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DESIGNING AND CONDUCTING
MICROLAB FOR TRAINING

By

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**INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT
AHMEDABAD**

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What is a Microlab?

'Microlab' emerged historically as an introductory exercise in the Sensitivity Training Laboratory. In place of making verbal statements to introduce the training programme, a microlab conforming to the culture of T-group enables the participants to live through an epitome of a laboratory programme. The participants are exposed to a variety of experiences in a brief period. As the T-group culture is based on experiential learning, self-presentation, interpersonal feedback, experimentation, identification of feelings, etc. in a climate of trust and openness using methods of learning by discovery, microlab is used to symbolically represent the nature and the variety of experiences and processes the participants are going to have in the groups. The authors used it first time in India in 1967 in T-group programmes. However, their experiences of using microlab while working in a variety of laboratories and other programmes designed for personnel, organisations, and community change indicated that microlab is a very useful potential exercise in many training programmes if it is designed and used properly. The present paper is intended to share our experiences

using the microlab and its modified forms in different programmes. It may be of some help to other trainers design microlab in their programmes.

For a training programme to be effective, it would be necessary to have the initial phase of preparing participants for the change which is being attended by a trainer. This, to use the terminology of Kurt Lewin, may be called unfreezing. Without such an initial input, benefit from the various training inputs may not be maximised. There are various ways in which such an initial input could be planned. One way of approaching this problem is through a 'microlab'. Microlab is a small capsule for the total training design with main emphasis on unfreezing the participants and enhancing their motivation to benefit from the training programme. Microlab preceding a laboratory programme is like an abstract preceding an article in a journal or an abstract given in the introductory chapter of a thesis. In some ways it is an appetizer for the food that is going to be served.

Conducting a Microlab

In a typical microlab situation the participants and the trainers assemble in a large room which has enough open space to move about freely. The trainer makes no attempt to introduce the training programme, instead he directly introduces the microlab.

He states that the first session starts with one trainer or the other announcing an event, to which the participants may volunteer to respond in any way they like. The trainer then requests the group to mill around in the room. The participants may sometimes show surprise and hesitancy. The trainer may repeat his "request to move around". After a minute or so of the milling the trainer may instruct the participants to form of pairs, triads, quadrates, etc. After obtaining the required structure the trainer announces the task and indicates the time limit. At the end of the period allotted, which is often only a few minutes, the trainer requests them to move away from their partners and mill awhile. He then restructures the group and announces the next item. The microlab, thus, continues as a series of events.

The structure of the group generally changes with each change in activity. Sometimes the activity may be in pairs, sometimes in triads, quadrates, pentas, etc. sometimes just dividing the cluster into two sub-groups.

Purposes of a Microlab

Some of the purposes served by the microlab are as follows:

- 1 It serves as a mechanism to unfreeze or open up the participants. It is an excellent and quick warm up mechanism that puts participants straight into the programme at the same time serves various other purposes. Generally when

the participants come, they come with certain expectations about the programme. They may be expecting some lectures, they may be thinking that this is yet another routine programme, they may be feeling anxious and uncertain, are inhibited to ask questions and so on. By putting them through several quickly changing and activity oriented exercises their preconceived notions and inhibitions are broken. They start raising more questions, the uncertainty probably increases and they get an opportunity to talk and explore freely and that help them unfreeze. Thus it sets the stage for learning.

It serves the purpose of taking the participants through a series of experiences they are going to have in the total programme. Generally, in the microlab, various items used or questions shared deal with different dimensions, concepts or aspects that are likely to be discussed during the programme. For example, in a microlab used to start a motivation programme, several questions dealing with motivation are utilised. However, the methodology that is going to be used in the programme need not be simulated in the microlab. For example, if some psychological tests are being used to provide feedback to the participants, it may not be always feasible to use a micro-instrument

in a microlab. Instead, the dimension of feedback could be simulated by asking the participants to point out some good or bad points in others.

