

EMERGENCE OF MY INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE

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In my first year at University in the late 60s, I was mildly impressed to notice that my three chosen subjects, Geography, English (Language and Literature), and History, were all exploring aspects of life in Anglo Saxon England. Geography was focusing on the earliest permanent settlements in Britain and their use of land, the evidence of which is now embedded in our landscape; in English we studied 'Old English' in order to read the literature of Anglo Saxon times; and in History we were looking at these same earliest 'written monuments' for what they revealed about the character and quality of life in those times.

I remember wondering in my first exams whether it would be construed as 'cheating' if as part of my answer in a particular area I referred to what I had learned in another subject. (I have forgotten my conclusion.) None of my friends seemed to have the same quandary because, as I recall, none was following my exact course of study. It eventually dawned on me that the alignment of the courses' content was perhaps fortuitous rather than deliberate: and probably no-one apart from me had noticed it!

After finishing University and completing a Teaching course I volunteered to teach in Africa with VSO. In no time at all I realised that the syllabus planned for the students completely failed to engage their interest, so I began a series of 'field studies', taking the students with me to find out about the lives and occupations of local people. I worked on the assumption that whatever interested me about their culture would probably interest them. The students loved it.

On my return to UK, the first school where I taught (Dartington Hall School) had just begun a pioneering and visionary new project linking this private school in South Devon with a state-funded secondary school in a coal-mining community in Yorkshire. In the headmaster's mind, the emotional, aesthetic, moral and social aspects of a child's development mattered as much as the intellectual and practical ones. It was his plan to develop a scheme which would foster individual and group creative life, enable students to explore the meaning and culture of their own lives, and experience other cultural lives, partly to help students assess their own. He wanted to bring together children from a private school with those from the maintained sector; parents from the privileged professional/ middle classes who often lived abroad with those from a stable, predominantly working class village in Yorkshire; and teachers from a rural independent boarding school with those from an urban secondary modern and a grammar school. It was a multi-dimensional scheme. The objects were to introduce each community to the education, organisation and ethos of the other; to enable people to live and learn together in each others' environment; to initiate conversations and encourage new insights. It was a unique and truly holistic experiment whose boundaries incorporated cultural, social, political and economic dimensions never before explored in this way. Inevitably the scheme touched on (one might say, collided with) the private, personal and psychological, exposing the prejudices and fears of all parties, as well as their curiosity and generosity. I was involved in the project for much of its six year life.

When I took my first job at this innovative and progressive school, as a teacher of both History and Geography, I began to think that a course integrating the two subjects would be an exciting development. A colleague working at the same school shared my interest, so Sociology was added to Geography and History in our Integrated Studies curriculum. The Examination Board which assessed student performance and awarded qualifications, was intrigued by the proposal. After extended negotiations, together we worked out and agreed both the syllabus and the methods of assessment. The course was heralded with much interest and attracted some adventurous students. It was not different merely because it made connections between disciplines which traditionally were kept separate, but was about new methods of inquiry and new processes of learning. After a number of years I noticed that the grades students achieved were higher than might have been expected. I began to wonder whether this was just the result of the interest focused on them, or of the consciously interconnected programme of study they followed.

As my career progressed my interest in how people learn developed. I realised that the context in which people study affects the success of their learning. Not only does the context need to be respectful and congenial, but its underlying values should not be at odds with the focus of the subject. For example, the effectiveness of a seminar about sustainability is compromised if it's run in a hotel by a motorway which serves instant coffee at break-times and exotic fruits after lunch. In short, students' brains learn from all aspects of their environment, holistically (and subliminally!). I began to experiment with choosing or creating holistic learning environments to promote effective learning.

