A Community Approach to Careers Work Training

Mark Smith

Careers Workers Action Group

This article is about the need for us to adopt a mature and personal approach to training. The "community approach" suggested involves participants in exploring and building their own theories, attitudes and practices on a solid base of experience. It is democratic and tailored to the individual's needs.

Objectives

If we examine the objectives of training they fall into four groups. To

1. make people aware of the body of knowledge and the theoretical concepts on which practice is based;
2. go some way in training individuals in the sorts of skills that make for successful practice;
3. examine the attitudes of the people seeking to exercise those skills; and
4. aim for some degree of personality adjustment and development.[1]

Comment has been made a number of times in these pages on the importance of the third and fourth objectives. The effectiveness of the worker is rather more likely to turn on his or her attitude and personality than skill or knowledge, yet it is these very areas that the training courses have tended to avoid.[2] There are, I would suggest, two major reasons for this:—

1. *The failure to match technique with topic.*

Recently, with the best of intentions, I gave a lecture to students on one of the larger careers officer training courses on the need for practitioners to make their values explicit and to act on them. From the questioning at the end it must be judged a failure. The major error I had committed is a common one on training courses—the failure to match the method of training with the topic covered. The students had been told what to believe, rather than say, experiencing a group situation in which values could be discovered. It is a point that T. R. Batten underlines,

"... every worker ... will have already developed their own attitudes to others and their own ways of trying to influence others. These attitudes and these ways of behaving towards other people may be somewhat different from what the trainer thinks they ought to be, but the workers will not necessary discard them just because the trainer thinks they should. They are only likely to do so when they have somehow first convinced themselves: and they are more likely to convince themselves if the trainer leaves them free to think for themselves by adopting a non-directive approach in this particular field of training."[3]

The authoritarian teaching methods adopted by many trainers cannot deal

with attitude, personality or indeed with successful skill training. Why then are they chosen?

2. *The lack of mature student/trainer relationships.*

It is clear that the quality of the trainer/student relationship is crucial if attitude and personality are to be examined in a sensitive and developing way. Regretfully one has the feeling that mature relationships often don't develop because trainers have not been able to come to terms with the fact that they are dealing with adults who, together, possess a rich and wide background of experience. That is perhaps, unfair on the trainers as rather too many students appear on courses expecting to be "given" knowledge rather than finding it out for themselves, and both are not helped by the attitude of the Training Board to elements like assessment.

If one had to search for "institutional" criteria by which to judge the maturity of the trainer/student relationship, assessment would be an obvious candidate. Assessment has always been a ready target for criticism in education, but in careers work training there really is some catching up to be done. The whole area is fraught with difficulties simply because there can be no respectable recourse to supposedly "objective" standards when dealing with attitude or even interviewing skills. Any judgement must be subjective. So we see exams and essays being used as an assessment tool and neither can be said to judge the competence of the individual as a careers worker. It might be naive of me, but I am sure it is possible to construct a training situation where no formal assessment is necessary, because the students, with the help of their trainers, assess their own competence. (In fact I know it is possible as certain Youth and Community courses do it already).

A mature relationship would imply certain other things such as using students far more as a "resource", (as some courses do already), and the joint control of the structure and content of courses.

One last point that should be made about the quality of the relationship between the trainer and the student is that it has an importance beyond that of the course, because one of the major determinants of "leadership style" is the leadership the individual has experienced as "follower". If trainee careers workers' attitudes and opinions are not given the respect they deserve it's small wonder that some young people get a raw deal from their careers officer or teacher.

Moving on from the failure of courses to handle adequately attitude and personality, four other areas of concern must be dealt with before looking at an alternative approach.

1. *Gaps in training*

Most students coming off a training course could give a long list of the areas they felt had been overlooked or not covered in sufficient depth. A more democratic environment could perhaps deal with that situation, but it would still be likely to leave the various courses with different specialisms and orientations. This must be applauded but it would be useful if intending students could be made aware of the character of each course so that they may pick the one most likely to suit their needs.

