

ENGLISH AT C-FAR

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The 'LIFE CHANGE' programme by the Centre for Adolescent Rehabilitation (C-FAR) is an innovative, holistic and pioneering initiative in the South West of England. It consists of an intensive community based, residential eclectic programme of *personal development, health, social/life skills training, education and empowerment* for young adult persistent male offenders (aged 18-24 years).

Teaching English at C-FAR has proved to be a very different experience from teaching in Secondary and Primary education where the National Curriculum reigns supreme and learning programmes are fine tuned to meet demands.

Rehabilitation underpins the work of C-FAR and in eleven weeks the teaching of English must take its place with all the other academic and physical forms of learning. It is part of a holistic programme that seeks to establish a new beginning for young men who are in danger of being lost to society.

The trainees arrive and present the teacher with a wide range of ability achievements and emotional and behavioural disorders. Their experience of schools and teaching varies from excellent achievement at GCSE and A Level – to no education at all. There may also be specific difficulties such as dyslexia. The situation is further complicated where drug and alcohol abuse have reduced the concentration span to that of a few fleeting minutes and the trainee is still trying to recover from the after effects of detoxification. Erratic behaviour – frustration and anger are common signs of the struggle some trainees have when sitting in a classroom trying to respond to the lesson. The teacher has to balance the trainees' need for patience and understanding with the necessity to provide quality-learning experiences with a sense of purpose and success.

It is more art than science

It is important that lessons are inclusive – that there is a sense of 'us' and a shared experience for trainee and teacher. It is a journey taken together.

Differentiation has to be by outcome and the lesson broad enough to allow progress from the academic and emotional point of arrival.

Measuring progression is difficult as trainees are inconsistent – no two lessons are ever the same – participation and outcomes varying enormously from session to session. However, a broad picture has emerged through the assessment tests taken on entry and at

the end of the course. There is a marked rise in the levels recorded – sometimes a whole level and more in the 11 weeks.

This primarily stems from the following key factors: -

- The trainees were not able to show their true ability on entry. Good diet, sleep, exercise and learning have combined to produce an increased level of maturation enabling the trainee to have a more realistic test.
- The English programme focuses the trainees' mind on recall of lost skills and puts them back in touch with the learning process. It has moved them on to a longer period of sustained concentration and increased the motivation to succeed.
- Some confidence and independence has been restored.... often through the provision of simple things like a pair of spectacles.
- Individual attention to specific needs that have been neglected can range from one to one conversations that quietly pursue a theme, idea or experience, to the provision of texts that reflect the GCSE and A Level courses for those who have past achievements on which to build.

Not all the outcomes are measurable by tests and it is important to understand that any 'progress' is a fragile achievement needing further support when the trainee returns to the community. Any learning programme requires reinforcement and development. The English programme aims to open up the possibilities to access the courses they need in the future.

EXPERIENCES FROM THE PROGRAMME

Speaking and Listening

On entry the trainees' language skills often reflect their disordered state of mind. Some may have a wide vocabulary and previous achievement that indicate an ability to pursue a discursive conversation – others have a very limited vocabulary and lack the ability to produce a coherent form of their ideas. The Prison environment has cut back on any language development, adjectives are reduced to basic Anglo Saxon terms and responses to verbal enquiry is defensive and minimal in order to protect the speaker from any adverse criticism - blending in has been a crucial life skill.

The English lessons are planned to allow time for a new approach – swearing is actively discouraged and patiently corrected – encouragement is given to the expression of ideas and experimentation with new words or phrases. When they are confident they will be encouraged, trainees respond positively and try out new modes of speech, using idioms and comparisons where they can.

It is noticeable that within a short period conversations develop a more reasoned tone, there is less use of expletives allowing an exchange of ideas to take place. This is a long way from being able to debate an issue without resorting to raised voices and the shouting of trite portmanteau phrases that convey nothing but blind prejudice before slamming out of the room when words fail.

Those trainees who have a wide vocabulary and have achieved GCSE do recover their skills and are quick to take up the opportunities to discuss and converse with teachers at a mature level. In turn they unconsciously provide an example to those who are less willing to risk speaking. The whole group 'raises their game' as they make progress.

Reading

Reading aloud in a group situation with such a wide ability range can be fraught. A high proportion has what they call 'dyslexia' – but very few have been properly diagnosed or assessed and only a small minority have had any remedial help. There are constraints of time in providing a full remedial programme but some basic coping strategies can be taught – such as a simple mask over the lower print on a page. Some are able to take up these strategies but others would still prefer not to be 'different'. One to one help is offered where possible – and often fellow trainees will help by reading alongside.

What emerges is a collage of 'reasons why I can't'. There is sometimes a cluster of factors with their roots going back to childhood failure. There is a retreat from challenge as soon as it becomes difficult and by the age of 18 – 25 many have given up and learned to cope in other ways – usually by getting someone else to do it for them. In order to help these trainees while they are at C-FAR the lessons are inclusive in that they are encouraged to read what they can and then supported by having a reader alongside. Where possible new sounds and strategies are introduced with some success.

It is slow and painstaking work and in reality can only be started in a small way at C-FAR. Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly positive and provides a potential springboard from which trainees can move forward.

Reading has often been an escape for those fluent readers who have been in prison. While at C-FAR there is some provision for wider reading across a range of authors and genres. That said, trainees would often benefit from books that would meet their individual needs and it would be an advantage to have funding for this. Where the teaching staff can meet the requests for specific books it is noticeable that reading skills, analysis and critical appraisal improves across the whole range of ability.

Writing

Creative writing is perhaps the most revealing of the skills in the English programme. Given the opportunity to write freely in response to the themes of the programme the majority of the trainees respond readily and write, often very movingly, of their lives and hopes for the future.

A pen and paper with time to write and support to do it is both a therapeutic and cathartic experience. For some the first draft is all that they wish to commit to – as though they are all too aware of revealing their innermost thoughts.... Others are prepared to move on and develop a more finely tuned piece of poetry or prose. These are usually those who have had a more consistent secondary education – but not always – the less proficient can sometimes be the most diligent. Encouraging all levels of ability can be extremely difficult and delicate work. When to push on and when to ‘let be’ is part of the art.

Specific writing difficulties of letterforms and fluency can be helped where the trainee is ready to address their need. Some trainees work at simple letter patterns in their own time and try to improve the quality of their handwritten texts – it is surprising how many have learned to write clearly with very little formal education.

Tackling writing and reading are essential skills in cognitive development – if you can express your thoughts in spoken language and write them in coherent form you are one step nearer controlling your future actions as well as meeting the needs of the moment. If you can interpret events in a controlled and coherent way you are less likely to act impulsively or compulsively. If you can narrate your past calmly and with perspective....painful experience is less likely to dominate your present and cloud your future happiness. Maturation is an ongoing process that starts at conception and continues throughout life. Where there are serious gaps in our own childhood experiences or damage induced by the circumstances in which we have lived, then we are trapped and cannot move forward.

English is part of C-FAR’S rehabilitation work to help young adult offenders ‘spring the trap’.

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