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**A HUMANISTIC APPROACH  
to  
TEACHER IN-SERVICE EDUCATION**

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**by**

**Patrick Whitaker**

Many teachers attend in-service courses. They do so to extend their skills, widen their knowledge and to keep abreast of current issues and developments. Courses vary in length from single lectures or workshops to one year full time secondments. The subject of this article is a week-long course for primary school teachers held as part of a local education authority's in-service programme. Entitled "Language and Learning" it was part of a regular programme of courses held each term in a particular area of the authority. One teacher from each of thirty different schools was invited to attend.

The traditional approach to this course had been to offer to the teachers a pre-planned programme of lectures, workshops and discussion groups. The planning and course management was undertaken by the advisory service with outside contributors brought in for particular sessions. This pattern had been running in the authority for some years before I joined the LEA in 1979. Prior to the course in question I had been responsible for planning and conducting three

courses of this sort, in conjunction with the LEA's Adviser for English.

I had decided to use this course as an opportunity to break with tradition. My own particular approach to in service education for teachers had been developing along quite different lines than that represented by the traditional pattern described above. Following discussions with colleagues it was agreed that I would, on this particular occasion, accept responsibility for managing the course in a different way. I held a preliminary meeting with the headteachers of the schools involved to outline the course method and to explain about the departure from tradition.

#### **My Approach to the Course**

The course facilitator style which I had been evolving over a number of years, draws upon a number of influences. Foremost among these has been my increasing involvement in counselling and regular participation in a wide range of human potential activities. Experience of small group work had led me to a belief in the power of groups

to provide a particularly rich and creative learning environment for human growth. In addition, the work of Paulo Freire the radical Brazilian educator had exercised a deep and powerful influence on my approach. Teachers themselves seem to be part of what Freire calls a conspiracy of silence, largely unaware that in perpetuating received wisdom and traditional orthodoxy they are working against the best interests of the learners they set out to serve. Until teachers have both the inclination and the capacity to link learning to the life force of each pupil, the conspiracy will continue. Freire's theories of praxis, conscientization and generative words continue to inspire.

Drawing upon these rich and challenging sources I had attempted to develop an approach which was person centred, in that the course members themselves are regarded both as the agenda for the course and the context for learning. I also set out with the assumption that I too am a learner, constantly seeking ways to deepen my understanding of the learning process. In deciding on a more humanistic approach to this course I was also conscious of a strongly heuristic element in my work, motivated by the question "What happens on an in-service course when . . . . ?"

Having been encouraged by the outcomes of this approach in other courses, and by the positive feedback of the teachers taking part, I felt that this course provided an excellent opportunity to further develop the model and to try and create an in-service course in which the teachers themselves become the

context for learning. They, rather than me, would be the planners and organizers of their own self identified learning. My task would be to try and create the conditions in which that could happen.

The course was held in the local teachers' centre in a large carpeted room suitable for whole and small group activities. The course ran from a Monday morning to a Friday afternoon, the same thirty teachers attending each session. In addition to myself a number of advisory teachers, serving the particular schools represented, took part in the course.

### **The Course Itself**

The course will be described in terms of the three distinct phases it went through - the first day and a half, the middle two and a half days and the final day.

#### **Phase 1**

One of the first objectives of the course was to build a warm, caring and creative learning environment. The course members were personally welcomed on their arrival, handed their course notes and invited to sit with other colleagues. The chairs had been arranged to encourage interactions and there were no obvious indications of where the source of power was - no focal point and no lecturer's table. A tape of Vivaldi concerti was playing and my advisory teacher colleagues circulated among the arrivals helping to make them welcome.

I opened the course with some very brief introductory remarks saying that I hoped this would be a shared experience in which we would have the opportunity to consider our own individual learning needs and to share and draw on the considerable knowledge, experience and expertise present in the group. Domestic details were explained and the times and durations of the coffee and lunch breaks agreed upon.

The next hour was taken up with a series of personal interactions designed to help course members get to know each other. Each course member was invited to work with a series of partners they had not met before, talking about their backgrounds, their present work and their hopes and expectations of the course. Following this we mingled around the room having brief interactions with those course members we had not met in the formal pairings.

After coffee, course members divided into the four groups which were to act as a constant reference point throughout the week. An advisory teacher acted as a group facilitator. The first group session was taken up with a specific task designed to get the group members talking and thinking about the course in hand. Each group was provided with large sheets of paper and felt pens and asked to prepare a poster which described the group's views, feelings, attitudes and thoughts about in service courses, and also the group's hopes and expectations for this particular one. These were then displayed and a brief plenary session before lunch allowed for viewing and discussion of the posters.

After lunch, course members were asked to work on their own to complete a series of sentence stems designed to help them focus on themselves and their teaching. The list contained such stems as:

*What I like about myself as a teacher is . . .*

*I would describe my teaching style as . . .*

*When I think about my classroom I . . .*

*I like it best in the classroom when . . .*

*The children who like me do so because . . .*

Course members were urged to respond to these stems as quickly and as intuitively as possible. Having completed these we broke into pairs and took it in turns to talk to our partner about the experience of completing the sentences and about any particular issues arising from them we wished to share.