2. *The lack of continuing training*

The appointment of training officers by some authorities and the increasing number of courses offering follow up units demonstrate a growing appreciation of the need for some sort of on-going training. However I am not at all sure that some of the "programmes" that have emerged are suitable or indeed whether training should be left up to individual authorities. The terms of reference of certain of the training officer appointments, especially concerning the sort of information PCO's expect in training reports on individual staff, leave one wondering as to the exact purpose of the appointment. Additionally the small size of some authorities precludes the possibility of officers gaining enough expertise in this type of work.

3. *Little or no contact with other community work trainees*

At present a number of courses operate in the same institutions as probation, social work, youth and community, teaching and librarian training courses, yet there is relatively little contact between them. At least one course is at present investigating common training areas and we have the example of the integrated social administration degree at Hatfield Polytechnic, but a lot could be achieved informally by the students if they wished.

4. *The dearth of training opportunities for careers teachers and support staff.*

Whilst the provision of training facilities for careers teachers has gradually been increasing, the position and needs of careers support staff have largely been forgotten. (I apologise for using the term "support staff"—the distinctions drawn between careers officers and employment assistants are both unfair and illogical. Considering the sort of problems employment assistants have to face they are underpaid, have relatively low status and pathetically little training. The approach and range of skills the effective employment assistant possesses must be judged as on a par with those of the careers officer and teacher. They therefore deserve the same quantity and quality of training as any other careers worker might expect).

A Community Approach

An alternative approach to training, if it is to take into account the criticisms made above, must be directed towards increasing the sensitivity and perception of the individual both in relation to his or her own attitudes and personality and to the feelings and thoughts of others. It must also ensure that :

1. theoretical concepts are based on an understanding of real situations which are seen to be relevant ; and
2. there should be a transference of theoretical concepts into actual practice.

Les Button points out that it is doubtful whether students initially will be able to make this two way transmission without deliberate stimulus.[4] He suggests that the trainer should structure the training situation so that,

"it is almost inevitable that the trainee will have certain experiences and consider a range of relevant material, but he has to live through the experience himself and draw his own conclusions as part of a working

team. In all this he will face the challenge of a tutor, but he will also be supported by him and his colleagues working as a tutorial group. Self reliance is bred not only by trainees being required to find their own way; it may also be built up from the confidence of having lived through a number of challenging situations."[5]

The sort of examination of self and environment that this approach suggests means that training is not going to be a comfortable experience. For it to work, the participants must be fully involved in day to day careers work, which infers that

1. training should be "part-time"; and
2. trainers, as participants, should be appointed on a part-time or, exceptionally, on a limited contract, basis.

What is being suggested here is that the trainee careers worker should spend around 190-200 days (over two years) "in training", which, allowing for holidays, works out at two days a week plus time for individual and other placements. The two days per week pattern would be split as follows—

1 day (equivalent) private study, observation, field work

$\frac{1}{2}$ day study group

$\frac{1}{2}$ day briefing sessions.

In more detail—

1. *Private study, observation, field work*

It has been said that a community approach to training involves the participant in exploring and building his or her own theories, attitudes and practice on a solid base of experience. The quality of that experience and the way in which it is handled are the keys to the approach. The intention is that trainees should use their own work situation and community as the major area for investigation. That the separate elements of the situation will be sifted out, analysed, and assessed. The approach might begin with the trainer and students working out what to look for when attempting to describe the nature of the community the individual worker is serving. It could then move through observation of the careers office, school, the social background of workers and "clients", and so on, always with the study group discussing what to look for and what has been seen and experienced. As the approach progresses observation will deepen using the skills and insights gained by previous exercises and carry over into areas not normally covered by careers work. For instance one would envisage the participants talking in some depth with young people, (on their own territory), without any special reference to "careers", so that a picture of the interactions and needs of particular groups of young people can be built up.[6] From such field work theoretical concepts can be formed and translated into concrete practices which can be used, assessed and adapted if necessary. A high degree of integration of theory and practice cannot be achieved in full-time training situations so that theoretical concepts tend to be viewed in isolation and their significance lost.

An essential part of the process is "recording". A number of courses have experimented with getting students to keep a diary of their time spent on placement or in work situations. However, the way these diaries have been

used has, in a number of instances, brought the idea into disrepute. "Recording" cannot be a subject for formal assessment. The sort of things that are worth recording must be worked out by the participants beforehand and the results discussed as they want. In addition to providing material for discussion the process of recording, if done regularly, does encourage the trainee to review his day to day performance (and others if relevant), in a way that is personal to his or her needs.

