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INSIGHTS

Offender Preparation & Education Network, Inc.

Cognitive Skills Aid Clients at *El Rio*

Cognitive skills education is an integral part of the curriculum taught at El Rio, a highly structured and effective alternative to incarceration program for parole violators and felony defendants mandated to treatment by the courts or community corrections agencies in New York City. The cognitive model suggests that offender rehabilitation and crime prevention can be achieved through cognitive skills education.

Studies have shown that drug use by participants involved in a drug court program is very low. The percentage of clean drug tests for current drug court participants in a survey of 14 drug courts ranged between 84% and 98%. The percentage of drug court participants who are rearrested while they are in a drug court program is also very low. A national survey of drug courts, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), found rearrest rates fell between 2% and 20% for drug court participants. Of those graduates who were rearrested, less than 3% were arrested for a violent offense, and of those, most were misdemeanors. The majority of rearrests were for new drug possession violations or traffic violations (Drug Courts Program Office, 1999).

In 1995, I started utilizing a cognitive model of delinquency prevention and offender rehabilitation developed by Robert R. Ross, Elizabeth A. Fabiano and Frank Porporino, three researchers and trainers from the Correctional Service of Canada. From my own research and during many discussions with these colleagues, it was clear that cognitive skills education could impact

clients in the American criminal justice system in many positive ways. In 2003, I was hired to facilitate numerous groups each week at El Rio, a full-service drug treatment program in the Bronx, New York. This evolved into a great opportunity to adapt aspects of the Cognitive Skills Training Program from Canada to American parole violators and felony defendants.

The basic assumption of the program is that the offender's thinking, not his or her behavior, should be the primary target for offender rehabilitation. Improving an individual's cognitive skills may help to prevent him/her from engaging in anti-social behaviors by equipping the individual with the essential skills for making a successful pro-social adjustment. Cognitive skills, acquired either through life experience or through direct intervention, may

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serve to help the individual relate to his or her environment in a more adaptive fashion and to reduce the chances of his/her adopting a criminal life-style when a pro-social lifestyle does not seem possible for the individual. Such a conceptualization of criminal behavior has important implications for correctional programming (Ross, Fabiano, Ross, 1991).

The Cognitive Skills Training Program

The Cognitive Skills Training Program, based on the cognitive model, is the core component and the basis for the Living Skills Programming within the Correctional Service of Canada. The program suggests that the offender be viewed as an active participant in his criminal behavior, as a decision-maker who is poorly equipped cognitively to cope successfully, and as a person who must be taught rather than treated. The cognitive model suggests that offender rehabilitation and crime prevention can be achieved through educational programming. Accordingly, within the Cognitive Skills Training Program, emphasis is placed on teaching offenders social competence by focusing on:

- Thinking skills, problem-solving, and decision-making;
- General strategies for recognizing problems, analyzing them;
- Conceiving and considering alternative non-criminal solutions to them;
- Formulating plans;
- Thinking logically, objectively, and rationally without over-generalizing, distorting facts, or externalizing blame;
- Calculating the consequences of their behavior, learning to stop and think before they act;
- Going beyond an egocentric view of the world and beginning to comprehend and consider the thoughts and feelings of other people;
- Improving interpersonal problem-solving skills and developing coping behaviors which can serve as effective alternatives to anti-social or criminal behavior;
- Viewing frustrations as problem-solving tasks and not just as personal threats;
- Developing a self-regulatory system so that their pro-social behavior is not dependent on external control;
- Controlling their life; that what happens depends in large measure on their thinking and the behavior it leads them to (Fabiano, Robinson, Porporino, 1991).

The Cognitive Skills Training Program consists of the following areas: 1) Problem-solving; 2) Creative thinking; 3) Values enhancement; 4) Social skills; 5) Negotiation skills and 6) Management of emotions, especially anger; and 7) Critical reasoning.

Problem-Solving

Many clients at El Rio fail to recognize that interpersonal problems exist or will occur. If they do recognize the issues, they still fail to understand them. In addition, some of the clients do not or cannot consider alternative solutions to problems. Through problem-solving exercises, the students can learn to stop responding in their old ways which are ineffective.

