for the better, it is in the realm of human relationships that the most far-reaching changes must be made.