

Report on the first two hours of the workshop on "Der 'Humanistic Approach' / Interaktive Verfahren, the section led by Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims Language Courses

+ Prof Schiffler

Professor Schiffler and I decided that the best way to start a workshop on the 'humanistic approach' was to involve people in a sequence of exercises that would allow them to get to know each other on a variety of different levels. Since one of the premises of this approach is that we are teaching full human beings, not shrivelled brains, it was imperative to allow them to meet each other, to experience each other and to begin to come to terms with each other.

Blind listening

HLT

This was the first exercise we did and it aims to make people aware of each other as voices and presences. Half the group sat in a circle with an empty chair next to them. The other half of the participants stood behind them. The seated people closed their eyes, while the people behind moved round and chose a partner they did not yet know and sat down next to them. The 'blind' person and the sighted person then had a typical, boring airplane conversation - the 'blind' person's task was to form a mental picture of his/her partner from the voice. After a 2 minute conversation the 'blind' one had to describe the other's physical appearance and clothing as accurately as possible. S/he then opened their eyes and checked the accuracy or otherwise of the description.

The 'blind' now became the sighted and the exercise was repeated.

The exercise provoked quite a bit of surprised discussion.

New Personalities

In this exercise we were invited to choose a completely new identity with no holds barred. We could change age, sex nationality, jobs etc..... After a few minutes reflection each participant introduced him/her self to a partner in the new identity.

People then got into groups of 4 and A introduced B (new identity) to C and D, C introduced D to A and B etc.....

This is a strong projection exercise and people learnt quite a bit about the other three in the group.

Both these first two exercises come from Elayne Phillip's repertoire.

Crimes not yet committed

I now felt it was time for people to get to grips with each other's names and the group of 30 people broke up into sub-groups of 10. Person A was asked to say their name and a crime they had never committed, eg: "I'm Mario and I haven't yet robbed a bank thru its computer" A then designated some one else in the group to carry on. This person, B, introduced A to the group plus his crime. B then gave him name and uncommitted crime. C reported on the first two and so on.

In the discussion that followed this exercise some felt we had been doing a present perfect drill, some thought it didn't feel like a drill, others thought it was a projection activity...

Mirroring

People got up and took a partner. They stood about a metre and a half apart and one person raised his/her hands. The other had to place her hands in an equivalent position, mirroring the first. When the leader moved his/her hands the other had to follow as closely as possible. All this in silence.

The aim of mirroring is to allow people to enter into the rhythm of another person, to sensitise them to cadences other than their own. It's an extraordinarily powerful way of getting to know another person. Each participant worked with a total of three others, thus having the chance to experience different rhythms.

Group mirroring with words

Here we all stood in a circle and our task was to mirror not each other but the leader. The mirroring concerned both voice and body. Mario led us sentence by sentence through a short scene in French. We followed his voice and his gestures. There was a rather magic feeling of togetherness and concentration. The French sounds produced were unusually good, perhaps due to the heightened atmosphere and the concentration.

This technique comes from the work of Bernard Dufeu, University of Mainz.

The message that all the above exercises were trying to convey was that people cannot be asked to work seriously together unless you give them a chance to get to know each other as real people. I would do just such a sequence of icebreakers at the start of a language course, indeed I would do more of them. This initial, humanising work is never time wasted, especially if you try to run your course democratically and demand that the students take executive control of the learning-teaching process. They can't do this effectively until they know each other.