

David Willow

## POTENTIALS FOR LEARNING

This article has its origins in a piece of writing I did for the course assessment this year. When I was working on it I came across a description of the polar explorer, Peary, spending a day walking northwards towards the pole only to discover that he was further south than when he had begun. He had been on a southward moving ice-floe whose rate of movement was faster than his walking pace. This rather unfortunate incident (which recalled some of our longer and more tedious community meetings) helped to crystallise some of the ideas and feelings to which I was struggling to give a coherent form. Connections may emerge in the course of the article.

The most immediate impact of the S.W. London course, especially for someone conditioned to conventional approaches to life and learning is that every experience it provides has potential for learning however uncertain the realisation may be. Following my own compass needle in a certain direction has not always led where I expected but has invariably been a precursor to some constructive alteration of awareness. An early intimation of this came on the initial planning weekend when I was a newcomer to a group which had, on the whole, been together for a year. I had been getting on fairly well for a day or two when I inadvertently made a comment which touched a raw nerve in the group. The muted hostility of the response left me feeling vulnerable and uneasy. Suddenly I was no longer in a safe place. In a sense my personal need of the moment had become dangerously dissociated from the group which was my immediate environment. In some imagined state of perfect awareness this could not have happened - I could have said nothing incongruous - just as Peary, had he been in perfect harmony with sun, wind and stars could not have been so misled. Nevertheless, once the discomfort of that experience had been absorbed I was able to draw a wider lesson from it and relate it to the world 'out there'. This was eventually possible because the overall orientation of the course is towards learning, and this was stronger than any tendency I might have had to bury the experience.

Mention of the world 'out there' recalls the nursery school quality of the course where real feelings and relationships are tested out in an artificial environment in which risks can be taken. Learning is permitted here because, ultimately, it is safe. This is, in Winnicott's term, a 'transitional area' where creative activity is possible. There are other such areas in society but rarely, unfortunately, in our formal educational institutions. Winnicott himself wrote that psychotherapy "has to do with two people playing together" and is effective in so far as the patient can "surprise himself with creative discovery as the child surprises himself in play". So our Monday afternoon play-group has not, perhaps, been a bad model for the 'serious' counselling and therapy we are engaged in during the rest of the week.

So far I have made a number of 'process' comments on the course, and my conceptual musings have always led me back to the process-content relationship. Again this is a duality which permeates all areas of life but is most visible and malleable in the transitional area which the course occupies. Of course we do have 'content' - workshops on various methods and theories, staff-group, student-group and the other accoutrements of the conventional educational structure - but the fact that this is all created out of the ever-threatening chaos of twenty-five or so different personalities with different needs and wants and with no structure imposed initially beyond the necessary limitations of time and space makes the 'process' element far more evident than it could be in a pre-structured, hierarchical course. The boundary between process and content is a shifting one whose position is much determined by passage of time and quality of awareness. It is my awareness of this constantly shifting relationship which has been heightened. For example as I moved through Dip. Year 1 in a number of different workshops I became aware of an overall shift of attitude in myself which somehow involved the ability to trust relationships and to use them positively, and that it was such a shift that I had at some level been seeking when I came onto the course rather than any specific expertise or set of skills. Such awareness is brought to fruition by work on the course, through supervision and through introspection, but the main point is that on a self-directed course it is absolutely necessary to make sense of the whole experience in some way in order to benefit from it. It is not just optional by-product as it might be in another setting (as I now teach on a conventionally structured social work course I am able to make a direct comparison).

If this begins to sound abstruse and egocentric, I should say that, for me at least, it has direct links with counselling and that counselling

is a practical and essential component of my work. In counselling there is always content, both in what the client presents and in how the worker chooses to respond. But there are also various processes - the broader pattern of the client's life, the broader meaning of the client-worker relationship etc. - and to me the most important quality of counsellor or therapist, beyond particular methods or personal characteristics, is the ability to maintain awareness of both process and content and to put the latter into the context of the former, or, in the words of Alan Watts (Psychotherapy East and West): "If I am to help someone to see that a false problem is false, I must pretend that I am taking his problem seriously. What I am actually taking seriously is his suffering, but he must be led to believe that it is what he considers as his problem". What I am suggesting, therefore, is that, by its very nature the course has enabled (or perhaps forced) me to develop a creative attitude towards the work I do which has been more valuable than, although inextricably linked with, various skills and methods I have acquired.

