"Who Will I Choose and Who Will Choose Me?"

Using Warm Up and Sociometry to Facilitate a Progressive Classroom Culture

by Bona Anna

Bona Anna is a Psychodramatist and is Assistant Principal at a state primary school in Christchurch, Aotearoa/New Zealand. She has been developing ways to apply Moreno's theories and techniques in her work as a classroom teacher, with the aim of improving learning and educational outcomes. Here she focuses on the use of warm up, sociometry and sociometric thinking to facilitate a progressive classroom culture. This article draws from her psychodrama thesis.

INTRODUCTION

Most of us have thought of reading books, signs, music and the formulae of mathematics and science. But reading people, things, situations or relationships may be a relatively new idea. Reading the cues of behaviour in specific life situations, however, gives us the primary data for a science of human relations. As we learn to read the role-playing of ourselves and others, our aims, our attitudes, our aspirations, and our warm up to interacting to achieve what is important to us will become more concrete. (Robert Haas (1949:240) introducing one of the first books on Moreno's work to be published for the education sector in America in 1949.)

Teachers in New Zealand have become experts at facilitating accomplishment in curriculum areas such as oral language, reading, writing, mathematics, science and the arts. Although social development has come to be regarded as an essential part of a child's education, its occurrence has been presumed rather than planned. For the most part, it is expected that social education will "happen" within the general classroom program. Largely, for many children, it does. Those children who come to the notice of the classroom teacher for deficiencies in social development are usually referred to special needs programs for individual help, or special programs are set up within the classroom to assist a "problem student". There is a focus on the individual child, whose limited social ability and low social acceptability is often expressed through, and then noted as, "bad behaviour". Thus, role clusters such as *behaviour problem* and *naughty child* tend to develop in the class and are embodied by particular children.

Systemic analysis to assist in understanding this phenomenon has been under-

utilized, although American educators were beginning to grapple with this issue as early as the 1940s. During that period, McClelland and Ratcliff, two sociometric researchers from Houston, Texas, commented that …"teachers' plans and efforts have been thwarted because pupils who started school so eagerly and with such well-meaning intentions have been frustrated in their efforts to learn by a feeling of not belonging. Many of these pupils have dropped out of school and a far larger number who remained in school have not done well. Good teachers have always tried to help their pupils fit the social milieu of which they are a part, but their methods have been trial and error because no one has shown them a method that they might use" (McClelland and Ratcliff 1947:147). In more recent times, this concern has been addressed on an ad hoc basis through the implementation of social skills or life skills programs in schools. Again, however, there is a focus on individual skills-based learning. The sociometric implications are poorly understood, and recognition of Morenian theory is absent.

In Moreno's view, a positive and supportive set of relationships in the social atom is a necessary component for an individual to achieve a high degree of spontaneity and creativity in life. "Moreno believed that our social world, what he came to call the social atom, was highly significant to our sense of well-being. In a constantly shifting pattern, we reach out towards or reject individuals in our social atom, and they do the same towards us" (Fox, 1987:xv). A low sociometric position tends to lead to social isolation and therefore a loss of creative potential. Much of Moreno's work was directed toward improving the position of the isolate in society.

Applying this thesis to educational enterprises Robert Haas (1949), an innovative American educator, coined the phrase "social literacy" and identified two reasons for its addition to the core curriculum. Firstly, in his view, a progressive social environment was an essential prerequisite in reducing under-achievement in educational attainment and promoting adequate achievement. Secondly, Haas maintained that, for the promotion of democratic human relations, a citizenry must develop adequate problem solving, flexibility, kindness and courtesy. Conflict could then be negotiated using a higher level of skills than presently existed. The ability to role reverse – experience the situation from the other's position - was essential for any lasting resolution in human conflict and this ability had its origins in social learning. These purposes remain relevant in the present educational environment, and are in accordance with the aims for essential skill development set down in *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (1993:17-20).

