

# The beginning of the end of andragogy

*Peter Morrall asks whether future part-time, nonresidential courses based on andragogy can maintain a commitment to the philosophy without the residential element present.*

A part-time course for community psychiatric nurses, based on the educational philosophy of andragogy (1, 2) and encompassing a series of residential periods of study, was pioneered at the University of Teesside (formerly Teesside Polytechnic). In this article, I review the participants' evaluations of the course. The evaluations imply strongly that this was a successful course, but point also to the residential components being the main reason for its success.

According to monitoring exercises such as student evaluations, the English National Board course (ENB 811) in Community Mental Health has been very effective in achieving its goals. Due to the cost, however, courses in the future are unlikely to replicate its format. In particular, there is little chance of the expensive residential components, perceived by the students to be fundamental to the success of the course, being reintroduced.

Can future part-time courses without these residential elements maintain a commitment to andragogy?

## Background

In 1987, Teesside Polytechnic set up a two-year community psychiatric nursing course (ENB 811). At the time of its inception, the course had certain

innovative features; these included: it being part-time (approximately one day of study at the polytechnic each week), its educational philosophy, and a series of residential periods of study contained within its structure. July 1992 saw the last of three student intakes complete the course.

It has been replaced by a part-time modularised programme in which core modules are shared with nurses from other disciplines. Community psychiatric nurses (CPNs) can gain now an ENB 812 certificate and a university diploma. This diploma is counted as the equivalent to the second year of a first-degree course. Virtually all of the educational tenets of the ENB 811 course are replicated in the new programme.

## ENB 811 course aims

The ENB 811 course was designed by its first course leader, Graham Dexter, aided by myself and other members of a curriculum planning team. Included in this team were practitioners and CPN managers.

The course aimed to help CPNs augment those nursing skills already obtained, allow occasions for self-awareness and reflection, provide a trusting and encouraging milieu in

which to share and explore views, increase knowledge, and take risks.

General parameters were provided by the ENB. For example, the ENB stated what the length of the course had to be, the type of clinical experiences to be offered to the participants, and the theoretical areas to be covered. The content and process of the course, however, was otherwise to be negotiated between the participants and the tutors.

It was intended that the course should not be constructed so as to produce a definitive end-result in the competency of the participants. Rather than being product-oriented, it would act as a stimulus for further development, particularly in the area of applying skills to practice.

## Educational philosophy

Those associated with the planning of the ENB 811 at Teesside perceived CPNs as people who were mature, professional, experienced, and practical. It was believed that participants on the course required an educational approach which capitalised on and paid respect to these qualities.

Consequently, the educational principles from the work of Dewey, Knowles, Rogers, and Mezirow (1-4) were complemented by a facilitative style of teaching taken from Heron (5).

Essentially, the educational philosophy, now widely understood as *andragogy*, was adhered to so as to help the participants grow as people and as professionals. Mezirow defines *andragogy* as: 'an organised and sustained effort to assist adults to learn in a way that enhances their capability to function as self-directed learners' (2, p136, Mezirow's emphasis).

The learning process on the course was given direction and form through the application of Mezirow's andragogical charter. This charter suggests that learners should be encouraged to:

- Progressively reduce dependency on the educator
- Engage in reciprocal learning relationships
- Define his or her own learning needs

● Assume increasing responsibility for defining their learning objectives, planning their own learning programme, and evaluating their progress

● Be involved in experiential and other active learning approaches

To compensate for the part-time structure of the course, we recognised that there would be a need for regular periods of intensive (residential) study to ensure that these principles were reified.

### The residentials

Over the two years, each group spent five working weeks at what became known as the Residentials. These residentials were held at a variety of geographical locations.

Many of them operated from a relatively luxurious guest house in North Yorkshire, while at the other extreme, one was held in an austere accommodation at Keilder Reservoir in Northumberland (6).

The purpose of the residential components of the course was to raise the quality of the educational experience for the participants in a way that was not possible during the one-day-per-week study days.

The idea was to create a concentrated working environment based on trust, honesty, mutuality, and the common goal of self-improvement. Having residential elements helped to break down the conventional relationships between tutors and students.

Dismantling these barriers necessitated leaving the normal pressures of life and institutional regulations behind (as far as is ever possible), and reaching a state of 'being' with the world and those around us (7): 'We wanted to get members of the group into the being mode so that they could become more receptive to the process of self-development' (6, p23).

