

Coping with the Qualities of Giftedness

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Abstract

There are a lot of group training sessions to train people in more effective behaviour. The authors are experienced in the development and execution of such courses for small groups of gifted adults. Because literature about this theme is scarce, the authors like to share their experiences. First, we explain the theoretical model we use in the training course. Then, we explain its design and how it works. Finally, we describe our experiences with the first three groups to go through the process.

Keywords: Qualities of giftedness; models; capacity building; training.

An existential model of giftedness

We have chosen the descriptive model of Kooijman & van Thiel [2008], which is now in widespread use in the Netherlands.

Gifted adults can be described in the following terms:

- Highly intelligent (thinking);
- Autonomous (being);
- Multi-faceted feeling;
- Passionate and curious (wanting);
- Highly sensitive (perceiving);
- Creation directed (acting); and
- Sparkling, original, quick, intense and complex (interplay).

This model can be called existential and was created by means of a Delphi study, which is a method of finding consensus in a group. It was developed by a team of professionals who work with gifted people and are themselves gifted. People who recognize themselves in these terms profit from information about gifted adults and can use the terminology and characterization as examples in coaching. There is no other tool currently available to measure this broad conceptualization of giftedness in a valid way.

Why training course for gifted adults?

Gifted adults have started receiving more attention in the last ten years. It is generally thought that they can quite easily help themselves. However, this often turns out not to be the case, particularly when one was not recognized as gifted during childhood and one does not appreciate being different (Nauta & Corten, 2002; Nauta & Ronner, 2008 & 2013). Contrary to popular belief and even in the hyper-competitive culture of the United States, giftedness is not always an advantage. It can easily lead to problems like performance anxiety, boredom or conflicts at work (Jacobsen, 2000; Streznewski, 1999).

Gifted adults can roughly be divided into three different groups. The first group does not function well and does not realise their full potential. The second group functions without many problems and the third group can manage but needs some assistance once in a while. The third group may need practical support and skills, but can find these in books, articles and courses that take giftedness into account. It is the first group that often needs specialized support and sometimes mental healthcare. Alas, this is not possible in the mainstream, as there are currently no standard mental healthcare interventions that take giftedness into consideration.

The kind of problems the first group experience can be seen where gifted adults write about their experiences – on internet forums, in the newsletters of Mensa (a worldwide society for people with a high general intelligence) and on some LinkedIn groups. Their problems concern making connection with others – at work, with friends and in intimate relationships. Burnout and conflicts at work are particular problems [Van der Waal et al, 2013]. A lot of these people, because of their experiences, start looking for the causes of their problems and find out that giftedness can be a contributing factor. Some gifted adults only discover their own giftedness when their equally gifted children have problems at school, get tested and the parents recognize themselves in the profile.

For a number of the problems of gifted adults, suitable courses already exist – such as those for performance anxiety, assertiveness and stress reduction. The starting point for the design of the group training course was realising that many gifted people don't feel at home in groups of people with average intelligence. The pace of instruction is too slow, so they tend to lose interest and the practical tasks are also unsuitable. When a gifted person is perceived as “showing off”, relationships with fellow students can become difficult. Some become jealous and hostile, while those who find the work a struggle can get so daunted by the comparison that they want to give up. All of these factors were taken into consideration in designing this course.

The design of the course

The purpose of the course is to teach the participants how they could handle their qualities more effectively in daily life. Writing a practical manual for themselves is the main theme of the course and of the homework set after each session.

Experience has told us that these are the situations that most need to be discussed:

- General stress and work-related stress;
- Performance anxiety;
- Hypersensitivity;
- Relationships (private and work-related); and
- Making choices.

Furthermore, it was decided that several theories and models should be taken into account:

- a) The Delphi model of giftedness;
- b) Balancing burden (load) and load capacity;
- c) Coping skills;
- d) Rational emotive therapy and cognitive behavioural principles; and
- e) Values and ethical considerations.

The trainers conduct a short telephone interview with all participants in advance of the training, to ascertain their needs and objectives relative to what the group course can offer. This interview also allows those for whom the course is unsuitable to be referred to a more fitting intervention.

Working with a group consisting solely of gifted adults has the advantage of mutual recognition and potential support. A lot of gifted adults, especially when they are new to their gifted status, hesitate to speak about it for fear of seeming boastful. The course was designed for small groups with a maximum of eight participants, because gifted adults work rather intensely and experience many sensory perceptions. This makes large groups too intense and taxing.

