The Praise of Audacity (De Lof der Stoutheid)

Dies Lecture by Prof. dr. Henk T. van der Molen, Dean of the Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences

104th Dies Natalis Erasmus University Rotterdam, Wednesday 8 November 2017

Dear colleagues and students, and all others who are present,

I would like to start with two questions to all of you.

First question: who has ever read the book Moriae Encomium? You have to be honest. Please raise your hands (response).

Actually, this is the Latin title of Erasmus' book The Praise of Folly (in Dutch: De Lof der Zotheid).

My second question is: who has ever been reading this book either in Dutch or in English? (response: I am happy to see that is quite a bit more!).

I received this book in 1987 as a birthday present from my first Ph. D. student. It took several years before I decided to read it. In fact that was part of my preparation for my first inaugural lecture in 1994, which was entitled The Communicative Detective. Plea for a transparent applied psychology (Van der Molen, 1994). In that lecture I mentioned that I really had been inspired by The Praise of Folly, without knowing that my next and most probably final professional destination would be the Erasmus University here in Rotterdam.

I reached this destination in 2001 when we started the new and modern psychology program under the leadership of founding dean Henk Schmidt. The inspiration by Erasmus himself has continued in the choice of the title of this Dies Natalis lecture: The Praise of Audacity, in Dutch De Lof der Stoutheid, mainly to be understood as Stoutmoedigheid, although 50 gram of Naughtiness may also be included.

The concept of audacity is partly the opposite of the concept of shyness, which was the subject of my own dissertation (Van der Molen, 1984; Van der Molen, 1985; Van der Molen, 1989). To be more specific, this subject was the development, execution and evaluation of courses for people suffering from extreme shyness, or in clinical psychological terms social anxiety. Actually, it has been the Rector Magnificus Huib Pols who has suggested to use this theme today. Although I have not been dealing with shyness for many years, I felt honored by the request and have taken the challenge. The problem of shyness was already described by Erasmus:

“Isocrates was so shy that he never dared to open his mouth in public. Or Cicero, the great founder of the Roman eloquence, could never begin to speak without an odd kind of trembling, like a boy that got the hiccough;…” They were looking maybe like Hans Teeuwen. (Video 1).

Cumulative Microtraining Method
I have also been challenged because the so-called microtraining method, originally developed by the American Allen Ivey (1971), and expanded to a Cumulative Microtraining method by Lang and myself in the nineties of the last century (Lang & Van der Molen, 1992), that we have been using in those courses for shy people, is nowadays still actual in the training of professional skills in many of the educational programs within the Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences. That is - as you probably know - the new name of our Faculty of Social Sciences.

This method is a well-structured didactic approach, founded in social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) which consists of six steps.

1. Theoretical instruction consisting of a minilecture about a specific social skill, such as asking questions or responding to criticism.
2. Modeling by means of video examples. Different fragments are shown each time. The “wrong” examples show inadequate use of the skill. The “good” example illustrates adequate use of the skill.
3. The skills are practiced in brief role-plays of about 5 minutes.
4. After the roleplay the trainee receives constructive feedback on the application of the skill from fellow trainees and from the trainer. For the learning process especially positive feedback is most important. From many studies it is known that positive reinforcement works much better than negative feedback. By the way, that is not only the case in education, it is also true for work behaviour of employees.
5. The trainer gives a summary of the application by the trainee of the skills and ends up with learning points.
6. The trainees receive homework to apply the skills in their own life.

Actually, referring to the 20th century novelist Anna Blaman, the slogan of the course was:

“This is the general guideline:
Do the things
You know you have to do
Even if you are trembling with fear like an aspen leaf,
But do them!”

The method is called cumulative because every session a new skill is added to the preceding skills. In the course for the shy people, that lasted 13 sessions of 2.5 hours each, we discriminated between listening skills and sender or assertive skills. To illustrate the general concept of assertiveness we used the following modeling video. Notice that I was working as a bit naughty waiter in an Italian ice shop in those days.

