WALDEN FELLOWSHIP BEHAVIORAL WORKSHOPS: MEMBER SELF-EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

Mark A. Mattaini

Columbia University School of Social Work & *Walden Fellowship, Inc.*

Gladys Williams

Applied Behavioral Consultant Services & *Walden Fellowship, Inc.*

ABSTRACT: Once a month, Walden Fellowship conducts open workshops for members and other interested persons. Each workshop focuses on existing and potential applications of the science of behavior to a specific topic, ranging from self-management to community organizing. The goals of the workshops are the provision of mutual education with a particular emphasis on practical skills, the development of a verbal community, and ultimately the strengthening of a cultural entity rooted in the science of behavior and mutual reinforcement. In this paper we discuss the format of the workshops, their history, and social validation data for the first two years.

Key Words: Cultural design, *Walden Two,* cultural practices.

On the first Wednesday of each month, Walden Fellowship conducts an evening workshop, bringing together as many of the members as possible. In *Walden Two* (Skinner, 1948), Sunday morning gatherings were used to develop a sense of community and to encourage the use of positive cultural practices. These were also the primary goals of Walden Fellowship meetings when the organization began nearly two years ago. Over time, however, experience and experimentation have resulted in changes, as expected. We now conceptualize these meetings as opportunities for mutual education among members, as well as the development of a verbal community. When we are successful, members leave each monthly workshop with specific new skills that they can apply in their lives elsewhere. They leave with new knowledge about applications of the science of behavior, enhanced fluency in verbal behavior about the science, and deepened commitment to the community.

Every effort is made to ensure that both the content of the meetings and the atmosphere are as reinforcing as possible: Refreshments, juice and wine are catered; the meeting place is selected to be comfortable and inviting. Members are aware of the need to reach out and welcome those who have not attended before. While meetings are open to anyone, some effort is made to ensure that those who are invited are interested in and open to what we are doing. Social validation (members' satisfaction with the workshops) is assessed each month, and both content and style of the presentations have evolved considerably in response to these evaluations.

AUTHORS' NOTE:

Please address all correspondence to: Mark A. Mattaini, Columbia University School of Social Work, 622 West 113th Street, New York, NY 10025. Email: mattaini@earthlink.net

Workshop Themes

The planners have attempted to ensure substantial variety in monthly topics, and to sequence workshops so that those with more technical content tend to be offered during months when long-time members are most likely to be the primary participants, such as in January and July. Themes that may draw a broader audience, for example, self-management, violence, or sexuality, are scheduled early in each school term, when we are most likely to attract new members. Since our primary audience consists of university-based faculty, students, and alumnae, the school calendar is an important contextual variable. August meetings are primarily community celebrations, but include a brief presentation as well. The themes of workshops held during the first two years are listed in Table 1.

Month	Theme
10/93	Acting to "Save the World"
11/93	The Practical Lessons of *Walden Two*
12/93	Empowerment & Empiricism
1/94	Behavioral Work with the Homeless
2/94	Behavioral Self-Management
3/94	Behavioral Work in Agencies
4/94	Personal Applications of the Behavior Code
5/94	Behaviorology: A Systems Approach
6/94	Violence is Behavior
7/94	The Missing Links in Self-Management
8/94	Celebration
9/94	Youth Violence: An Interim Report
10/94	Feminism & Behaviorism
11/94	Home-Based Family Training
12/94	Healthy, Helpful, Happy & Harmless
1/95	Behavior Treatment of Mentally Ill Chemical Abusers
2/95	Understanding Depression: New Behavioral Contributions
3/95	Behavioral Parent Training: Special Challenges
4/95	Life-Sculpting: Better than Therapy
5/95	Reinforcing Respect for Diversity (Part 1)
6/95	Creating Healthy Family "Cultures"
7/95	Tales of the "Lone Behaviorist"
8/95	Celebrations
9/95	"Cognitive-Behavioral": One Model or Two?
10/95	Behavioral Community Practice

Table 1. *Monthly workshop themes*

One major change was instituted part-way through the second year. Prior to that time, the gatherings were called *monthly meetings,* and the content (modeled roughly on that described in *Walden Two)* emphasized reflections on behavioral and

nonbehavioral readings (cf., Mattaini, 1991). After the transition, the meetings were referred to as *workshops,* and much more emphasis was placed on participants' learning of specific new skills, as well as increased familiarity and fluency in verbal behavior about the science. As a result, workshops became less general and philosophical, and instead more applied and focused. While social validation ratings did not change significantly (as seen below, a ceiling effect is a complication here), narrative evaluations indicated a preference for this format, and attendance data show that the rate of stable attendees has increased somewhat. A small cadre of about eight regular attendees, including several Board members, attend nearly every month. From six to ten less regular attendees also attend each month; we are targeting a modest increase for the coming year. Meanwhile, evaluation of meeting content and how it affects attendance, is on-going.

Workshop Structure and Style of Presentation

A sample workshop program, as currently structured, is shown below:

"Tales of the Lone Behaviorist"

June 6, 1995

Program (7:30 p.m.):
- Greetings and Introductions
- "Tales of the Lone Behaviorist"
   -Ara
   -Mark
 - Talking Circles
 - Research Brief (Janet)
 - Behavior Code
 - Announcements and Door Prizes

Social Hour (8:45 to 9:15 p.m.)

Members (who travel from all boroughs of New York City, Westchester County, Long Island, and New Jersey) gather between 7:15 and 7:30 p.m. As there are usually one or more new attendees, we provide a very brief introduction to the overall organization, and all participants introduce themselves. One or more members with specific expertise present the major content, which may be either a description of behavior work being done by the presenter, or an elaboration of new conceptual or empirical work and its implications for professional and personal application. These presentations are structured to teach specific skills.