Over the lifespan of the course, the attempt to attain state of 'being' embodied many bizarre activities, for instance, windsurfing on a freezing cold lake, living in a log cabin, and conducting warm-up exercises *al*

*fresco* - much to the bewilderment of the residents of suburban Rotherham!

Each place can be remembered for its own peculiar characteristic or incident. For example, at Keilder it was having to sleep within centimetres of noisome and inescapable drains.

At Rawmarsh, it was the proprietor and his semicastrated dog causing havoc to the concentration of the members of the group by wandering through the classroom (ie, the guests' sitting room) at unpredictable times.

At the end of the course, the students were asked to complete four statements:

1. What I am taking away from the course is...

2. What I liked about the course was....

3. What I disliked about the course was....

4. What I [the participant] could have done differently was....

### Evaluations

The method for evaluating the students' comments on the course was a simplified and modified version of techniques recommended by Strauss and Corbin (8) and Burnard (9) for analysing qualitative data.

Out of 42 participants (the total number of students), 33 evaluations (78.5 per cent) were received, with approximately the same percentage coming from each intake. All of the evaluations were read and then reread, common themes identified, coded and classified by myself.

A colleague was then asked to review the students' comments and make his own classifications. The two sets of classifications were then compared, and adjustments made. Five major themes were extrapolated from the raw data:

#### ● Improved working practices

Thirty-one participants stated that they believed how they operated at work had changed for the better in a number of directions. For example:

'[What I am taking away is] ...increased awareness of professional

responsibility [and] a sharpening of practice relating to process issues, ie recording information, time management, prioritising cases.'

#### ● Personal development

Various aspects of personal growth were mentioned by 30 participants, many of whom made connections between the changes in them as individuals and the effect this had on their working practices. For example:

'I feel the course has initiated great changes in me, I am much more self-confident, much more self-disciplined and certainly more aware of my professional role. This enables me to set short-term and long-term goals which I think produces more efficient functioning.'

#### ● The learning process

Ways in which the student found her or his learning had been enhanced were mentioned by 26 participants. For example:

'The feedback from other group members and the self-reflection offered the opportunity to experience growth and change in myself and in others.'

#### ● Negative elements to course design/philosophy

Nineteen of the course members made observations about the deficiencies of the course. In the main, these were related to the problem of balancing the demands of the course with the demands of their practice. For example:

'The pressure of the course plus my own caseload and responsibilities has at times been very great and has meant that I have not spent as much time as I would like on course work.'

#### ● The residential periods of study

Virtually all of the participants, either explicitly or implicitly, made reference to the importance of the residential components. For example:

'The residential weeks I feel have been of great value to me, allowing me to get to know fellow members of the group more thoroughly. Also being away from outside distractions allowed total commitment and this led

to a personal increase in motivation and allowed me to function at an intensive level for a sustained period.'

These residential periods were seen by the participants to be of importance for their self-development and professional development, as well as crucial to the learning process. They were regarded by both the tutors and the participants as the arena in which the core elements of Mezirow's Charter could be exploited fully.

It was, for example, only in the relaxed atmosphere of the residential (as opposed to the relatively formal polytechnic environment) that the tutors were able to facilitate a gradual increase in the students abilities to become autonomous for their own learning.

### Conclusion

The evaluations given by the participants indicate a high level of satisfaction with a part-time course (ENB 811) which followed an androgogical perspective to learning.

These evaluations, together with other quality measures, such as the external examiner's reports, indicate that the course accomplished its educational aims.

The essential and dynamic part of the course, however, appears to have been the residentials. It was the residentials that enabled the implementation of andragogy.

Therefore, it is unlikely that subsequent part-time courses, which propagate a similar educational philosophy but don't contain residential constituents, will register the same level of satisfaction.

Consequently, either the design of these courses will have to be altered to include cost-effective elements which serve the same purpose as the residentials or compromise will have to be made over the educational philosophy.

With respect to the latter, it is the government's monetary policy which is ultimately the cause of the residentials being abandoned. That is, the existence of a £50 billion public sector borrowing requirement (10), and the consequential cuts in public spending, may prove to be the catalyst for the return to a more traditional (pedagogical) educational philosophy.

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