

Adult Learning: Theory and Practice

Reality Therapy and Adult Education: A Practical Method

Dr. Robert E. Wubbolding
Director, Center for Reality Therapy
Cincinnati, Ohio



Reality Therapy provides a practical way to talk to, to counsel, and to teach the Adult Learner. When people seek GED to upgrade a skill, to achieve a certificate of learning, or to enrich their knowledge base in any manner the outcome is a heightened sense of control and self-confidence. These outcomes are congruent and even synonymous with the goals of Reality Therapy.

Goals of Reality Therapy:

Reality Therapy, founded by the Los Angeles Psychiatrist, William Glasser, is based on the fact that the human brain generates behaviors to satisfy human needs. We are all motivated by five forces: Belonging, Power, Enjoyment, Freedom, and Survival. All of our behaviors serve the purpose of getting us involved with people, achieving something, increasing pleasure, gaining a sense of liberation from restraint, or merely to enhance our physical well-being.

In adult education I suggest that the first three needs deserve special attention. Since the needs overlap with each other the fulfillment of the first three will usually insure the fulfillment of Freedom. To be more precise, the Adult Learning Environment should be what Glasser says any classroom should be; "A Good Place." It should exude warmth and friendliness. The students are best served when they perceive the learning center or class as a place where people care. It should be a place where achievement or power is felt each

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day. The atmosphere should also be characterized by enjoyment. What Maria Montessori said of children can also be said of adults, "What is learned through play is there to stay." While the learning environment cannot always be fun, the adult educator aims at making the learning as enjoyable as possible. For adults, like children, retain what is need-satisfying. And fun or enjoyment is an innate human need.

Methodology

Rather than attempt to discuss every aspect of how to use the many aspects of Reality Therapy in the classroom, I would like to suggest how teachers can talk to students using the communication skills contained in Reality Therapy. Dr. Glasser has discussed how to structure the learning environment in *Control Theory in the Classroom*. In my own book *Using Reality Therapy* I have detailed the method for talk-

ing to students in a practical and workable manner. Some practical suggestions include the following:

- A. Get a commitment from the student.
Help the students decide how committed they are to the program. Ask if completing the program is a dream, a whim or a goal which they will back up with action. If the level of commitment is "I'll try", explain that if they were on a plane, they would expect the pilot to be more committed to a safe landing than merely, "I'll try to land the plane safely." They would expect a commitment characterized by, "I'll do whatever it takes." Thus a higher level of commitment will get more results.
- B. Ask what they want from the program:
Help students define general goals, weekly objectives, and daily achievements. Continuously remind them of their goal. They could write them down and even post in a visible place if appropriate. Give recognition whenever possible.
As the director of an adult learning center, I saw to it that the names of the graduates were posted in large letters when they passed the GED. They were asked to return to the Center to post their own names and then to talk to one other student about their test taking experience. This provided an opportunity for recognition (Belonging and Power) for all parties including the teachers.
- C. Ask how they spend their time:
Talk to the students about the specifics of their use of time. Try to become a "TV camera" so that you and the students can visualize exactly how they spend time. This can be very useful in increasing the efficiency of study time. In Reality Therapy it is more useful to talk about what the clients or students are "doing" than it is to talk about what they are "feeling". The reason is that we have more direct control over what we do than over what we feel. And when we change what we do we will change how we feel. Thus when a person feels depressed, it is action that changes this feeling, just as when a person is hungry it is action that eliminates the hunger. The feeling is not lessened merely by discussing it.

D. Ask students to make value judgements about their own behavior:

This component of the Reality Therapy Methodology is the keystone. On this procedure hinges all successful activity. We only change our behavior when we judge that ~~our current efforts are not getting us what we want.~~ Often times we repeat behaviors that do not work - shouting at our children, repeatedly looking for a lost object such as car keys in the same place, and "spinning our wheels" fruitlessly in many ways. The key to change is to evaluate whether our current behavior is getting us what we want. Thus a teacher can help the student examine current study habits and then ask such questions as, "If you delay studying till 9:00 PM, will you really be effective? Does it help or hurt to procrastinate your studying?" The important part of this procedure is to ask rather than tell the student. The teacher could have group sessions in which students are asked to determine their wants, examine their behaviors and then evaluate if what they are doing is really to their best advantage. Whether this occurs on a one to one basis or as part of a class the teacher aims at reaching the next Reality Therapy procedure.

E. Ask students to make positive plans:

Whether the plan is to study from 6:00 - 8:00 PM, to buy a good lamp to use, to have someone else answer the phone, to build a closer relationship with a spouse or child, it should be a "SATIC Plan." It should have, at least, the following characteristics. S - It should be "Simple". Any plan that is overly complicated will probably not be executed. Grandiosity in planning is self-defeating. A - It should be "Attainable". If the person is beginning an educational program, a plan to study for one week or even one evening is more realistic than a plan to study "from now on..." Remember the motto, "Well begun is half done." M - The plan should be "Measurable". It should answer the key question "When will you do it?" It is important to be exact in planning. Just as an airline tells the customer exactly when the flight will depart, e.g., at "8:30 PM" not "sometime in the evening", so too, the student is asked to be precise in planning. A vague plan will rarely be implemented. An exact and measurable plan, while not providing an absolute assurance of success, is more likely to be carried out than a vague one. I - The best plan is an "Immediate" one. An excellent question is "What will you do tonight, or when you leave today, that is different from what you did previously?" C - The plan is an independent plan or one "Controlled" by the doer of the plan. It does not, therefore, depend on what someone else does. "I'll study tonight if nothing comes up to interfere with my plan" is a poor plan. The plan is a strategy that the planner will carry out regardless of what others do. It is therefore a plan that the planner is also "committed" to. A handshake or a written plan helps the student to see the plan as a firm commitment rather than a weak possibility of future behavior.

In summary, Reality Therapy is a very useful tool for adult educators. Learning can more efficiently take place if

the environment allows for students to gain a sense of Belonging, Power or Achievement, Fun, and Freedom or Independence. The communication skills are best remembered with the letters "WDEP". W = Discussion of WANTS or goals. D = Discussion of what the students DO or how they spend their time. E = Discussion of how students EVALUATE or make value judgements on the effectiveness of their behavior. And P = Discussion of PLANNING. Students are assisted in making precise, realistically attainable, and independent plans.

References

- Glasser G. *Control Theory in The Classroom*. 1986. N.Y. Harper & Row, Pub.
Wubbolding, R. *Using Reality Therapy*. 1988. N.Y. Harper & Row, Pub.