Video 2

Example 1. Subassertive

I think you all recognize this kind of situation. From research it is known that people who mostly tend to be subassertive develop a low self-esteem, feelings of depression and sometimes even loneliness. Let us look at another response style.
Video 3

Example 2. Aggressive

Although this response may look funny, it is also not adequate since it may easily cause conflicts and shame in people surrounding the person under attention. If this anger occurs frequently, other people might start to be afraid of that person or they may dislike him more and more. How could he do better?

Video 4

Example 3. Assertive

In this situation you see that the person is standing up for himself in an appropriate and quiet manner. Moreover, he reaches his goal without being offensive and his partner might be a bit proud of him. In general, assertiveness means: standing up for oneself without needlessly hurting others.

In the development and persistence of shyness there is often a vicious circle and we have chosen a training method to break through this circle. I will illustrate this with the next Figure in which the theory about the different aspects of shyness together with the elements of the training have been summarized.

Figure 1. Theory of shyness and training method

Let us first look at the left part of this Figure. We say that someone suffers from shyness when he or she frequently does not know how to cope with social situations. This “not knowing how to cope” may be caused by a social skills deficiency. This ignorance can also be caused by inhibitions or from a lack of audacity. Shy persons believe that they
cannot cope with the situation, and the execution of the skills is then suppressed. In both cases this “not knowing what to do” is followed by fear, negative self-evaluations, and negative feelings, that can be also expressed physically in various ways: sweating, trembling and blushing. If you notice that you are blushing, you have another negative self-evaluation, and even get more red: a small vicious circle within the larger one. As a consequence, the person will probably avoid such social situations. The effect of this avoidant behavior is that the social skills are not practiced and thus not reinforced. A final result is that the chance of performing socially adequate behavior is reduced. And then the circle is round.

Let us now turn to the right hand side of the Figure. Lessons about the different aspects of shyness intend to give some understanding of this specific personal problem. That is also called psychoeducation. Actually we choose to speak in terms of education instead of psychotherapy to reduce the risk of stigmatization and to lower the threshold for the trainees. The structured training of skills aims to add the adequate use of social skills and to reduce feelings of fear. Lessons and exercises on irrational cognitions like “Everybody thinks that I am boring” aim to reduce negative self-evaluations and anticipatory fear. Relaxation training is directed at the reduction of physical symptoms like trembling and blushing. Finally, the intention of the homework assignments is to practice the skills in real life, to reduce avoidance behavior and to experience some success.

I will give you one example of a trainee. Nowadays I have to say: he had a migration background, originally coming from Surinam. So, his face was black. Despite this fact he was extremely suffering from the physical feeling that he was blushing and that other people could see that. This is a concrete example of an irrational thought: “Everybody notices that I am blushing …and that is terrible.” To prevent that others could see his blushing face, if possible he decided to choose such a position in a group that the sun would shine on his face. His thought was: “If others now might see that I am blushing, they will ascribe that to the heat of the sun”.

Effects of the course

Like many others this man was helped greatly by the course. Of course I cannot explain the whole randomized controlled effect study, but the effects on the variables knowledge about shyness, behavioural communication skills, feelings of anxiety, irrational cognitions, avoidance behavior and self-confidence were very high. The effects were also higher than generally found in psychotherapy effect studies (Van der Molen, 1985). So, many trainees were better able to deal with their extreme shyness or even overcame it.

The importance of audacity for our students

I will now try to establish a bridge between the specific example of the training of people suffering from shyness to our students. As I have demonstrated, shy people have difficulties in dealing with all kinds of social situations. When our students start their studies, they are also still lacking many skills in dealing with their future professional situations. A few examples. Medical doctors have to treat patients with complex complaints. Lawyers have to deal with burning conflicts in the interest of their clients.
Clinical psychologists and pedagogues have to deal with difficult situations between parents and their children. The Erasmus University is offering 30 bachelor programs, many of which belong to the so-called “learned professions”.

Although the content of the programs is very different, all our students have to acquire generic professional skills, such as listening and sender or assertive skills, presentation skills, skills for giving professional advice, leading meetings, and – important for every academic – academic writing skills.

Since the start of our psychology program 16 years ago we have combined small scale Problem Based Learning (e.g. Schmidt & Moust, 1982) with intensive Professional Skills Training.