In his book *Effective Group Leadership* Max Clayton (1994:13) maintains that a group meets in order to achieve certain goals. The group leader's function therefore, is to facilitate the development of a group culture within which the group members are able to do the necessary work to achieve those goals. This principle is applicable to the leadership of any group, including a group that has formed for educational purposes. My work required the facilitation of a classroom culture in which the effective development of skills, attitudes and knowledge, as set out in official curriculum documents, could take place. Sociometric analysis, combined with the utilization of the concepts of warm up and sociometry, enabled me to facilitate increasingly progressive learning roles, positive classmate relationships and adequate social development. The result

has been the emergence of a progressive classroom culture or learning environment, and thus the enhancement of educational achievement.

A Sociometric Analysis

Moreno states that sociometry aims to determine objectively the basic structure of human societies (Fox, 1987:20). It involves the study and measurement of social relations - the "groupal" and structural dynamics in any community, group or class (Clayton, 1989:59). Sociograms may be used to record the patterns of social relations. These are the positive, negative or neutral feelings flowing between people in a group or students in a class. The sociometric term for this is tele - the projection of feeling, in the here and now, into space (Clayton, 1989:61). Transference is often involved in the phenomena of projection, interfering with the chances of positive two-way tele developing. A person's feeling towards another may not originate solely in the present situation, and may not really be "deserved" by the person onto whom it is being transferred. This feeling may originate in a previous relationship. If that relationship involves conflict, the transferred feeling is likely to be negative. It is this negative, transferred feeling which underlies dysfunctional group processes and, in the case of school children, fragmenting classroom relationships.

Some children in the class will be highly chosen by others - the positive stars or stars of acceptance. Other children will be significantly under chosen. These are the negative stars, or stars of rejection. A few children will be completely neglected - the isolates. Clayton (1989:63) maintains that the true isolate does not choose and is not chosen at all. A few children may form isolated dyads choosing only one other and remain separate from the rest of the class members. A subgroup of children, who choose only each other and exclude all others, is called a clique. As well, certain children may have a position in the group whereby they act as links. These pivotal members become obvious when they are chosen by children from two different subgroups or are chosen by all the positive and negative stars. These children often place value on both sides and act as neutral ground for relating. They are central to the development of positive and functional sociometry in a class.

As a teacher relating to the educational trend towards collaborative learning approaches, I have frequently directed my students to choose partners or organize themselves into small work groups. As many teachers have done, I noticed the group dynamics emerging in the class. Through directions such as "choose a partner for folk dancing, pair up for walking, choose a reading buddy, form a buzz group, make groups of four for project work", the classroom sociometry was revealed publicly, and often painfully, on a regular basis. Some children were highly chosen while others were under-chosen. The isolates stood alone. The dyads chose each other. The pivotal children attempted to straddle the emerging gulfs. A tone of anxiety and fragmentation developed. Coping systems were engaged. Chaos threatened. It seems self evident to comment here that class cohesion was reduced. I, like many teachers, made attempts to intervene in these regressing group dynamics by suggesting certain pairings to children, or by asking the pivotal children to pair up with isolates and negative stars. However, having little theoretical background in sociometry and group process at this time, my attempts to effectively assist students in the management of their relationships were

largely unsuccessful.

This poor class cohesion compounded over time and was reflected in a range of fragmenting behaviours by particular children. Certain roles - *the reluctant chooser, the self-important clique leader, the frightened clique seeker, the rejected victim, the anxious participant, the withdrawing isolate, and the village idiot* - cemented themselves into the classroom culture and seemed difficult to shift. The learning environment was thus characterized by exclusivity, harshness, low risk-taking and high anxiety. In my view, under-achievement of group goals was a consequence. I hypothesized that the educational attainment of children, especially those whose experience of the sociometry was negative, was reduced. Furthermore, the growth of social literacy in each student was not attended to in a planned or systematic way. The curriculum goal of social development remained, therefore, poorly met.

A thorough search through the literature led me to realise that educators from the late 1930s onwards have used sociometric measurements and techniques to intervene in the social dynamics of a classroom. Their purpose was to positively influence childrens' self-concepts, social literacy and enjoyment of school, and thus facilitate a higher level of educational achievement. I was particularly struck by the remarks of Nahum Shoobs (1947,154-164). Commenting on the positive behavioural and scholastic results of applied sociometry in a Brooklyn, New York public school classroom, she pondered how children might develop flexible and functional roles if exposed to sociometry from kindergarten levels.