- 3 Microlab serves as an instrument to tune the participant to the programme by arousing their curiosity about what is happening.
- 4 Microlab helps to communicate to the participant that the programme he is attending is unconventional and different, it requires a lot of active participation by him in the programme and that he is free in discussing various things.
- 5 It helps to break the usual expectation which the participants may have about the training programme in terms of only passive receiving instructions.
- 6 It helps to raise new expectations and establish new norms of behaviour like expressing feelings to one other, feeling free to ^{seek} help, to prepare to experiment, etc.
- 7 It helps to maximise interaction amongst participants and help them to know one other on dimensions on which they ^{one} usually do not get acquainted or interact with/other.

Designing a Microlab

Microlab is generally introduced only at the beginning of a laboratory programme. However, it can be used in various other situations and in various forms. For example, microlab can be

used to begin a lecture based programme where no methodology is used. Here the microlab may not communicate the unconventionality of the programme, but it may prepare the participants for free transactions. On such occasions it is advisable to announce that microlab is being used only for providing an opportunity for multiple interactions among participants in a short period and for generating a free atmosphere. Generally after the microlab the participants tend to enquire about the purpose of the session. A small explanation in this regard may be helpful.

Microlab can be used for various durations. While for short term programmes the microlab may be for an hour, for long term programmes this may take a full day. In such cases it may be appropriately called "microprogramme", "microcourse", "micro-lecture", "microsessions", etc., rather than microlab. However, if the microprogramme is conducted using lab form where people get opportunities to experiment, it could be called as microlab. Since it is easier and conventional the term microlab is suggested for all the other micros.

The following points may be kept in view while planning a microlab:

- 1 The microlab should not have items which can be completely discussed. Most of the discussions may be designed for a

short time, but are not to be completed and finished there. Microlab should stimulate interest and keep in a little suspense on these items.

- 2 There should be a high level of activity in the microlab. The success of the microlab depends on the pace with which the various activities could be done.
- 3 There should be a variety of items in the microlab.
- 4 Microlab should be designed well in advance, including sequencing of the various items. For example, one microlab could move from items related to the self to those relating to the roles going from there, to the total organisation, etc. There should be enough preparation and each item should be written down in detail.
- 5 There should be enough variety in the microlab and some unconventional ways of stimulating people like fantasies, drawings, skits, blindwalking, fishbowl, crawling, role plays, etc. should also be used.
- 6 If more than one faculty member is involved in the microlab, it may be useful to take turns in running the items. In such a case, those who are not running a particular item may participate in other items.

Microlabs in Different Groups

This section reports the various activities or exercises the authors have used in running the microlab for different groups. These activities may give an idea about the various dimensions that can be used in microlabs.

A. Cross-cultural groups

Microlab can prove to be a very valuable tool in warming up and bringing closer cross-cultural groups that are meeting for a brief period of time over a conference or a training programme.

A group of bankers from different Asian countries underwent a one month training programme on development banking. The first two days of their programme were devoted to introductory exercises to bring the participants closer and understand and appreciate each others' culture. The two day programme began with a 2 hour microlab session. The following were some of the items included:

- a. Pair up a person from another country and explain the significance your name has in your country.
- b. Pair up with a person from another country and share with him one significant aspect of the role you perform in your organisation.
- c. Pair up with a person from another country and mention a significant role your organisation has played in the past in your country.

- d. Identify a new development role your organisation can play in your country in the context of your country's present needs and share with your partner.
- e. Use three adjectives to describe some positive aspects of your culture and share with your partner.
- f. Use three adjectives to describe some aspects of your culture you do not like or you see there is scope for improvement.
- g. Share with your partner the image you have of his culture using three adjectives.
- h. Share with the others in your triad how do you feel being here at this moment.
- i. Share with the others in your group the image you have of this host country.
- j. Share with your partner the places of interest you are planning to visit in this country during your stay here.
- k. Share in your group an area of concern you have in relation to this programme.
- l. Share in your group the expectations you have about this one month programme and in what other way you want to make use of this experience.

- m. Share with your partner one problem you have recognised about yourself in programmes of this kind in the past and how you plan to overcome that.
- n. Share with your partner one of your strong points as a person and one of your weak points as a person.
- o. Tell your partner something you like in him.