Efficient problem-solvers first define the problem they face, then look back and consider its cause and all of the possible solutions, anticipate the possible consequences of these options, and then carefully plan step-by-step means to solve it, while taking the perspective of other people into account. They finally consider an alternative plan if it is necessary, based on the results. Of course, the offenders may not be aware of the thinking steps they follow because they have learned them sufficiently well that they have become automatic and the steps blend together in a single process. Problem-solving may *appear* to be a single process, but it is simple only for those who have *learned* the component skills and *practiced* using them for a considerable length of time.

Offenders need to be taught all the steps and then need to practice them in the group and outside until they become automatic. They must also practice them in situations in which they are rewarded for doing so because they yield success in solving actual problems (Ross, Fabiano, Ross, 1991).

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El Rio is designed to enable participants to practice strategies with actual problems. Clients are routinely taught how to analyze the alternative solutions they have generated, to evaluate the consequences of each option, to select the best alternative, and to determine what behaviors are necessary to solve the problem.

Creative Thinking

When I worked with researchers at the Correctional Service in Canada, they reported that many offenders experienced cognitive rigidity; that is, they clung to their ideas even if the evidence was contrary. It was as if they were trapped by their own ideas.

When I came to El Rio, I developed a group called “Institutionalization” which allows the clients to realize the following errors in thinking:

- 1) If one persists in conceptualizing new situations or problems in terms of views which one had developed from former situations without considering their appropriateness in the new situation, the person will experience basic difficulties in forming alternative conceptualizations. This cognitive inflexibility may give the client major problems in comprehending social problems, complex situations, or changing circumstances.
- 2) If one is not willing to face change in his or her environment, the offender may feel overwhelmed and may engender maladaptive and inappropriate behavior.
- 3) Cognitive inflexibility leads to repetitive behavior. The offender who persists in repeating his or her anti-social acts in spite of repeated punishment and little reward may not only be risk-taking; his or her behavior may actually reflect a basic cognitive deficit—an inability to develop alternative views of the world and to conceptualize alternative ways of achieving his or her goals or solving the problem.

At El Rio, the clients are learning about Edward de Bono’s ideas about creative thinking. For example, offenders learn about “lateral thinking,” which encourages them to elicit new ideas without fear of retaliation. As a result, clients learn to apply creative thinking to many different situations in a deliberate and systematic way.

Values Enhancement

None of the cognitive skills training will be effective with clients if they don’t learn about values. We don’t want to train more skilled offenders!

Ross, Fabiano, and Ross believe that there is one universal value which all individuals should adopt: concern for the feelings of other people. It is this value which the authors of the Cognitive Skills program believe must be taught to offenders; it is this value which is the focus of their cognitive skills educational program.

The general approach at El Rio is to teach empathy to the clients. In order to do this effectively, the offenders’ egocentric thinking must be constantly challenged. The client learns to consider the views, wishes, attitudes, and feelings of other people. Ross, Fabiano, and Ross pointed out in the training sessions that participants need to come to seriously question and examine their ideas about many important matters of morality, and more importantly, the offenders need to consider the points of view of other people.

Social Skills

Many clients at El Rio behave in anti-social ways because they lack the skills to behave in a pro-social manner. Many offenders lack the skills to interact positively with peers, counselors, employers, and family members. The ability to interact in social situations in such a way that one gains acceptance and reinforcement, rather than punishment and rejection, requires that the clients at El Rio develop an adequate repertoire of thinking and social skills. Listening skills, interviewing skills, as well as conversational skills, are taught on an on-going basis, allowing the clients to learn how to build stronger communities.

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Negotiation Skills

During my years as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin, Professor D. David Mortensen taught me about personal styles of conflict resolution developed by R. J. Sternberg and L. J. Soriano. At El Rio, we teach clients to take another person's interests into account when attempting to resolve a conflict, and to forgive and forget. I encourage all practitioners to read work by Sternberg and Soriano.