I began to envisage that the development of fragmenting roles might be impeded, the development of progressive roles promoted and a progressive learning culture emerge. Thus, specific planned sociometric interventions would eventually be unnecessary in the absence of an entrenched, regressive sociometric system. Behaviour problems need not arise to any large extent, and the class work could be fully focused on the teaching and learning programs. I was further encouraged by Clayton's contention (1994:18) that the sociometric structure of any group has a bearing on the amount and quality of the learning. I firmed up my resolve to put soundly-based sociometric practices into place in the classroom. This could be called, perhaps, sociometric classroom management.

As a pre-requisite, I utilized the concept of warm up to good effect in developing adequate learning roles. The aim was to facilitate the growth of progressive roles, a fluid, positive sociometry and a high level of social literacy in the students. Overall, I was interested in how a well-functioning sociometric structure and an adequate warm up in students could contribute towards a positive classroom culture over time, so that educational goals were highly achieved. New entrant pupils arriving from kindergarten would thus enter an established expansive learning environment. In my view this approach had the potential to build children up and ensure that their experience of school was positive. The school might thus make a significant contribution towards progressive development and the enhancement of spontaneity in each child, as well as achieving its more precisely prescribed educational objectives. These ideas linked well with Moreno's vision of an educational ethos built on the unifying power of spontaneity.

WARMING UP TO PROGRESSIVE ROLES

If you stand at the gate of any school and watch children arrive in the morning to begin their school day you will immediately notice the wide range of warm ups with which they come. I noticed that many of the children I taught arrived at school already warming up to a day of activity and learning. These children walked in with an air of expectancy and purpose. Then there was the other group, the potential rejectees, the isolates, the victims and the children with behavioural problems. They arrived at school warmed up to a range of fragmenting roles. There may have been trouble at home - early morning television watching instead of preparation for school, uneaten breakfasts or no breakfasts, impatient parents, sibling arguments, mislaid homework, lost school bags, lunch preparation problems, transport difficulties. Some parents were unable to model an adequate warm up for their children's school day or to provide a home environment where this could be facilitated. Thus, we have arriving at school, together with those who are well warmed up, the anxious learner, the willful rebel, the disorganized school attendee and the time bomb. The challenge for a teacher lies in her or his ability to gather up such a diversity of warm ups in a short space of time and create a functional education work group by nine o'clock.

I developed a range of methods to assist in the creation of an adequate warm up to the school day. First and most importantly was the development of an appropriate warm up for myself, the teacher. Just as a therapist or group leader focuses conscious attention on developing a positive warm up to the work ahead, so too must a teacher actively develop in themselves a good warm up to the educational work, the classroom environment and the students. I then turned my attention towards the students, and developed procedures to assist them to warm up appropriately to the school day too, so that they arrived purposeful, positive and well organised.

A Focus On Framing

I had noticed that the traditional practice of allowing children unsupervised playtime before the official class beginning time of nine o'clock had a fragmenting effect on an appropriate warm up to learning. In response to this, a loosely supervised independent reading and informal story discussion session, beginning for each child as they entered the class and including willing parents, replaced playtime before school.

A Focus On Parents, Time And Structure

I began to pay more attention to the expectations that I had of parents. All relevant organisational matters were announced to parents beforehand. As well, the school's expectations of the home were communicated to parents and caregivers on enrolment. Thus I applied the principle of parallel process, whereby my well-organised focus was communicated to parents, who in turn proceeded to model adequate expectations for their children.

A Focus On Purpose

The assumption is often made that students know the purpose for which they come to school. Informal research into this matter has led me to believe that children's personal understanding of the reasons for school attendance vary widely, and are often at odds with those of the teaching staff and parents. With the aim of developing a workable warm

up in each child and a sound purpose for the class programme, I directed a session at the beginning of the school year. This took the form of small group talk, feeding into whole class discussion, and concluded when a number of commonly held purposes for attending class were established and recorded. To stimulate children's thinking about this often-neglected topic, I enacted the role of a student with inadequate, confused or unknown reasons for attending school and invited the students to interview me.

