



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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A SUPPORT GROUP FOR STUDENTS WHO STUTTER

Our students engage in activities in which they are required to speak throughout each day—asking questions, interacting with classmates, communicating with customers at their jobs, and interacting with family members. Students' grades, in some courses, may be based partially on their oral participation throughout the semester. Speech is such a facile skill for many of us that frequently we take it for granted.

Problems Associated with Stuttering

Consider the plight of students who stutter. They may face difficulties communicating and getting their message across efficiently (or not). Negative stereotypes include that they are nervous, introverted, guarded. Offensive responses and adverse evaluations by peers, significant others, and employers/potential employers (and perhaps even some professors!) contribute to speaking anxiety. Long-term experiences that adult students have had interacting and communicating with others who do not stutter might eventually create hostility.

Overall, the potential results of stuttering can be disabling disorders that may impact social adjustment and, ultimately, professional goals. Some students may develop poor attitudes towards their general academic performance and schooling as well.

A Stuttering Support Group

At Bronx Community College, students with speech problems have the opportunity to participate in a Speech Clinic course for a semester. They receive instruction towards remediation of their speech disorders, as well as individual counseling to assist in learning to cope with them. In spring 2009, three individuals who had participated previously in the Speech Clinic approached me with requests for continued assistance. Some had received speech therapy in other locations, but none had participated before in group-based support sessions. I established a stuttering support group and served as facilitator.

Getting Started

A support group for students who stutter was initiated at the beginning of the spring 2009 semester. It was inaugurated with the notion of establishing an accepting environment for students to discuss their feelings about their challenges, share coping strategies, and provide general encouragement to each other. Initially, a format for the class and behavioral guidelines had to be established.

The frequency and duration of the group meetings were limited by student scheduling constraints; meetings occurred every week of the semester for 12 weeks. Each meeting lasted approximately 60 minutes. Group size was set at three—i.e., the number of students who initiated the request. Students met in the office of the facilitator where chairs were arranged in a circle to encourage parity.

It was important to set behavioral guidelines so as to encourage an accepting, nonthreatening environment. Group members were asked to avoid interrupting others and making judgmental comments, to share their emotions to their fullest degree of comfort, and to participate regularly.

Meetings

In the first meeting, group goals were explained and participation rules set. In the first and subsequent sessions, members provided historical background information about their lives with stuttering. These initial sessions revealed that students had some communicative experiences in common—i.e., classroom ordeals, dating dilemmas, and part-time employment problems. The chance to meet and interact with individuals who had had similar encounters was critical, as members indicated that they had never met other individuals with fluency disorders (outside of a single, older family member, in one case).

In the initial sessions, each student was asked to be responsible for setting the theme for at least two or three subsequent meetings throughout the semester. Placing the responsibility of "leading" several sessions onto the members promoted accountability. It also provided a chance for students to feel respected and powerful. All



varieties of themes were encouraged, including popular media, professional formation, and social interaction/participation.

After the initial sessions, each began with welcoming remarks and announcement of the theme and activities for the day. Members were given a chance to provide informal commentary before launching into the discussion. These latter comments often provided additional direction for future meetings. Throughout the session, the facilitator occasionally reminded members about the behavioral guidelines while acknowledging all member comments and reframing them as needed. Sessions ended with a review of the session and plans for the subsequent session.

A recurrent thread, woven into sessions, was the discussion and subsequent development of strategies for engaging in day-to-day communicative interactions. Specific meeting themes included current sports news, popular media, politics, interview skill-building, dating, and interacting with family. In many meetings, it was interesting to observe how students would provide advice and support regarding their fellow members' daily communicative ordeals. Modeling positive behaviors was observed.

The opportunity for impromptu role play presented itself on two occasions after members voiced concerns regarding recent/upcoming interactions. On one occasion, a male member expressed concern over his interactions with individuals of the opposite sex and the ensuing trouble with anxiety and fluency. It was fortuitous that one member of the group was a female; she suggested a role-play activity during an upcoming meeting. On another occasion, a different member voiced concerns regarding an upcoming interview, and the group offered him an opportunity to engage in a mock interview with one of his peers. In the latter case, the group facilitator provided guidance to the "interviewer" about the basic format and nature of interview questions.

Overall Benefits/Results

The group was quite successful. The following two semesters, two members returned to request re-initiation of regular meetings. Comments from members indicated that they noted improvements in their ability to face communicative interactions and confidence in initiating interactions. Members reported positive changes in family dynamics and interpersonal relationships. It appeared that attitudes towards themselves had experienced some change for the better; greater self-acceptance was apparent. One member shared that he had expanded his potential career choices in light of input from the group and that he was considering seeking a position on the executive board of a student

club. Finally, they all commented that the value of the chance to know other students who stuttered was immeasurable. Members indicated that group participation and the role-play activities had helped them develop greater confidence in communicative interactions.

Conclusions

Staff/faculty members who undertake such a venture should have some background in counseling and counseling techniques. Establishing such a group requires setting background rules and creating an environment where students who stutter can come to share their common experiences with little fear of judgment. The facilitator should allow the group to develop on its own while providing only gentle guidance as needed.

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