The final hour of the first day consisted of a period when course members, working on their own were invited to try and generate their particular learning goals for the course. Again working with a partner we shared our goals and attempted to help each other clarify what it was we were hoping to achieve. A period of ten minutes was then provided in which to make the first entry in our course diaries, recording in particular how we felt about specific instances, events and activities. For the last ten minutes we sat in a circle and shared our reflections on the day.

The second day began with each of us writing on an index card the learning goal we had decided upon.

We also noted down other issues which interested and concerned us. This was followed by a whole group task in which we circulated, sharing our learning goals with others and trying to find colleagues whose needs were similar to our own. This produced some lively interaction and negotiation which resulted in the identification of a number of theme groupings which were then written on large sheets of paper and pinned up. The needs of the group were now beginning to emerge. After coffee the whole group sat round a large blank timetable to plan the programme for the rest of the week. Some fixed points could be recorded immediately. A formal lecture had already been arranged; further small group meeting times were agreed upon; and most of the final day was earmarked for evaluations, action planning and formal discussions with the headteachers who would be visiting to have an hour's meeting with their course member. When these were agreed upon each of us worked out a personal timetable for the two and a half day mid-phase of the course. Individuals and those working in theme groups were then asked to chart their planned activities on the large timetable.

This first day has been described in some detail since I believe it was crucial in creating conditions for self directed personal learning. Throughout the first phase there was a strong emphasis on group interaction and personal time which gave course members the opportunity to reflect upon their work and to consider their particular in - service needs. The aim was to use the potential power of the group

to activate each course member's learning resources and to help them to develop an awareness of their individual learning needs and capabilities.

### The second phase

This second phase lasted from Tuesday lunch time until Thursday evening. Apart from the formal lecture and the small group sessions, course members worked on their own agendas, sometimes on their own, sometimes with one or two others and on one particular morning in two larger theme groups. Not all the learning activities took place at the course venue. There were visits to schools, resource centres and libraries and some chose to work at home. Among some of the pieces of work undertaken were:

*Developing the self concept in children*

*Parental involvement in reading*

*Listening and communication skills*

*Liaison programme between a special school and an infant school.*

*Home/school liaison*

*Computer assisted learning*

During this phase the atmosphere was relaxed and informal but very purposeful. It had the quality of an unstructured workshop. Coffee and lunch breaks had ceased to be fixed events and many stayed on after the agreed ending point of the day to finish things and to talk with colleagues. Much information was shared through the course notice board and many spontaneous meetings, discussions and visits were arranged.

### Final phase

The final morning began with the whole group meeting together to review the work of the week. Individuals, small groups and theme groups took it in turns to share with others the processes and outcomes of their projects. These were later summarised in writing and a post course booklet sent to each course member.

After coffee, course members working on their own were invited to develop for themselves an action programme for follow-up work back in school. This was also a time to prepare for the hour long interview with the headteacher which was to follow in the afternoon.

The first session after lunch was a period for reviewing and reflecting on the course. Members were invited to write an open letter about their reactions to the week, about their own learning goals and how well they felt they had realised them. It was also suggested that quotations from the course diary could be included to provide insights into the learning process. Following completion of the open letters, which were to be photocopied and circulated, the group met for the last time in a circle to share thoughts, feelings and hopes for the future. After tea each course member sat down with his or her headteacher to discuss the course and to consider the follow-up implications for the school.

### Outcomes

I had been encouraged right from the first day. The early interactions

succeeded in building an open and honest climate for working together. The final circle time reflected that many of the course members had gone home on the first evening confused about the course method and purpose, but with a willingness to be open to its developments. Both verbal and written responses indicated that few teachers had worked in this way before and that the processes and methods of this course had altered their view of in service education as a key element in personal and professional development. Most pointed to an enhanced feeling of confidence and well being, some to a sense of personal discovery. One teacher in the final circle time said that after thirty years of wavering she now had the confidence to learn to drive.

Since the course, the teachers have continued to meet as a support group. One or two of the group have undertaken to send out reminders, to book meeting rooms and to arrange specific activities. The first review meeting, held about four months later, indicated that most had made progress with their plans and that the meeting with the head on the final afternoon had been significant in raising the importance of the course in other colleagues' eyes. The long term benefits to pupils will be more difficult to gauge, although a small number of the course members have made significant adjustments to their own teaching style, attempting to make classroom learning more pupil centred, with far greater attention being given to the development of the self concept of pupils.

The course reinforced my own belief in the person centred approach to learning. The responses of course members emphasised that the seeds of growth are within us all and that if only we can find conditions in which they can be activated and encouraged to grow, much can be achieved. The answer to my question - "What happens on an in-service course when . . . ?" was answered in many ways. Firstly that the deep seated and sometimes imprisoned seeds of growth can be activated when a safe psychological climate is created. Secondly that

learners have enormous resources for their own development once they have given themselves "permission" to learn. Thirdly that attitudes, assumptions and values can be reworked and reformed in a climate of enquiry and growth.

All this was some years ago. Since then I have grown to have confidence and trust in this process. It does not always work and many times I get things wrong. But constantly I rediscover the power and potential of the person. I never cease to be excited and amazed.

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