Children joined this reception class through the course of a year as they arrived from the local kindergarten. Similar work to develop a purpose was undertaken with the new entrants, especially those whose warm up to school was fragmentary. This took the form described above, but was sometimes carried out on an individual basis. In effect, I was modeling a useful warm up to the new "career" called school.

A Focus On The Teacher's Opening Statement

Max Clayton (1994:14-19) outlined the leadership displayed by a group leader in setting a positive purpose and effective, inclusive working structures for a group. He noted that what the leader said in the opening statements began a warm up in the group members, which could be built on as the group proceeded. The likelihood of good outcomes was thus virtually guaranteed. I paid closer attention to my opening statements, with increasingly improved results. A purposeful warm up to learning emerged in the class and was built on appropriately. An example of an opening statement is presented later in the article.

A Focus On The Development Of Progressive Learning Roles

I directed class sessions with the purpose of focusing attention on the development of progressive learning and social roles. One of these, "Getting Ready For School", was initiated to help students prepare for school in the mornings. This was particularly pertinent for those pupils whose home circumstances did not facilitate an adequate warm up to school. A home scene was produced. Moreno's concepts of role exercise and guided spontaneity (1949:X,No.5), and the psychodramatic techniques of concretization, maximization, mirroring, modeling, doubling and role reversal were utilized. Another session, "Arriving At School" was conducted to assist in the development of progressive functioning on arrival at school. "Welcoming New Children" and "Being New At School" facilitated the growth of adequate roles for the integration of beginning students. An example of one such session, where detailed description and analysis is provided, is included in my thesis (1998:46-52).

The application of the principle of warm up in the ways described facilitated the development in students of a range of progressive roles. I modeled an adequate warm up to the role of the teacher and guide. The structure of the program was such that the children entered into a quiet, friendly and purposeful learning environment. New entrant children were inducted adequately. Confusion, anxiety and chaos rarely intruded to warm students up to fragmenting roles. Progressive role growth in the students stimulated a greater expression of spontaneity, and laid the groundwork for the utilization of sociometry in the development of classmate relationships.

DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING A PROGRESSIVE SOCIOMETRIC STRUCTURE

The building up of positive relationships in the class was accomplished by maintaining an awareness of the sociometry as it emerged, and adopting management strategies, described below, which pre-empted negative structures and reinforced positive links, thus promoting maximum flexibility, creativity and spontaneity. The development of progressive learning and social roles described was already a contributory factor, and the increasingly open sociometry in turn assisted students to develop and maintain a warm up to functional learning roles.

School activities such as reading, talking, walking, dancing, physical education, mathematics, problem solving, science experiments, social studies assignments and art provided many opportunities for work to be done in pairs. The directions for pairs formation were designed to facilitate progressively more flexible relationships: "Look around the class and choose someone with whom you enjoy working; you would like to work today; you think you could work well with on this occasion; you have not worked with for a long time." If there was an odd number I suggested that students take the initiative to form a group of three. The range of curriculum areas lent themselves to a variety of sociometric instructions. For example, in physical education the focus might be: "Choose someone with whom you think you could work safely."

On some occasions I issued sociometric instructions to encourage an appreciation of the diversity of roles and talents within the class which could be used to approach the multiplicity of different learning activities: "Earlier, in physical education, you chose someone with whom you thought you could work safely. Now you are going to use musical instruments. Music is a different kind of activity from physical education. Look around the class and choose someone with whom you think you could create good music."

Co-operative group work was often utilized for learning activities as well. The management of group formation had a profound effect on the quality of the classroom sociometry. I varied the directions for different tasks over a year to encourage a broad range of choosing. For example: "You are going to do this science task in groups of four. How about you look around the class, and choose three other people whom you think you could work well with on *this* particular task; you think might be good to work with in science; you think you could be helpful towards in science."