Most of these were conducted in pairs or in triads. Items dealing with the 'self' were kept minimum as in the one month programme there was no provision for working at the self-level. Items on role were not emphasised as the programme was not meant to increase their role effectiveness but to provide them experiences of development banking in different countries. The emphasis was on sharing the cultures and understanding one other. Some of the items were shared only in pairs, some in triads, some in groups of four and some in the total group. There were thirty participants. The microlab was followed by structured exercises on resource utilisation, planning, collaboration, etc. dimensions. The feedback at the end of the programme indicated that the participants gained a great amount of momentum and felt very free during the one month programme as a result of these experiences. In another international group of Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary meeting for a review conference, the microlab was used to intro-

duce them to the unconventional methods of organising the conference and take them through such methods. The Sisters were drawn from all over the world and included the top team of four along with their Superior General from Rome. The conference aimed at reviewing the work done by the Sisters in different countries, their effectiveness as a team, understanding the needs of Sisters working in poorer and backward countries, the context, constraints and difficulties under which they were working, appreciate each others' problems and plan the future directions. Sisters from each country brought a report to discuss and share. The detailed experiences provided to this group are presented elsewhere*. The following items were used in the microlab which was held at the beginning of the conference. One of the constraints this group had was that of language. About a half of them did not know English but knew French and the rest knew English and not fluent in French. During the conference a simultaneous translation system was organised. However, in the microlab the Sisters had to invent their own mechanisms and mostly communicated through slow language. Only the ^{instructions} instructor's were translated into French so that every one understood.

* Pareek, Udai. Process consultation with an international conference. ASCI Journal of Management, 1976

- a. Mill around and while you are moving greet each other non-verbally or through symbols.
- b. Form pairs and introduce to each other non-verbally something about the place where you are working.
- c. Share with each other something that has struck you in this country since the time of your arrival here.
- d. What impresses you most about people in the place you are working. Share with your partner.
- e. Use three adjectives to describe the people with whom you work and communicate them with your partner.
- f. Share in your triad your image of the Sisters of your congregation in countries represented by the other two.
- g. Tell the other Sisters in your triad one thing that you can give from your district to the sisters from the other two countries.
- h. Tell the other Sisters in your triad one thing that you are in need of for your effective work in your district and ask them if they can give you.
- i. Share with the other Sister a small prayer you like. You may recite in your own language and then try to explain.
- j. Share one strong point and weak point of your work in your district with others.

- k. Tell something that you are proud of as a person and something you would like to get rid of as a person.
- l. Share with others how do you feel being here in this country and in this group.
- m. Use three adjectives to describe your image of the young Sisters in your congregation. Share in your group. One of you share common things with all of us.
- n. Break into groups of 4 and suggest different ways of overcoming the language barrier during the conference time. Share in the total community.
- o. Share in your triad the image you have of the superiors team from Rome. Present it as a skit form to total community.
- p. Break into triads of different countries. Share in pairs with each other a pressing problem in your district. After one person narrates, the listener would repeat the summary of what she understood. The third Sister would comment on how well the first Sister narrated and how well the second Sister understood and communicated back. In the triad every one gets an opportunity to comment on the other pair.

B. Motivation Laboratories

The following are some of the items being used in motivation laboratories. Depending on whether the participants are

drawn from the same organisation or different organisations more items could be added. Only some relevant items are presented here. Some of these could be done in pairs or triads and also could be shared in the total community. These items have been used in groups ranging from 9 to 40 in size.

- a. Tell one thing that you like most in your job and one thing that you like least in your job.
- b. Share with your partner what is it that is a driving force in making you do the job you are doing in your organization.
- c. Think of a successful person you know of and describe his behaviour to your partner without revealing his name.
- d. Share with your partner the weak points you see in him.
- e. Describe the climate of your organisation non-verbally to your partner.
- f. Think of a significant incident in your life and describe it to your partner, how you felt and why was it significant to you.
- g. Use three adjectives to describe the strong points of your subordinates and three to describe their weak points as you see them.
- h. Use three adjectives to describe the strengths and weaknesses of your superiors.
- i. Recall a situation where you felt very powerful and narrate it to others in your triad/group/partner.

