

Alan Lowen

Educational Community

It is not possible to be involved in the educational world today—whether as teacher, pupil, administrator or researcher—without having misgivings. In some inner urban schools the evidence is immediate and to hand; where the evidence is more remote it may receive less attention, but it is no less relevant to our educational dilemma. Of the random examples that follow, some may be more recognizable to your situation than others, but together they describe much of our education system. These are some of our misgivings: that in any classroom, what is taught may have little bearing on what is learned; that education is undermined by the demands of the examination systems; that apparently exciting new curricula and syllabuses often meet, once the novelty wears off, ‘the usual apathetic response’; that we sometimes demand of our pupils in schools attitudes and behaviour that imperil their freedom to be who they want or may need to be; that Colleges of Education tell students how to become better teachers, but often fail to have much constructive influence on how these people will eventually act in classrooms; that at all levels of education there are many ‘failures’; and that for teachers and pupils alike boredom is accepted as inevitable.

Nevertheless the system continues to work. It is still feasible for the educational institution to function more or less in disregard of the anomalies, and even if we choose to make changes, we may find, as in the past, that the problems are still with us, and education still an unfulfilled dream. To allow the

process of education to evolve, we need to see how we are trapped into perpetuating the past and present system; our trap is that when we see that something is wrong, we try to change the system. We do not change ourselves.

It may be that in ignoring or denying the need for changes in ourselves, we are unwittingly blocking the path to our own goal. However, many teachers would argue that their task is to bring about changes in those they teach, not in themselves. After all, if we were not already educated, how could we be teachers? In this case we should perhaps consider the effect on us of our own schooling.

For at least fifteen years of our lives almost all of us were systematically taught, and there is an abundance of evidence, for example the difficulty many people have in knowing what they want in life, to suggest that during those years what we actually learned best was **TO BE TAUGHT**, or, in the case of the ‘failures’, **NOT** to be taught. The result is that for many generations, even when most devoted to the concept of education, we as teachers have remained trapped in the practice of schooling—of teaching others what we know they need to learn! What they learn, just as we did, is to be taught. It is therefore no surprise that after just two or three years of schooling—and unless we are lucky, for the rest of our lives—we are unable to define our needs as learners; that is what teachers are for! And as teachers, so long as we continue to regard ourselves, more or less, as those who know, we do not have to listen or learn or understand; we merely have to teach.

The conclusion is evident; we ourselves stand in need of the experience of education. We need to feel its effect within ourselves and in our lives before we can have genuine faith in protecting

our pupils' and students' freedom to learn, instead of strangling it. We are left with the single question of how to achieve this. Educational Community was founded with this question in mind, and what follows is one suggestion that has already proved valuable.

The past twenty years has seen the development of an increasing variety of processes in which people work together towards goals of deepened understanding of themselves and others, of closer union with their feelings and perceptions, of greater participation in the moment-to-moment flow of their lives, and of greater fulfilment of their hidden possibilities as living people. The essence of these processes is a learning experience. As Carl Rogers says, 'It is self-initiated. Even when the impetus or stimulus comes from the outside, the sense of discovery, of reaching out, of grasping and comprehending, comes from within. It is pervasive. It makes a difference in the behaviour, the attitudes, perhaps even the personality of the learner. It is evaluated by the learner. He knows whether it is meeting his need, whether it leads toward what he wants to know, whether it illuminates the dark area of ignorance he is experiencing.'

It is important to add that the group processes have unfortunately produced a new breed of teachers equipped with a potent supply of new techniques but delivering the old message: 'I know what you need.' There is no guarantee that a group leader will not impose his teachings; that depends not on his techniques but on his integrity and understanding as a person. Where there

are no techniques however, it is more difficult for him to exploit the role of teacher. The simplest kind of group process was originated by Carl Rogers as a meeting among people in which there is a minimum of structuring; there are no techniques, no plans, no rules; simply people meeting other people, and among them a teacher. His function is to participate as a listening and responsive person who is potentially valuable. The real teacher is the group, which provides each of us with the opportunity to experience our own learning.

During the Christmas and Easter vacations, a series of three-day 'Rogerian' groups was held in London for people in education. Apart from the value in helping individuals to realize constructive changes in themselves as people and as teachers, these programmes have led to a variety of plans and propositions on a larger scale.

In the immediate future Educational Community plans to develop the practice of running groups at colleges and schools, and eventually to organize a longer training programme for people in education. At some point we should like to initiate pilot schemes where there is enough support among staff at specific schools and colleges. At the same time Educational Community is involved in learning how to provide support for people who are working, and sometimes struggling, towards the goals we share.

If you are interested in any of these ventures, or simply want to feel involved and in touch with *Educational Community* you can contact us at 19 *Dunollie Road, London NW5.*

Alan Lowen, was active in the education world for 10 years as teacher and researcher. More recently he went to the USA to learn, and later teach, at Carl Rogers' Center for Studies of the Person, and for the past 2 years has worked with groups in this country and in the States.

Carl Rogers' work, and details of his group process, are described in his books: 'On Becoming a Person' 'Freedom to Learn' 'Encounter Groups' (Penguin)