The course consists of four parts, held on four afternoons or two whole days. Recruitment was done within the network of gifted adults and on the website of one of the trainers, which attracted the attention of several potential participants.

The course was structured in advance, for the most part, and then adapted according to the feedback of the participants. They were also given the opportunity of a follow-up telephone call with one of the trainers during the three months after the end of the course.

The First Three Groups

The first three groups had 5, 6 and 8 participants. Their ages ranged from early 20s to late 50s and they all had a regular salaried job. The course was paid for by the disability insurance of one participant and by the employers of two other participants.

At first, most of the group were reluctant to participate, probably because their previous experiences in groups weren't always positive. Once they relaxed, they obviously found it pleasant to meet and share experiences with other gifted adults. Many participants recognized themselves in the stories of others and this made for a tight-knit group with honest and open communication.

It soon became clear that the participants preferred to review the relevant theories at a fast pace, finding a slow pace irritating. The practical exercises – in pairs or plenary – were designed to complement the theory, inspired by situations the participants themselves contributed. It became pretty clear that comprehension of a theory is no guarantee of an instant application of the knowledge.

Rational emotive therapy and cognitive behavioural principles were an eye-opener for most of the participants, although practical applicability was not easily accepted and some resistance was verbalized.

Practical exercises were also not an easy feat for some of the participants. They wanted to achieve the course's objectives, but found themselves feeling defensive. Their unconscious resistance to the new knowledge and methods took the form of either criticizing the theory or calling the behaviour the trainers suggested contrived and impractical.

The trainers responded by giving the participants the choice between learning by experimenting or by further discussion of the theory and searching for relevant examples. The trainers refrained from criticizing or evangelizing, allowing the participants to adapt at their own pace and in their own way. Given respect and a choice, much of the resistance dissolved and progress was made to the satisfaction of everyone involved.

Besides discussing theoretical concepts, participants enjoyed talking freely about being gifted, the consequences thereof for contact with others and the problems it can cause. Sharing problems and solutions was an important part of the course.

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Some reactions by participants:

- The relaxed atmosphere is positive;
- The course has useful information and exercises;
- The course has a varied design, lots of material to work with; and
- Learning focused on methods of working it out for oneself, rather than being given standard one-size-fits-all solutions.

Discussion

The liveliness of the discussions, the persistent attendance and the positive reactions show that this course fills a need for this target group. Not only schoolchildren struggle with giftedness – seemingly successful adults also need coping strategies to deal with their giftedness.

One of the participants said: "I used to want to tell everyone in a meeting how to act. Now I wait until they look at me before I tell them how to handle the problem".

Our aim was to make the course manageable and affordable, taking travelling into account because participants came from all parts of the Netherlands. We chose to hold the course on four

Saturday afternoons, so participants didn't need to take days off work. Due to private obligations, this still proved to be a problem for some participants.

As an experiment, the trainers organised the third training course during two whole days in the week after Christmas, when many people have time off work anyway. The drawback was coping with the intensity of two full days of activity at a time of year with lots of social and practical obligations. Gifted adults can be very sensitive to stimuli and they tend to communicate intensely, so they were rather weary after a full day of the course.

In comparison with regular group courses for the general public, these participants clearly needed to fully comprehend the theoretical model before they could work it through and accept it, to agree with it before they could use it in practice. They tend to be uncomfortable with knowledge that is handed down – they prefer a subject that is open to discussion and well-substantiated before it can be accepted and used. This makes a course for gifted adults more difficult, but also more fascinating and challenging!

Suggestions for trainers

We would like to share some suggestions for trainers wishing to work with groups of gifted adults:

- Work with small groups – a maximum of 8 participants and preferably with two trainers.
- Assess participants in advance by telephone to ensure that the course is appropriate for the individual. Recommend that people with mental health problems seek advice from their doctor, coach or therapist about participating in the course.
- Try to steer abstract and theoretical ramblings that serve as a defensive distraction back towards talking about the personal experiences of the participants.

The intensity of working with a group of gifted individuals is a double edged sword – it can be both invigorating and tiresome. Take regular breaks and discuss your observations of the group in private with your co-trainer.

Any theory that can be reasonably assumed to be new and unfamiliar should be discussed fully. It can be helpful to send relevant literature beforehand.

If participants report that they know this theory already, don't accept it at face value. Ask what they understand about it and encourage further exploration. Be aware that some participants need to have a detached discussion about the theory before they will be willing to put it into practice.

You will be severely tested as a trainer! Take time for discussions with individuals, but keep an eye out for the needs and goals of the whole group.

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