We have used the Cumulative Microtraining method for example in practicals for the training of PBL-skills for students and tutors, in Communication Skills training (Lang & Van der Molen, 2016; Van der Molen, Lang, Trower & Look, 2014), in Presentation Skills Training, and in the training of Psychodiagnostic Skills (Van der Molen, Schmidt, De Jong & Osseweijer, 2011; Van der Molen, Schmidt, De Jong, Osseweijer, Oostrom & De Boer, 2015).

Online education: Digitalization of the programmes

Since online education is becoming more important during the last decades, we already started with digitalization of those programmes in the beginning of this century. We have done this both for the Dutch language materials to be studied by Dutch students, and for the English materials directed at students in our international bachelor programme psychology, that attracts now more around 140 students each year. This has contributed to more efficient programmes, since Step 1 Theoretical instruction and Step 2 Modeling of the microtraining method don’t need to be executed anymore by the trainers. Video-examples like I have shown before can now be inspected by the students at home before the real practical sessions start. Moreover, for rehearsal of the skills many exercises have been constructed in these programmes. This has led to a considerable reduction of the needed trainer time and therefore to a substantial reduction of costs. You might be afraid that this could lead to smaller effectiveness of the practicums. I can reassure you. Several of my PhD’s (Schönrock-Adema, 2002; Kuntze, 2009) who have been studying the effectiveness of those practicums have shown that the effects of the innovative, partly self-instructional programs are at least as effective as the traditionally completely guided programmes.

A final successful application of the microtraining method took place in our course Zelf leren schrijven (Ackermann, Osseweijer, Schmidt & Van der Molen, 2006; Van der Molen, Ackermann, Osseweijer, Schmidt, Van der Wal & De Boer, 2015). Actually the title was a slight variation of the title of the book of my favorite author Gerard Reve Zelf Schrijver Worden. As you know, for many students writing a bachelor or a master thesis is really an enormous challenge. It often has led to substantial study delay, and therefore to reduction of our study results (studierendementen). When I was a student, there was
no attention at all for these writing skills. You just were expected to sit down and write your thesis.

In the digitalized course we developed, we have tried to unravel the microskills of writing, such as creating a good and logic structure, referring, paraphrasing and quoting, construction of sentences and paragraphs, argumentation and summarizing. For each skill, students receive an instruction, rules of thumb and several short exercises. Students exercise those skills on respectively www.schrijfvaardigheid.nl or www.academicwritingskillscourse.com.

The programs we have developed so far are frequently used by other institutions of higher education. Several years ago we have adapted the writing course for students in economy and business administration, in good and close cooperation with the educational director of the Erasmus School of Economics prof.dr. Ivo Arnold and his colleague Bas Karreman (Karreman, Werner, Van der Molen, Osseweijer, Ackermann, Schmidt & Van der Wal, 2016; Karreman, Werner, Van der Molen, Osseweijer, Ackermann, Schmidt & Van der Wal, 2017). In due time our university will undergo the external quality accreditation by the NVAO, the Instellingstoets Kwaliteitszorg. The last course is in my view a good and concrete example of horizontal learning, that is cross-fertilization of educational programmes of our different faculties.

Conclusion

My shy trainees could finally be praised for their audacity. For our present students I hope that they will be praised for their professionality. When they use their skills professionally, they let society work!

So, as a take home message I would like to say to all of you:

Be audacious!

But also: Be careful. Because remember: Homo homini lupus. Mankind is a wolf to other mankind. “Danger is on your road”, Gerard Reve would say.

For those of you who did not read The Praise of Folly: Do it. It is fun and wisdom!

Let me end like Erasmus in this famous master piece: “Quare valete, …, vivite, bibite!” “Therefore, farewell, …, live and bring a toast!”

Congratulations with our 104th birthday and thank you for your attention!
References


Acknowledgements

I express my gratitude to prof.dr. Marise Born for her conscientious feedback on the first draft of this lecture, and to Eveline Osseweijer for her perfect support of the Powerpoint presentation and the subtitling of the short movies.