- j. Share with your partner an important goal of your life.
- k. Share with your partner a strength you have in you that you think helps you achieving your goal.
- l. Share with your partner a weak point you have in you that you fear might block you from achieving your goal.
- m. Ask your partner about what outside help can you take for overcoming something that comes in your way to achieve an important goal.
- n. Share with your partner something you consider as significant about your role.
- o. Share with your partner something you consider as a strong point in you and another you consider as a weak point in you.
- p. Share with your partner one of your dreams.
- q. Imagine yourself 10 years from now and describe to your partner some of the fantasies you have.
- r. Tell a story you like.
- s. Share with your partner your ideas about how children should be treated by parents in relation to their studies in the school.
- t. Share with others in your group what motivated you to attend this course and how do you feel being here.
- u. Share with others something that has struck you in this place.

- v. Tell the other person something you like in him and something you do not like in him.
- w. Think of a situation in your life^{or}/in your role when you failed and share with your partner how you reacted and felt in that situations.
- x. What is your style of reacting to strangers. Ask your partner for the same and share with him if you reacted differently.
- y. Share with your partner one complaint you have from your wife/husband, one complaint you often have from your children, one complaint you had from your teacher, when you were young, one complaint you have from your subordinates and one from your superiors.
- z. Share similarly one thing on which your wife compliments you, one on which your kids like you, one on which your teachers used to compliment you, one on which your superiors complimented you.

C. Family Planning Programmes

In a one-week programme of training labour welfare officers as change agents in family welfare different dimensions were covered. This was not a laboratory programme, but a lecture, case study, discussion, role play and action planning methodology based workshop-cum-training programme. Two days of the six days were devoted to

motivate the welfare officers to work as family welfare change agents and to help them appreciate the population problem and the need for family planning. Next two days were devoted to expose them to different techniques of family planning, provide them technical details, and detailed knowledge about rumours, belief systems and orientations of illiterate public to various fertility regulation methods. The last two days were devoted for action plans and role plays on dealing with workers. Detailed outline of the training design is presented elsewhere*. The following items were used in a full session devoted to ^{the} micro-lab of this programme.

- a. Share with your partner how you spend your leisure time and the hobbies you have.
- b. Describe to your partner some things about which you are happy and some things about which you are unhappy.
- c. Imagine that you have achieved everything you want. Share with your partner how would life be looking to you, what things would you be having with you, etc.
- d. Share with your partner your future ambitions and dreams, about your own career to the career of your children and other comforts.
- e. What are some of the comforts you have at present about which you are happy? Tell your partner.

- f. Imagine that the country has developed very well economically in the next 20 years. We have progressed in technology, industry, education, health and in all aspects. Discuss in your small group how your home, its surroundings and this city would ^{look} look/like. Present a tourist's description of this city and a foreign visitor's description of your home. Write these descriptions in the next 15 minutes as imaginatively as you can.
- g. Imagine now that the population has grown at the same rate as it has been growing so far in your country. Unemployment has increased. Resources depleted, and many other things have happened because population growth could not be controlled. Imagine yourself in the year 1999 and write an essay about how this city looks like, how your home is in this city, educational facilities, the comforts you would be having, etc. Take 15 minutes and try to be as imaginative as you can. (Share in the total community).
- h. Think of three adjectives to describe the family planning methods and share them in your group.
- i. Think of an image to depict the family planning programmes in industry and share with your group.
- j. Share with your partner two of your views about family planning one positive and one negative.

- k. Describe to your partner a couple you know of who has a small family and another couple of a large family and contrast their life as an outside observer.
- l. Imagine your group to be a group of workers in a mill. Give them a two minute lecture on family planning.
- m. Share with your partner if you are using any family planning practices.
- n. Identify one thing that you can do in your role as a Labour Welfare Officer to contribute to the cause of family planning and discuss it with your partner. Your partner may raise questions.
- o. Think of a situation where you influenced another person or group of persons because of your abilities rather than because of your role. Describe that situation to your partner and tell him how effective you have been.
- p. Narrate one of your success experiences in life and one of your failure experiences and the lessons you have learnt from them.