Aside from the obvious merits of this approach, observation and field work gives each participant in training a degree of authoritative experience so that everyone, in spite of any other inequalities in levels of experience, will have something to contribute. It also draws attention to the environment in which the worker is operating and can therefore bring support for the worker's attempts to deal with local situations in a way not possible in other types of training.

2. *The study group*

The informal study group of seven to nine participants is the major institution in the community approach. We have already seen that one of it's main functions is to facilitate the sharing and investigation of experience, the development of theory, and the framing of suitable approaches. It has two further functions—a place where participants can sort out their attitudes and a source of emotional support. The latter is possibly the more important, as trainees are likely to find themselves in stressful situations (ranging from the first attempts at classwork to conflict with fellow workers) directly as a result of their training programme. As with many institutions, in this respect, the importance of the group lies outside its sessions in the relationships it fosters.

Study groups would be expected to meet once a week through the training period. For logistical reasons the members of the group will have to be fairly near to each other and the danger here is that there will not be enough variety of daily experience. This can be overcome by rationing places to different authorities and by bringing together the training of different "types" of careers worker. The beauty of the study group is its flexibility—it can draw in other people as required, it's local and can literally operate from someone's front room. Where specialist facilities are needed, such as video equipment, it can attach itself to a local further education, or technical college. Above all it is far more likely to be responsive to the needs of its members.

All this points to the special role the trainer must play. He is there to challenge ideas and actions, to provide support, and initially to structure the course. As training proceeds it would be hoped the trainer plays far less of an authoritative role and becomes more of a participant and organiser at the behest of the group. For reasons already outlined, it would be better if the trainer is a practising careers worker and, because of the support role should stand outside the hierarchy of participants' employing authorities.

3. *Briefing sessions*

Whilst the study group has been utilised for discovering theoretical concepts, skill training and attitude development, other techniques must be used in tandem to further deepen participants' knowledge of the processes in

which they are involved and to enhance occupational and educational knowledge. Whilst a certain amount of occupational knowledge can be picked up on the job a number of things militate against its acquisition, so it is necessary to have some sort of external briefing for trainees and workers, which could usefully be organised by the training agency. For this kind of session you might bring together two or three study groups. It may also be desirable to retain traditional lecture techniques for some of the background briefing work e.g. the nature and structure of industry, careers service, youth service etc. A possible, and more democratic approach would be to limit the use of lectures and to rely on "briefing groups" to conduct their own programme. All that is needed is a little application, something like a Workers Education Association book box, a list of readings and access to relevant expertise. The briefing group would be formed by bringing together two study groups and would operate by requiring members to do a certain amount of reading, to report and then to discuss what has arisen. After the group has completed a "general" course it could then go on to design and implement its own study packs.[7]

4. *Placements*

With participants using their own immediate situation so much in this approach, the use of placement in other authorities and areas of community work is essential. It is also desirable that the practice of some courses to have extended industrial or commercial placements should continue.

Epilogue

This has been called a community approach to training because it is localised, integrated with day to day careers work, and aimed at developing a real understanding of peoples' attitudes and thinking. Above all else it has been designed so as not to allow participants to be passive spectators in their own training. It is, I hope, a mature and personal approach to careers work training.

References

1. For a fuller account of these objectives see L. Button, *Discovery and Experience,* Oxford University Press 1971.
2. See Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person,* Constable 1961.
3. T. R. Batten, *The Non-directive approach in group and community work,* Oxford University Press 1967, p. 69-70.
4. L Button, *Training for Youth Work in Colleges of Education,* University College of Swansea, 1969, p. 11.
5. *Discovery and Experience,* p. 129.
6. I recently attended a Youth and Community work introductory course where this technique was successfully used. Most of the people on the course were experienced part-time youth workers and the suggestion that they should go away and talk in this way with young people was greeted with some scepticism. When they returned having completed the exercise almost all felt that it had been successful and were struck by the enthusiastic response they had encountered.
7. For a full account of the possibilities of this kind of group see Jenny Jacobs, Sheila Rose, James Shrag, *Organising Macro-analysis Seminars,* Friends Peace and International Relations Committee 1974.