



Trouble-d

The Power of Definition



Focus determines direction

It's amazing how different things look when you're cruising at speed just 10 metres off the ground. "Don't look at the trees, don't look at the fence. You will steer towards whatever you focus on so keep looking straight ahead!"

I could hear the words of my instructor resounding in my head as I clung desperately to the handgrips on my first solo flight with a paraglider, dangling helplessly in mid-air with wind rushing past and a gritted determination not to embarrass myself by hitting a tree or any other bone-breaking object at full velocity.

The instructor's advice resonates with Biblical principles that we do well to consider in our work with young people. Texts such as Deuteronomy 28:14 and Hebrews 12:1-2 caution that fixing our eyes on anything other than Jesus will lead us off the straight and narrow and into serious trouble instead.

What I'm going to do in this short paper, based on this principle that focus determines direction, is to show that the definitions we use to describe the people and situations we encounter do, to a very large extent, determine our focus and, therefore, the direction of our work with young people.

By way of analogy, think back to a time you visited your GP with something like a bad headache. The GP's advice to you (e.g. have a rest; take paracetamol; have your eyes tested) will have been determined almost entirely by what he or she believed to be the cause of the problem and I'm convinced that the same principle (i.e. diagnosis determines intervention) applies equally well to our work with young people.

I will also show how application of this principle can have a very significant impact on our ability to bring about positive change in young people's lives.

Definitions have emotional impact

Picture this. Dark basement, dim lights, smoke-filled room, blaring music. Leather-clad teenage skinheads dancing, stamping, shouting, thrusting Nazi salutes violently into the air as if to stab at some unseen enemy. Dangerous enemies? Evil maniacs? Dregs of society?

Believe me, all of these thoughts, and worse, rang in my head as I struggled to deal with the raging emotional turmoil of this encounter as a Christian youth worker on a social work assignment in Germany.

The ways in which we define people and situations have a powerful impact on the way in which we think about, feel about and respond to those people and situations. It would have been great, I thought, if I could have stayed in professional-Christian mode and looked at these young people with a heart filled with compassion and love, but I couldn't. All I felt was anger, disgust and contempt.

The labels that I and others were using, that defined them as 'neo-Nazis' and 'far-Right', evoked too strong an emotional reaction in me. So much for Christian witness I breathed, as I chastised myself silently.

As youth workers, we know that our experiences can sometimes push us to the outer edges of our ability to cope. This is, paradoxically, the place where we often encounter God, the unexpected place where God reveals himself in almost unrecognisable guises.

I met God that night through the courageous spirit of a young teenage girl who, sensing my obvious discomfort, awkwardly but compassionately explained that these young 'Nazis', her friends, were struggling to find meaning in life, to find employment, to find a place in society where there seemed to be none.

A re-defining principle

It was her perspective, a redefinition of the situation as I experienced it, that helped me to carry on in that work for the remainder of my assignment and to reach out with something approaching genuine care for this particular flock of lost sheep, trying hard all the while to keep mental images of Jesus in view (e.g. Matthew 9:13, 36).

Since that time, I have been struck again and again by the power of definition and redefinition as a means to transform personal perspectives, action strategies and human lives.

I flash back to a to a time when, on a work visit to Lebanon, I found myself chatting informally with a young supporter of Hezbollah who happened to mention the name of his home town. "Oh, isn't that near the security zone?", I asked, hoping that he would be impressed by my knowledge of the region.

"No," he replied with sharp annoyance in his voice, "it is near the occupied territory of South Lebanon. 'Security zone' is the term Israel uses to justify its on-going occupation of our territory".

Although we were in fact describing the same piece of land, the language (i.e. definitions) that we used conveyed all sorts of political assumptions that both framed our thinking and profoundly influenced emotional reactions.

In this instance, I recognised that a shift in my own language (signalling a move towards common metaphorical ground) was going to be absolutely necessary if I was to have any hope at all of creating meaningful relationship with him.

Be aware of ripple effects

This is a very important principle to bear in mind in working with young people, especially when working with volatile teenagers who may already be experiencing all kinds of emotional turmoil. The definitions that we use can be like stones thrown into a pool of water, creating ripples that spread out far from the original point of impact.

We may call these ripples dynamics, and we do well to remember that the word dynamics comes from the same root as the word dynamite.