As may be evident from the above items microlab here focussed mainly on inducing orientations to think about family planning in the participants through fantasy. It also attempted at covering some dimensions that they were likely to face in the training programme. The contrasting experiences provided in the beginning

followed by the items on introducing change and style as change agents, satisfactions one can have as change agents, are planned in a sequence.

1 In another programme intended to train family planning workers in communication skills and skills of transacting with villagers, the following items were used. The participants were drawn from Primary Health Centers and included extension educators and family planning health assistants. The programme used laboratory methodology, using feedback on field observations made earlier, role plays, personal sharing, discussions and experimentation using actual transactions in the villages. Twelve workers were drawn from two PHCs and were known to one other. The microlab lasted two hours. Usual milling around was used.

- a. What is something that struck you most in your activities this month? Share with your partner ~~one~~ thing that satisfied you most, and one thing that you disliked most.
- b. Use three adjectives to describe the people in the area you work. Share with the total group.
- c. Use three adjectives to describe the doctors of your PHC.
- d. Use three adjectives to describe your work.
- e. Use three adjectives to describe your male colleagues.
- f. Use three adjectives to describe the female colleagues in your PHC.

- g. Think of a client with whom you felt most comfortable and you were able to convince him and make him adopt family planning. Share your experience including how you approached him first, how many visits you had to make, ultimately how he accepted, what services you provided later, etc.
- h. Think of a client with whom you tried best and could not succeed. Narrate your experiences with this client. Your partner may ask you questions.
- i. Share with your partner two things that satisfy you and two things that satisfy you least in your job.
- j. Describe to your partner an exciting experience or a wonderful thing you have done in your life apart from what you did in your job.
- k. Imagine that you are transferred to a new PHC. In this PHC there is no doctor and there are only paramedical staff and you are the boss. You have to plan the family planning programme in this block. Outline the various steps you would like to undertake in starting your work and share in your group.
- l. Share a few images you have of the family planning programme in your triad. One member from your triad would summarise for the total group.

- m. Imagine your partner to be a resistant client and try to convince him about family planning in 3 minutes. After 3 minutes ask your partner for comments about your performance.
- n. Think of a new idea you have in executing the family planning programme in the villages allotted to you. Imagine your partner to be your superior and try to sell the idea.
- o. Choose a person from your PHC whom you know and tell him one of his strong points as a family planning worker. After both of you finish tell him one of his weak points as a FP worker.
- p. If you were to be made the District Family Planning Officer what are some of the things you would like to do for making FP workers more effective. Think for 3 minutes and share in your group. One member from the group to summarise for the benefit of others.

In another programme meant for the district level officers of medical and health services who are also working in family planning the following are some items used. They were being given an orientation programme in new techniques of management. The programme was mostly lecture and case method based although the first two days were devoted to some behavioural science based

concepts. All of them were visiting the Indian Institute of Management, where the training was held, for the first time. The microlab was arranged as a post-dinner session on the previous night. The officers were known to each other and they all had reservations about use of management in their jobs.

- a. What is it that struck you most here? Share with your partner.
- b. Describe to your partner how you were deputed to this programme and what were your first reactions.
- c. What image did you have of the physical and spatical structure of this city and this institute before you came here and what were your first reactions after arrival here.
- d. What is it that you like most in your job and what is that you like least.
- e. Use three adjectives to describe your medical officers, three to describe your ANMs, three to describe the FPHAs and three to describe your EEs and three to describe yourselves. Share with the total group on each item separately.
- f. Describe your image of management in one sentence. Share with the total group.
- g. Share with your partner one of your strong points and one of your weak points.

- h. Tell your partner something you like in him/her.
- i. Divide yourself into two groups and prepare a skit to communicate non-verbally the future of family planning programmes in India.
- j. Share in your small group your expectations from this programme. One member from each group to summarise for the total group.