Immediately following the presentation, members break into small groups of about six persons each, and participate in "talking circles" - a traditional Native American approach for ensuring every member is heard. Each group is given a typed card with a question related to the application of the content of the presentation. The

card is passed around the circle; as each member holds the card, she responds in brief to the question without interruption from others, then passes the card to the next pent

of community. At the same time, the important themes being covered, and the seriousness with which they are taken, lead members to view the organization as a cultural entity that can make a difference, both for themselves personally and in the larger society.

Workshop Evaluations

Social validation rating results for the workshops are shown in Figure 1. Clearly, those attending are satisfied overall; participants' statements of their inclinations to attend the next meeting may be more telling than their satisfaction with the current meeting, but both tend to achieve similar ratings. Even given the obvious ceiling effect, however, variations seen on the graph are also apparent to experienced observers of group process. Some presentations, in particular, are more successful than others in addressing material of immediate interest to members, and doing so at the optimal conceptual level. It is also clear that presenters' energy and skills in public speaking are related to participant satisfaction.

Luckily, if the main presentation does not go as well as might be hoped, the talking circles and other items on the agenda, including the social hour, can compensate to a significant degree. This occurs particularly if core members recognize the problem and make special efforts to reach out to those who appear to be disengaged from the workshop content. Members experienced in observing and working with group processes are particularly valuable at such times.

The response cost involved in attending, especially for those traveling significant distances on public transportation or having parking problems, is very significant. Those who attend regularly tend to be members of one of three groups: (a) board members and other core persons whose behavior is in part governed by the rule that regular contact is crucial to achieving long-term positive outcomes at a
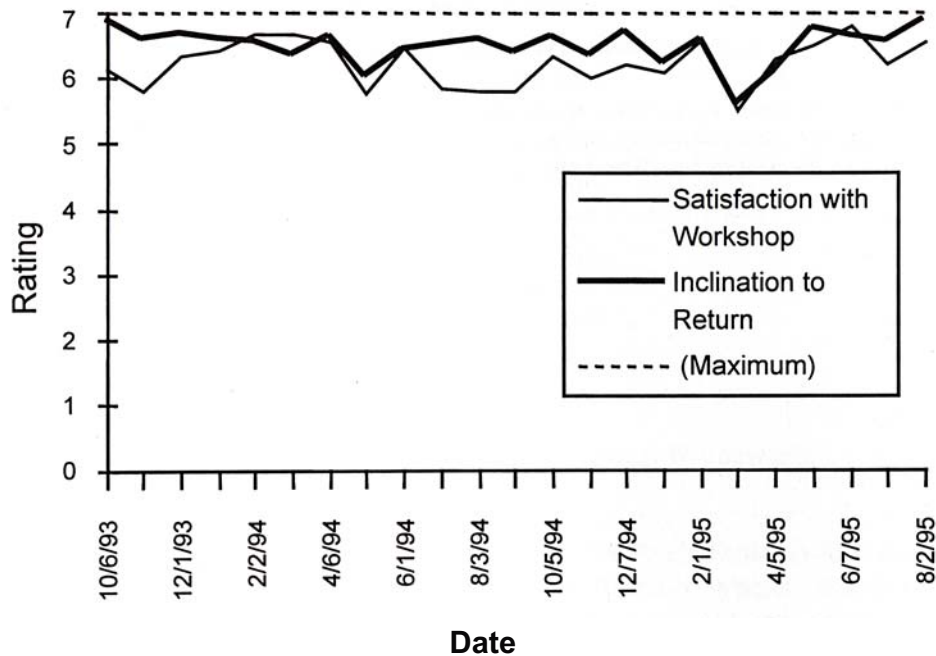
Figure 1. *Workshop social validity data, rated on* 1 *(worst) to* 7 *(best) scales. Questions are, "How satisfied were you with this workshop,"and, "How inclined are you to return to the next workshop-barring unbreakable commitments?"*

sociocultural level, (b) persons who live or work in close proximity to the meetings, and (c) persons who see core members as valuable mentors. As few others attend primarily when the particular subject matter is of interest, which is satisfactory to the organizers. Giving people a role in organizing or presenting at the workshops also tends to connect them more firmly with the Fellowship as a cultural entity. There is substantial overlap, for example, between participants in the Cultural Design Task Forces, particularly their science subcommittees (Mattaini, Twyman, Chin, & Spencer, in press) and those attending the monthly workshops.

We are far from our capacity attendance at these workshops; over the next year we expect to expand our efforts at marketing and recruiting. The more persons who attend, and apply what they learn in other spheres of their lives, the broader direct and indirect effects the organization will have, and the larger the pool of possible participants for other Fellowship activities. Since the core mission of Walden Fellowship is to extend applications of the science of behavior as widely as possible into the larger society, these workshops are a central organizational priority.

REFERENCES

Mattaini, M. A. (1991). Walden 1.9: Successive approximations. *Behavior and Social Issues*. *i(2), 53-60*.

Mattaini, M. A., & Twyman, J. S. (1996). The Walden Fellowship experiments. *Behavior and Social issues,* 6, 97-107. http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/bsi.v6i2.286

Mattaini, M. A., Twyman, J. S., Chin, W., & Spencer, N. L. (in press). Cultural design: Walden Fellowship task forces. *Behavior and Social issues*.

Skinner, B. F. (1948). *Walden Two*. New York: MacMillan.