Andy, normally a confident, cheerful member of a youth group, was angry and agitated when he came in that evening. Something had happened to upset him and he was definitely not going to talk about it. Luke, his closest friend, was also noticeably quiet.

Later that evening, during an apparently friendly kick-around with a football, Andy suddenly launched at Luke and punched him in the face. Moments later, I found myself struggling to hold the two of them apart at arms length, Andy raging in the one hand and Luke staggering in bewilderment in the other.

After some time spent in furious accusation and counter-accusation, with Andy claiming that Luke had made slanderous allegations about his sister's sexual behaviour and Luke denying this vehemently, I managed to persuade them, albeit reluctantly, to sit down on opposite sides of the church office to talk this through with me acting as impromptu mediator.

Andy and Luke sat glaring at each other but refusing outright to speak to each other except via me. I insisted, therefore, that each of them sat silently while the other explained his version of events (that is, his own definition of the situation), asking occasional questions in order to clarify the facts.

After each had presented his own side of the story, I offered my own interpretation (that is, a redefinition) of what had taken place, based on their accounts but including my own observations and comments. It was noticeable how the tension between Andy and Luke began to dissipate as they started to focus on dispute over facts instead of dispute with one-another.

Having established the truth of the matter (which, in this instance, turned out to be an unfortunate misunderstanding), Andy and Luke were able to shake hands and leave the room together.

Choosing the right definition

It can be that our definitions simply affect our ability to be effective. A few years ago, I became responsible for a number of projects working with young single homeless people in the UK. In the early stages, the focus of this work was on dealing with housing-related issues since the main selection criterion for the client group was homelessness and the primary definition of underlying cause was lack of affordable housing.

Having worked very hard to find suitable accommodation for these young people, however, an alarming number became homeless again within just 3-months.

It was clear that the project's initial definition of the situation was either wrong, or at least inadequate. On further exploration, we began to understand that one of the most common underlying reasons for homelessness among our particular client group was relationship breakdown and so befriending, counselling, life-skills and social work were incorporated alongside housing support.

This redefinition led to a change in strategy which, in turn, resulted in a significantly higher degree of success for the project and the young people that we sought to serve.

Definitions have a dynamic influence

Definitions can perform both descriptive and prescriptive functions. Take, for instance, the various roles that Jeffs & Smith (1987) introduced in their now-classic text on work with young people. The metaphors (i.e. definitions) used throughout the book (e.g. redcoat, educator, caretaker) not only describe caricatures of common youth worker roles but can also, insofar as they are adopted by youth workers in practice, have the effect of prescribing their focus.

Sue was my co-worker in a Baptist church youth group and we agreed that her principal role should be that of informal educator. In practice, our definition of Sue's role ('educator') not only described what she did but also actively determined the focus of her work and how she would carry it out.

Most of the youth meetings that Sue led were highly participative and involved creative exploration of live issues for those involved (e.g. sex, money, God). If we had chosen an alternative definition for her work (e.g. 'sports leader'), the focus of her work would have been very different.

The notion of definition and redefinition as dynamic rather than static influences within social interaction was, in essence, the backbone of the PC (that is, 'politically correct', not 'personal computer') movement back in the 1980s/90s.

Postmodernists had identified that human language is able both to express and generate mental and cultural concepts/attitudes and, therefore, the idea became popular that subliminal education could be achieved by introducing deliberate changes in common language.

In order to change public stereotypes of people with HIV/AIDS, for example, the expression dying from AIDS (emphasis: death) was replaced with living with AIDS (emphasis: life).

Excesses of this redefining principle came to bear the brunt of popular humour at the time, especially where language was used euphemistically to disguise the meaning of otherwise unacceptable practices (e.g. 'terminate with extreme prejudice' to describe political assassination), but the basic idea was sound.

Be aware of stereotypes

Take, for example, work with any group of young people, whether in school/college or informal environments. It is quite natural, especially when a group is new, to notice particularly distinctive behaviours of each person in the room.

This one seems enthusiastic, this one obstinate, this one likes to crack jokes etc. The process of identifying characteristics in this way can help both teacher-leader and participants simplify a new situation which could feel, otherwise, quite overwhelming.