Professor Mortensen writes in his book entitled *Miscommunication*:

If something is bothersome, it is not necessary to pretend that nothing has happened. It is possible to let the other person know right away. By identifying communicative failures in this way, truth and openness aided the process of searching for mutual understanding (p. 155, 1997).

The Management of Anger and Other Emotions

There will be times when the problem an offender encounters will make him or her highly aroused both emotionally and physiologically. It is clear that clients cannot avoid all conflict.

Emotions, of course, are a crucial aspect of thinking. There are few thoughts without emotion; few emotions without thoughts. The emotion is often stronger than and overrides the thought. It is imperative that the offenders learn to use cognitive techniques to manage their emotions so that they no longer are simply controlled by them.

A moderate level of arousal in conflict situations is both natural and essential since it energizes and can serve to motivate problem-solving activity. Very strong feelings and high levels of arousal, however, interfere with the individual's application of cognitive skills which he or she has no difficulty in using when he or she is calm.

In large measure, the client's success at El Rio (and elsewhere) in social adaptation will depend on his or her ability to: 1) Respond to interpersonal conflict in a manner which effectively prevents him or her from becoming emotionally aroused; 2) Maintain or reduce his or her

level of arousal to a moderate level in emotionally provoking situations; 3) Persist in applying the cognitive skills even when his or her emotional arousal is high.

The ability to handle all emotions, especially anger, in a sophisticated manner, can be developed in two ways:

- 1) By *practicing* cognitive skills so frequently that they become automatic responses.
- 2) By *practicing these skills under emotionally arousing conditions*.

Practitioners in the field need to think about the application of the cognitive skills under conditions which correspond as closely as possible to the emotionally charged conflicts the offenders are likely to encounter outside of the sessions.

Critical Reasoning

All clients at El Rio need to learn how to think *critically*. That type of thinking involves rational, careful, logical analysis of the situation. Critical analysis also involves conclusions that are based on correct and sufficient information. It is easy for offenders to include biases, unwarranted assumptions, distorted facts, and untested opinions, but these negative aspects of thinking must be challenged by the facilitator.

The thinking of many offenders is emotional rather than rational. As a result, they evidence many erroneous beliefs and unreasonable attitudes which they cling to stubbornly and rigidly, impervious to new information. That same lack of critical reasoning may make the clients easily misled by others because they are unable to adequately judge the reasonableness of information that is suggested to them. If we are to build stronger communities, we must teach offenders to think critically so they stop turning on one another in their neighborhoods.

Training in critical reasoning fosters very positive qualities: 1) intellectual curiosity; 2) objectivity; 3) flexibility; 4) sound judgment; 5) open-mindedness; 6) relevance; 7) persistence in seeking evidence; 8) decisiveness; and 9) respect for other points of view (D'Angelo, 1971).

Conclusion

El Rio, a highly structured and effective licensed substance abuse treatment program, offers an alternative to incarceration for parole violators and felony defendants arrested for drug-related crimes and mandated to treatment by the courts or community corrections agencies. El Rio is based in the Bronx, New York, and is a prison-and-community-based program in the Osborne Association.

Cognitive skills are routinely taught in the various groups designed for the clients at El Rio. The cognitive model suggests that offender rehabilitation and crime prevention can be achieved through cognitive skills education. This author has worked extensively with The Cognitive Skills Training Program, developed by Ross, Fabiano, and Porporino.

Practitioners are encouraged to teach the seven basic areas of cognitive skills education discussed in this article:

1) Problem-solving; 2) Creative thinking; 3) Values

enhancement; 4) Social skills; 5) Negotiation skills; 6) Management of emotions, especially anger; and 7) Critical reasoning.

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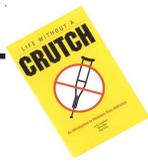
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Dr. Kimora has a Ph.D. in Education from the University of Minnesota. Her published doctoral dissertation entitled "The need for cognitive skills training in correctional vocational educational programming" was published in the *Yearbook of Correctional Education, 1998-99*.

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