I noted earlier that while all the experience on the course has potential for learning, that potential will be realised at different times. The timing depends on many factors but it does seem that the truth, or at least the requisite degree of it, will eventually emerge. At times, with so many needs, possibilities and demands, it is easy to succumb to the confusion, but the clouds will eventually clear, perhaps with the aid of individual supervision. There are parallels here too with individual and group counselling and a useful lesson for me has been that it is alright at times to relax a little and let things happen, or to find ways of enabling them to happen without forcing the pace.

A more specific example of learning emerging after a lapse of time, as well as of the content of a particular decision coming to be placed within the context of my own life process, is the choice I made to come onto the course in Dip. Year 1 rather than opting to do the foundation year. I was given the choice and a certain amount of information about the course, some of it contradictory and rather confusing. I rationalised the decision I made by reference to various practical considerations and also, to some extent, by dismissing the whole issue as something which really didn't matter too much either way. And yet, much later, I began to consider a whole series of 'back door' decisions which had become a theme of my life. I had regularly got into jobs, courses, even the flat in which I was living, by obscure and devious routes which often involved the avoidance of clear commitment at the beginning (at one time a six month trip through Asia

began with what should have been a holiday in Greece). This was not always a bad way to do things. I had usually got where I wanted, but that particular way of getting there often involved losses as well as gains which are both implicit in the attitude of 'I didn't really want to do this, I just happen to be here'. This allowed me to deny the significance of much that happened on the course initially, to the extent of not even noting it in my diary. Again I do not want to use space here to explore this personal theme any further, but merely to note that it is in the nature of the course to throw such personality traits into high relief and that, as with other examples I have used, this also echoes what happens in a counselling relationship and can therefore be used as positive learning material and is not (I hope) aimless navel-gazing.

The anxiety which lies behind the last comment derives from the potential of all counselling and therapeutic activities for hermetic introspection divorced from political and social realities. It is an anxiety I have often felt on the S.W. London course and other students have probably confronted it more directly than me by forming a 'politics in counselling' group. I have certainly not resolved this issue but have found that what the course does offer is an artificial and experimental model of how society can operate by debate, consensus and the acknowledgement of conflicts and individual needs. It is not easy to function in this way, even for a group of twenty-five or so, and I commented earlier on the length and tedium of some of the community meetings, but there is a distinct advantage in the fact that we are in the 'transitional area', detached from the 'real world' out there and yet bringing in the beliefs and prejudices which were formed by, and operate in, that world. It is possible to construct the model, play around with it, and observe and participate in its operation without the immediate pressures of the organisations we usually work and study in.

So here we have a group of people, mostly employed in the public services, attempting to put into practice traditional democratic values such as freedom of expression, peaceful co-existence and respect for others. At the same time (or at least in the time I have been on the course) we have a Government that seems to me to be attempting to destroy those services and undermine those values, and with a patently militaristic bias. This is a highly uncomfortable position to be in, and the feeling of being under attack has not been helped by threatened cuts to the course itself. The question of whether counselling, and humanistic values in general, prove to be irrelevant in the long run is not one to go into here. In terms of practical learning

I can affirm that the model offered can work, at least on this scale.

Although it takes longer to attempt to incorporate, or at least acknowledge, all needs, it saves time and is actually more efficient in the long run. Otherwise the buried conflict will return to subvert the best laid plans. It also seems that there are certain skills and structures which enable this to happen. I believe I have taken some of these skills, and the awareness which goes with them, into the organisations in which I work.

Of course there are other political implications, both wider and more specific, than I have indicated here. I have attempted to give some impression of my own passage through this course and the effects of the journey. As I go into the final term I still don't know which way the ice is flowing but I'm glad I'm still on it.

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Tom Osborn

## PLANNING A STUDENT-DIRECTED LEARNING PROGRAMME

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Now is the day of the trendy right.

Not so long ago, we were discovering a lot about how students could determine their own work. What has happened to all that valuable learning?

Self-direction, student planning, is no soft option. It needs its own disciplines and its own precision. Even if we assume that the staff on a course and the authorities of a college are willing: there are in particular three major obstacles which students themselves have to overcome in planning their own programme.

First, it is not easy for people to say, or to know, what they want to learn.

Second, it is not easy for people to recognise and to manage the resources available to them.