D. In Education

Microlabs could also be used in programmes of education: with students, with teachers, with educational administrators, with change agents and several other groups. Its use with a few such groups is presented below.

In a one week programme on Managing Change in Academic Institutions, organised for the senior administrators from institutions of higher education, the following were some of the items used. In the actual programme there were lectures, case discussions, feedback through instruments and action plans for change.

- a. Introduce yourself by telling the other person something about you other than your name, age, role and designation.
- b. Describe to the other person the organisational climate in your institution using a few adjectives.
- c. Share with your partner one thing that you like most in your job and one thing that you like least in your job.

- d. Think of a situation where you were instrumental in bringing about a change in any place you worked in the past and share it with your partner.
- e. Share with your partner the image you have about your style as a change agent, when your partner shares with you, you may ask him questions.
- f. What is one thing in your institution that you find as difficult to change.
- g. Share with your partner something about which you are proud of.
- h. Share with your partner one thing that you would like to improve.

In another 3-days workshop for primary and middle school teachers of a rural area the following items were used in the microlab. The programme which was attended by about 20 teachers attempted at inculcating in them a desire to make the curriculum they teach more relevant to the villagers, help the teachers participate in community activities and collaborate more with one another and people in the village. Before the workshop, a survey indicated that villagers had very negative images of the teachers as well as the present day education.

- a. What are the three different resources you see in the village where your school is located. Share with your partner.
- b. Identify one area where improvement can be made in the curriculum you teach to your students. Share your thoughts on how such improvements could be made with your partner.
- c. Share with your partner something that you like most in your job and something you like least in your job.
- d. Break into groups of 4 and prepare a list of adjectives to describe the villagers of the villages where you work.
- e. Make a list of adjectives to describe the inspectors of schools.
- f. Make a list of adjectives to describe the teachers like you in general.
- g. Find out one mechanism by which the resources in this village can be used better.
- h. What is one thing you would like to see changed in this village.
- i. Share with your partner what is ^{thing} one/you can do to help this village change.
- j. Mention two things about which you are proud of.

- k. Mention one of your weaknesses.
- l. Tell your partner something that pleases him and ask him if he is pleased.

Combinations of these items and some items from the earlier programmes were used in starting a four day programme of headmasters of public schools. The programme attempted at training them as change agents.

E. Creativity and Problem Solving

The following are some of the items that could be used while introducing a programme in creativity and problem solving. These items deal with various factors associated with creativity.

- a. Introduce yourself non-verbally to your partner.
- b. Select any one object you find in this room and describe the various uses of that object in 2 minutes time. Your partner will time and count the number of uses you cite. After you are through your partner will select another object and repeat the same.
- c. Add ten more uses of the object your partner has chosen in 3 minutes.
- d. List the various attributes of a pen you have in your pocket. List as many as you can.
- e. Share your image and attitudes about modern art with your partner.

- f. Think of a creative person you know and describe him to your partner without naming him. Your partner may ask you several questions.
- g. Choose an animal that best describes your role in your organisation. Tell your partner why you chose that particular animal.
- h. Share with your partner your reactions to the programme schedule being not circulated to you so far.
- i. Imagine that plants and animals have been crossbred to produce planimals. Describe how life in this world looks like in your triad.
- j. Think of the physiological process—excretion through various mechanisms in the body (anal, skin, fus, nasal, etc.). Think of all the processes in an organisation which parallel the excretion process. Share with your partner.
- k. Coin four new words using English and one other language you know. Give a meaning and share with your partner.
- l. How would you plant four rose plants so that the distance between any two is same as that between any other two. Take 3 minutes to think about it. After that share with your partner what processes went on in your mind.

- m. Describe the various associations the word ARM arouses in you.
- n. Use anything in this room and try to prepare something you like to give as a present to some one whom you like. You have 10 minutes.
- o. Assemble in small groups and prepare a skit to non-verbally present your feelings and reactions to this lab.

Microlab, thus, can be used in different situations and in different ways.