

The Delphi Method

By Bill Carlson

The facilitator turned and briskly walked away from a table where eight teachers were seated. As she distanced herself from the teachers, one of whom has just stated concerns about the practical value of the training, she snapped, “Oh, does anyone else feel that way?”

Not waiting for a response from any of the 175 teachers-in-training, she continued a brief monologue that, in effect, diverted the group’s focus away from the teacher’s critical comment. The training session, barely ruffled, flowed smoothly on.

This is just one of many such tricks used by facilitators skilled in applying the Delphi method of group control. It can be used effectively to defuse an upset student’s parent or to bring massive changes to an entire K-12 education system.

For example, a concerned mother makes an appointment with her child’s elementary school principal to complain about an ongoing classroom issue. The principal, after listening to the problem, calmly states, “But Mrs. Jones, you are the only one who has ever complained about this.”

Concluding the conversation, a bewildered Mrs. Jones, having just been ‘Delphied,’ leaves the school site feeling as if she had behaved like a trouble-making whiner. Later, the principal may look into Mrs. Jones’ complaint and quietly oblige it, or add it to the growing list of related complaints.

The Delphi can also be used with pliant school councils to bring in peculiar curriculum or experimental teaching methods, no matter how ineffective. Do you like the present heavy emphasis on the dubious cooperative learning experiment? If not, a facilitator can help you like it!

The Delphi Technique was originally conceived as a way to obtain the opinion of experts without necessarily bringing them together face to face. The Rand Corporation did much of the early work. Education adapted — or more accurately, corrupted — the Delphi method to become a means to achieve group consensus for pre-set objectives.

No time for questions at the end of your session? Not-so-subtle reminders that your child might be punished if you are unruly? Former allies on your school council who suddenly see the light? All classic Delphi tactics!

If the technique has been applied skillfully, Delphi targets rarely, if ever, know that they are being manipulated. So, are you a Delphi target?

(Mr. Carlson is a retired supervising parole agent and school board trustee in California.)