

Ursula Fausset

ENCOUNTER IN A COUNTRY COLLEGE OF FURTHER EDUCATION

At the beginning of the last academic year, I began running an evening class advertised as a 'Sensitivity Training Group'. It wasn't until half way through the first term that the word Encounter was mentioned. I doubt whether it would have been acceptable by the authorities and I think several people would have run home if they had known this label for the group which they were in.

My interests in working under an educational umbrella were manifold. I see the work primarily as education. I suppose I had some missionary zeal of bringing IT to the people. As though I was introducing forbidden fruits, under cover, and incredibly cheaply, for a bigger cross-section of the community than such groups usually reach out to. Also, it saved me the admin. side of gathering a local group and was likely ground for some research I wanted to do, regarding on-on-going groups.

The room provided by the college was so bleak and public, that we soon began meeting, illicitly, in my house (a bit is split off for the work) and this move enabled us to continue for longer than the scheduled two hours. People travelled to the course from within a twenty mile radius. Altogether, over eight months, fifteen people were involved and we had a constant nine members.

Before signing on, participants were issued with a blurb saying what it was all about. After two weeks I distributed another bit of paper, offering a counselling service. This was well used and I think did a lot towards making it a positive experience. It also helps account for the low drop-out rate.

During the first term I was very conscious of the extremes; from an oppressed cliché-ridden housewife, to a perceptive dominating professor. There was a big dependence on me as leader and I wondered if we'd ever build a group. After the first twelve week spell, we were strong enough to top up with new people and hastened the absorption by holding a fifteen hour day, which was a turning point in the history of the group.

As people became more open, there was a lot of intolerance and hostility to work through; that was followed by a long period of hard work, lightened by patches of fun. In the end there was the usual clinging to something good; to make meaningful the loss, we spent a lot of time winding down with parting rituals.

When we began, I wouldn't have believed that the up-tight church warden would be asking for a massage evening; or the highly suspicious social worker would be struggling to be her new affectionate self outside the group; that the professor could grow fond of the oppressed house-wife. Yet I could have believed it. It is that faith in the manifest wonder of each individual, which adds joy for 'The Work

Near the end of our time I asked participants to fill in a questionnaire (it took several hours!) which helped them integrate the learning and was very useful to me as leader feedback. Everyone had gained in self-confidence. The majority enjoyed other people more and felt they had grown in awareness, responsibility, creativity and openness. In fact they knew and liked both themselves and others more.

For next year the college is providing an excellent carpeted room. And another local college has asked for a Sensitivity Training Group.

Michael Hecht

CHANGE IN TEACHING - a tentative assessment

I identify three strands in the activities which 'Change in Teaching' is fostering:

1. Personal development at the level of the encounter between individuals and in groups. This bears on behaviour in the classroom. Let me call it therapy.
2. Participation in (at least information about) whatever goes on that affects the present life of children and young people. In so far as Change in Teaching is aiming at student teachers, I call this 'learning sideways through the windows', to supplement what students in training are being taught downwards from their lecturers. In so far as this is active participation, frequently for the benefit of the deprived, I call this 'gathering up the fragments.'
3. Critique of the present and projection of a reformed educational programme, in respect of content and method. This requires visionary fervour in the first place and then intellectual justification. If we have the first we shall find the second. But we shall have to draw on the widest funds of experience and ideas, throughout the world.

I want to comment on each of these strands.

1. Therapy. Clearly these activities are desired, urgent and beneficial. Without them inter-communication is not only difficult for many people, it is also liable to remain trapped in old grooves. But I want to ask: WHY have these activities become necessary? My answer is: because the central core of the academic tradition is dead. Those academics in whom it still lives know that it has died. But it is most clearly dead