

Mentoring Course: Iasi, Romania: late July 2000

M. Trevor Shanklin, Ph.D.:

SPELT teacher trainer/ adjunct faculty, Northern Arizona University

In talking about the relation between the ‘undermind’ and the conscious mind, Claxton offers the insight that “attention gets diverted from watching how the system actually behaves to trying to figure out what is going on, and using these putative explanations as the basis for action” (Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind 1999, p. 32). As I learned through Caroline’s workshop, this happens to us when we observe teaching as well, or in a broader context, work with colleagues, and even broader, interact with others. As one example, in an activity designed to develop the skill of paraphrasing, I was paired with an extremely articulate participant. We found this task very difficult: interpretation and drawing conclusions got in the way of simply reporting back what the other person had said. In the short space of the activity, we went beyond awareness raising and started to develop a fundamental skill, in this particular case learning to better understand the individual we are conversing with. As Caroline reminded us, “you need to establish that you have a common vocabulary.”

In fact, the entire workshop was skills-development training. Caroline was able to break down more global concepts, such as active listening, or post-lesson feedback, into discrete elements that could be practiced individually.

At the same time, personal and professional growth became combined. For the post-lesson feedback role-plays, we were shown segments of student teaching that were bound to trigger strong reactions. The role-plays became, unexpectedly, an exercise in restraining ourselves so that we began to realize that those initial reactions actually got in the way of truly ‘seeing’ the classroom. As Caroline stated: “the more one can forget oneself, one’s own agenda, and focus on others, the better.”

Caroline managed to work in the SPELT trainers in such a way that we met in our own group initially and then branched out and interacted with the rest of the participants. In addition to benefiting greatly from the workshop ourselves, we were in many ways the unseen framework that helped to support the workshop as a whole. Important networking also took place at the conference. A robust example would be the cooperation between the delegations from Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia. The methodology instructor from Nis will investigate the possibility of assisting the program in Niksic, currently without a seminar instructor. (I have already received follow-up e-mail about this.) The SPELT trainers from Croatia planned workshops in Montenegro and Serbia and mentoring courses in Croatia for the Fall term, co-taught with the methodology assistants from Osijek and Zagreb.

Three other key features that contributed to the success of the workshop were: a) the integration of resources; b) the very positive group dynamics and c) the support structure provided by the International Language Center in Iasi:

a) As the workshop progressed, more and more participants found themselves in a computer lab with five workstations hooked up to the Internet. They were sending e-mail, finding resources for a presentation about their countries and preparing the daily reports that each country was responsible for on one day. There was also a book table downstairs in the school, a number of articles distributed by Caroline, and the book *Readings in Teacher Development* that was given to every participant. The school we were meeting at presented us with the recent issue of the first ASMERO national mentoring newsletter. The presentation of the countries via slide shows from a computer projector, which took place half way through the conference, was a great hit. It also gave an example of one of the most basic uses of computers in the classroom, a use that reinforces incorporating project work in the classroom. The journal entries were also an example of project work that encouraged participants to express themselves more freely. The completed reports, posted daily and handed out to all participants, give a glimpse into how individual activities and day's events were received. The sustained quality of the reports served as an incentive.

b) The group dynamics that developed cashed in on the great strength of the Open Society Institute, the local autonomy of the national foundations and the ability to coordinate activities between them. The participants for this conference were selected by the national foundations, but in consultation with the SPELT program. This opportunity was not missed by Caroline, who carefully structured activities that built up trust and cooperation--the rest happened spontaneously in evening activities or sharing a coffee, for which space was allotted by the conference organizers. One participant pointed out that the presentation of the countries half-way through the conference was successful because of the timing--at the beginning it would have been intimidating, and the participants would have been less interested in hearing about the others. As the workshop progressed it seemed that everyone took an active role in ensuring its success, in other words, took individual responsibility for the success of the workshop.

c) The support group at Iasi made the participants feel welcome and important. Every aspect from transportation to meals to coffee breaks to city tours to meeting individual needs was provided for. The technician worked closely with us to make the lab as accessible as possible. He also spent several hours helping us to set up the slide-show presentation. The special events organized for us, such as the wine-tasting tour, dinner in a monastery and day trip to the painted monasteries, did their part in creating the atmosphere that the workshop itself was a special event. Indeed it was: the participants were exceptional teachers who the SPELT program has worked with.

Indeed the workshop was a reward for the commitment that these teachers have shown to their profession in difficult circumstances--and it was handled as such. In this respect the workshop showed a perfect congruity with the primary theme of the workshop: fostering a growth model of professional development rather than a deficiency model.

The principle of congruity was demonstrated by Caroline. She enabled us to reflect on it through a gridding activity where we individually worked out, among other things, the purpose of an activity and the role of the facilitator and participants. I found myself entering the same information under the role of the facilitator: 'sets up and manages the activity, keeps time'. It became clearer and clearer that we were being provided with a model of how to organize a learner-centered classroom (without the issue ever having been raised!). Equally important for me was a model of how to foster skills acquisition and working in the dimension of interpersonal skills.

My personal enrichment from the workshop was also a result of the skills practiced in the workshop. When the trainers interacted with the whole group, I had some of my most powerful experiences with the role-plays. I felt that I learned from and contributed to these sessions in a way that would not have been possible without the very training we were undergoing.

I would characterize this along the following lines: observation is the basis for knowledge. But to truly observe, we have to remove a lot of personal baggage. I realized at this workshop that the conclusions I reach and inferences I draw can get in the way of both teaching and mentoring. And if anyone has benefited from this training, it is my 2 1/2 year old son.

Here is an excerpt from a recent message from a Samara participant about the workshop, accompanying some photos taken from the workshop. In it she mentions the value of the training the participants in Samara had prior to the workshop. This is very encouraging, as it suggests that SPELT trainers could conduct such mentoring courses as the transition to trainer training that could then be capped once again by selecting a few of the best teachers to take part in another international event like this. Notice as well the reference to the bonding that occurred between the different nationalities:

I want to thank you once more for choosing me as a participant of the course in Iasi. I enjoyed it greatly. Caroline was brilliant and the group was very nice and friendly. I think our group from Samara was the luckiest one as we had your mentor training programme before we came to Romania. It was much easier for us to understand and to accept what Caroline was speaking about.

I'm really missing those people who I met in Iasi. I hope that I'll see you and at least some of them some time.