In the 1980s here in Dartington, four or five of us began to plan the creation of a 'Centre for Ecological and Spiritual Studies', a name which was changed to 'Schumacher College' before the programme was launched. My real contribution was my experience of helping people learn. We agreed to offer a wide-reaching course programme of Ecological and Spiritual Studies. Generally speaking, the courses were five weeks long and led by respected pioneering scholars. Our permanent staff included academics from the fields of the Physical Sciences, Ecology, Psychology and the Arts whose role was to probe the roots of the theses underpinning the work of our visiting scholars. Music, art, environmental economics, philosophy, psychology, business, medicine, design, ancient wisdom, green politics, Gaia, building sustainable homes, relations between the genders... we touched on them all in the first couple of years. The list was the start of a comprehensive (but not complete) exploration of ecological and spiritual studies. It was met with enthusiasm from people all over the world.

Yet after just two years it appeared that the world's supply of students eager to join the College's courses had faltered. Advisors told us that our programme was so eclectic that 'the market' didn't have a clear idea of what we were about. They were unable to place our courses into a traditional discipline, or to see the point of the processes we had adopted to reinforce the learning. (Apparently, in the 90s it was still only a minority that grasped the intention of our programme.) We therefore agreed on the need to present ourselves more clearly and chose to focus on three strands of study. One strand would look at the lessons emerging from the new sciences; another would explore development and new economics, and the third would focus on ecological perspectives on our traditional ways of understanding the world...thus, eco-philosophy, eco-theology, eco-psychology etc. We felt this change narrowed our programme somewhat, but it still allowed us the freedom to offer ecological and spiritual studies and to make webs of connections between many fields of endeavour. For pragmatic reasons, we also decided to reduce the length of the courses to three weeks from five. In some ways this marked the point at which it began to feel to us as if our studies were in danger of becoming less 'holistic' than had been our original intention. We didn't routinely use the word holistic: we spoke in terms of integration, interconnections and of the breadth as well as the depth, of the study.

From the first, Schumacher College's design involved everyone in certain key daily tasks such as food preparation. Part of our holistic vision, this was to create a context in which the implications of our courses could be examined. The conscious choice of an organic and vegetarian diet, both for pragmatic and philosophical reasons; the sourcing of the food and other materials; the living and working in community, together offered opportunities to explore and elaborate on the academic programme. Some called it a pressure-cooker environment, and within the constraints of the programme we were very successful in providing a holistic education, even if students were only here for a short time. But as our confidence grew, it was clear that we needed courses with extended periods of study so that we could move towards a more holistic programme.

The emergence of the Holistic Science course (so named by a teacher at the University!) at Schumacher College transformed the context in which any student could experience learning there. Now, not only was there a permanent residential group of long-term students, but there was an ongoing corpus of holistic inquiry which informed and enriched everyone's experience, however short their visit. Admittedly, the Holistic Science Course's boundaries were prescribed within the Faculty of Science, in order to satisfy the demands of University accreditation. Nevertheless, in their individual projects some students slipped outside this limitation and chose to put economics, education, community etc. under the spotlight, expanding the boundaries of the course.

When I reflect on the development of my practice, I can consciously go back no further than my time at University. There I was aware of connections between disciplines, but still indoctrinated in the long established academic tradition of the boundaries between them. After University, having decided to study and work in

experimental education, I was exposed to and involved in some of the challenges made in the 1970s to conventional practices. There were various radical experiments at that time, though often they sprang from a materialist philosophy. Soon, I developed the confidence in my own field to challenge the status quo. I was fortunate to be in a situation where such challenges were welcomed, and encouraged.

I was a child of my time...most of us are. The zeitgeist of the 1960s and 70s was of adventure, risk-taking and exploration. The expectation was to overturn barriers, to attack the status quo and to achieve inclusivity for the excluded. The work of the last three decades has been to push at doors which had already been edged ajar in the 60s and 70s. But still today, although the language in education has changed, there is still a whiff of iconoclasm about the education at Schumacher College, and about Holistic Science in particular.



Anne Phillips was one of a team of four who designed Schumacher College, becoming its Director in 1993 for the next 13 years. Early on her work evolved from traditional teaching into helping people learn most effectively in a range of contexts. She also spent a year in East Africa doing Voluntary Service Overseas.

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