In the beginning a high level of anxiety in the class was managed successfully with the direction: "Choose someone with whom you think you will feel happy and secure." However, as students developed familiarity with sociometric management of this kind and as I became more encouraging that they take the choosing seriously, I noticed that an atmosphere of openness and daring began to develop. I was then able to introduce increasingly more challenging directions over time. My aim was to lead students to consider linking with an ever-increasing range of classmates, and to gradually approach those with whom sociometric links were weak, neutral or negative. The graduation of directions was thus: "Choose someone whom you do not know very well but would like to get to know better; it might be a challenge to get to know better; it might be a challenge to work with; you have never paired with before."

On the occasions when I "inherited" a class of students in which the sociometry had been unmanaged, I faced a greater challenge. This was particularly so if the students were older and the relationship patterns more entrenched. I observed that there was a general tone of defensiveness, rigidity and aggressiveness amongst the students, and the sociometric structures had an inflexible, closed quality. Students chose only their "best friends". The roles of isolate, victim, negative star and positive star were clearly discernible and were expressed by the same few children. A low level of spontaneity and a high level of anxiety characterized the class.

In a therapy group a group leader might work directly with such sociometry, asking members to reveal their negative, positive and neutral choices, and she or he might begin to explore the origins of these choices with the aim of producing a greater flexibility over time. However, in the educational context in which I worked the sociometric management described above was utilized to "loosen" the entrenched sociometry, so that educational aims might be better realized. Acting on ideas suggested by Clayton (1994) and referred to earlier, I formulated an opening statement that I thought was appropriate for the older students in this particular class, and presented it at the beginning of the school year.

"Welcome to your class for 1998. I am looking forward to a good year of work with you. I notice that some of you are unused to working with a wide variety of other students and like to work with the same group of students all the time. I am someone who believes it is good and productive to work with a lot of different people at different times for different purposes. So this is one thing you will learn to do under my guidance. I hope we will be able to create an open, friendly learning environment in which everyone's contribution is valued, where it is understood that making mistakes is a normal part of learning, and where every one of you will develop your abilities in all the different subjects we will be studying."

This opening statement warmed the children up to a range of responses – surprise, shock, relief, excitement, fear, disbelief, cynicism, resistance and anxiety. Thus, I issued simple and non-threatening sociometric directions to begin with and built up the challenge over the year.

In utilizing the kind of sociometric management that I have described, there was no intention of replacing spontaneous friendship links with forced, unwanted or artificial links. The sociometric directions were carefully framed with specifics, stating clearly that students were to work with a chosen peer or peers for a specific purpose, to the best of their ability, for a specified period. Thus, I was not seeking to deny the reality of the positive, negative and neutral tele that existed between the students. This would have reduced my work to a form of social engineering. I noticed, however, that the students would invariably choose partners based on the existing tele until I offered sociometric instructions, which warmed them up to other aspects of themselves, particularly aspects to do with learning, working together and valuing others. As a result of my interventions the sociometry became increasingly flexible as the year progressed, and gradually an element of daring emerged. This produced a warm up in some students to the role of the *bold social interactor*. Greater risks were taken in terms of choosing work buddies and this slowly filtered through into social interaction. Thus, a range of progressive roles, absent or embryonic at the beginning

of the first term, developed over time within the social fabric of this class. In individual terms, each student was being role trained, and thereby developing functional aspects of themselves that had been previously under developed.

CONCLUSIONS

The advantage of this approach for the management of classmate relationships lay in the reduction of tension that resulted. Students, released from the anxiety which poorly managed sociometry tended to produce in the class - who will I chose and who will chose me - warmed up instead to progressive roles and a sense of daring, fun, and spontaneity. The isolate, the victim, the negative star and the dyad appeared in a much-diluted form. Role flexibility was enhanced and a fluid, open classroom sociometry developed. Behaviour problems reduced, thus allowing for maximum focus on teaching and learning activities and overall positive advances in educational achievement and social literacy.

In answer to Shoobs' pondering about what would happen if children were exposed to these kinds of sociometric interventions from kindergarten, I would predict progressive role growth in all students, and the development of increasingly more open, fluid classroom cultures. The roles of isolate and victim need not develop to any large degree in any child during their schooling. The ongoing experience of social belonging, identified long ago by Moreno as being essential to human well being, is thus accessible to assist all students to fulfill their creative potential.

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Bona can be contacted on email at:
bonaanna@hotmail.com