As Doel & Sawdon (1999) pointed out, however, group leaders often (a) notice most readily behaviours that they find problematic (e.g. apparent obstinacy) in certain individuals and (b) move all too easily from "Jack sometimes behaves in a way that I find difficult" to "Jack = Difficult".

A certain behaviour may become the defining characteristic of an individual in the worker's mind so that she/he is unable to see beyond it to the person as a whole.

Mark belonged to an urban street gang that was renowned for roaming a particular housing estate at night and intimidating local residents. I was warned by the police that Mark was a troublemaker (notice the label) and commissioned by social services as part of a small detached youth team to spend time on the estate at night to try to get to know gang members.

After learning to find ways to deal with strong initial suspicions, I did start to get to know Mark and, although there was no doubt that he was involved in petty crime on the estate, there was another side of his character that displayed deep despondency with his way of life and a genuine desire to change.

My principal task from that time on became that of helping Mark and significant others in his life to shift their automatic definition of Mark from troublemaker to person as an important starting point to support other changes in his life. Sadly, the last time I saw Mark he was angry and distraught and claimed to have just been assaulted by a police officer. He stopped turning up to meet with me and I never saw him again.

Redefinition in the Bible

You may not be surprised to note that this principle of definition and redefinition is, in fact, embedded deep in the pages of the Bible. Notice, for instance, Abram's name change to Abraham (Genesis 17:5) or Simon's name change to Peter (John 1:42). In each of these cases, God's renaming (i.e. re-definition) of the person has a symbolic meaning that is intended to inspire and to transform.

God is able to transform even the most challenging of human experiences. See, for instance, Jesus' dealing with Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:35-42). When Jesus declared that, "The child is not dead but asleep" (v39), was he deluded (as the crowd thought), speaking figuratively or, perhaps, redefining the situation from a uniquely divine perspective?

I would dare to propose that this latter possibility is true (See John 11:11-14 (Lazarus' death) for a similar example).

There is, however, a very great difference between redefining situations according to our terms and God redefining them according to His.

Paul reinforces this point when he comments that, "...we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Corinthians 2:13-14).

We do well to hear God's own voice if we desire to speak with his authority.

Conclusion

We have seen that definition and redefinition can have considerable influence over our thinking and emotions as well as the orientation of our work with young people and our overall effectiveness. We have also seen that definition and redefinition can contribute to profound personal, interpersonal and social change.

If we want to know God's perspective in our work with young people, however, we do need his Spirit to reveal it to us. I believe that this calls for a life of prayer and study of the Bible alongside any other training that we may have received. Let us remember that it is only Jesus who can transform the young people with whom we work into the living, dynamic children of God (John 1:12-13).

Key points (summary)

- ✓ The way we define a situation determines the way we are likely to intervene in it.
- ✓ The definitions we use have an effect on our thinking, feelings and behaviour.
- ✓ Finding common definitions can help build relationships and resolve conflict.
- ✓ Definitions have the power to prescribe and to engender positive change.
- ✓ Only God's Spirit can bring about transformation to eternal life.

Prompts for reflection-action

- 🗨️ How would you describe the focus of your work with young people? Jot down three things that you aim to achieve through it and ask a friend or colleague to comment on what is written and not written on your list. Do any of your aims need to be redefined in order to be more effective?
- 🗨️ What words would you use to describe key characteristics of the young people you work with, either as individuals or as groups as a whole? Write down the characteristics on paper with "How this contributes to the group positively" to one side and "How this affects the group negatively" to the other. What actions could you take to build on the positives and reduce the impact of the negatives?
- 🗨️ Think of the person you find most difficult to deal with in your work with young people. Jot down the things you find most difficult on one side of a sheet of paper. Now turn the paper over and write down things that you share in common that could serve as bridge-builders in your next encounter.
- 🗨️ What role do you believe the Holy Spirit plays in your work with young people, e.g. in/through you, individual young people, their families, schools, youth groups, the church etc. How does this belief influence and inform your actual work with young people?

References

- Doel, M. & Sawdon, C. (1999). *The Essential Groupworker*. Jessica Kingsley Publications Ltd. London.
- Jeffs, T. & Smith, M. (1987). *Youth Work*. Macmillan Press Ltd. London.

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In an age when young people find themselves increasingly defined by labels, this short piece is a timely resource for Christians and others working with young people - as teachers, social workers or informal educators.

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