

# Educational approaches a journey through the XXth century

*This article explores and reflects upon some educational approaches in training looking at them from a certain perspective from the evolution of psychology during the last century. This article is not about psychological models but about educational approaches inspired by those models. For this reason the mentioned psychological models have been simplified and they are just used to explain the associated educational implications.*

*This analysis (through the evolution of psychology and related social sciences) of the educational approaches in training gives us new perspectives and criteria for using and combining methods and dynamics exercises in our educational practices*



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Those new criteria and perspectives for the planning and running of training activities aim to be complementary to others already widely considered in non-formal education such as the different learning capacities, styles and traditions, the characteristics of the learners, the possibilities of the learning environment, the specific objectives of the learning session...

Without pretending to be normative, this article might help us as well to recognise eventual deficits or mistakes in our work and to correct misleading educational practices.

## First approach

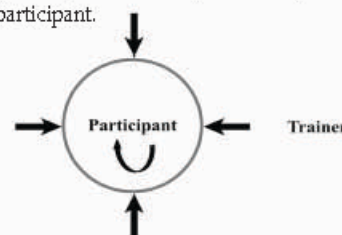
At the beginning of the last century - around 1900 - two different schools of Psychology (Freud and Behavioural Psychology) concentrate their efforts on "studying" the individual.

Freud was responsible for making popular the idea of the conscious versus unconscious mind. Freud suggested that the unconscious layer of the mind is the largest and the source of human motivations, whether they be simple desires for food or sex, neurotic compulsions, or the motives of an artist or scientist. The goal of Freudian therapies was to get to know the individual from inside "making the unconscious conscious."

Behavioural Psychology advocates the use of strict experimental procedures to study observable behaviour (responses) in relation to the environment (stimuli). The learning process, of the dogs associating the sound of a bell with food, was called "conditioning". Key Behaviourist figures like Watson, Pavlov and Skinner devoted their work to knowing the individual from outside, through the causes and effects of human behaviours and activities.

The educational implications of these two "individual focused" approaches would imply an emphasis on getting to know the participants; trying

to understand what is inside them and interpreting their behaviours. This approach is also called the "medical" approach, where the object of study is the subject, the participant.



In non-formal education the ultimate aim of such an approach normally goes beyond just "knowing" the participant. This is simply a step; getting to know the participant aims to cater the training programme to them. Questionnaires, interviews and assessments are some of the methods rooted in this educational approach.

While using those methods the role of the trainer consists, at first, of defining the angles of studying the participant. After receiving the answers or outcomes, the trainer has the responsibility to understand and interpret what they mean, what is behind them, in order to adapt the training practice to the individuals taking part in it.

The potentials of such an approach among others are the high attention paid to and consideration of the individuals. By doing so, normally, the training programme better meets the participants' needs.

The disadvantages of this approach come from the difficulty of understanding the meaning of the received outcomes. It is often very difficult to know what happens on a personal level. Quite often, the trainers don't have the experience, sensitivity or competencies to decode it. Another risk is to drift into a paternalistic relation with the participants due to the asymmetry in the relation (the participant is at least at the beginning the "patient" and the trainer the "doctor"). This can easily happen if, after the diagnosis of the participants' capacities and



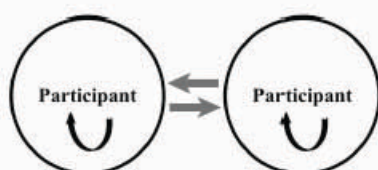
limitations, the trainer doesn't involve them in the development of training initiatives to overcome them.

## Second approach

In the 50s the humanist paradigm emerged as a response to both the determinism inherent in Freudian psychoanalysis and the limited place of empathy and free will found in behaviourism.

Carl Rogers was one of the founders of humanistic psychology, which promotes a more person-to-person approach to the traditional therapist-patient relationship, and emphasises responsibility and intention in human behaviour. Rogers thought that human interaction is very powerful and is the main source of learning. He trusted the human potential to learn, to grow and to "become". As a consequence of it, he promoted the autonomy of the individual: "If I trust you, I give you the autonomy to develop". Freedom to Learn is a classic statement of his educational approach; "one chooses - and then learns from the consequences".

He saw himself as a facilitator - one who created the environment for engagement and provided educators with some important questions with regard to their way of being with participants and the processes they might employ. He thought that different methods could be used for the learning to happen. Informal education was for him not so much person-centred as dialogical.



In non-formal education, this approach would imply putting the focus on the interaction and relationships participant-participant and trainer-participant. The learning experience happens through growth and development of participants together with others.

The role of the trainer in such an approach would be to define the terms of the interaction and to participate in it. The trainer has a particular role but as participants do, he interacts with the same human qualities of empathy, respect and sincerity to be successful. The trainer becomes a facilitator of the learning process.

The advantages and potentials of such an approach are the rich mutual learning experience, the use of individuals and groups as learning sources and the promotion of individual capacities.

Some of the disadvantages or difficulties of this approach are the following: the mutual interaction between participants can get out of control and the learning is limited to the capacities of the persons involved in the process. Additionally, the exclusive use of this approach can create a closed circle "what it is between us comes again and again". If there is a lack of sincerity and openness there might be a lack of challenges

within a too comfortable environment of "nice friends".

Typical examples in training of methods inspired in such an approach are duo work, the mutual interviews, the presentations, the working groups... and in general any dynamic which uses the group of participants as learning source and which focuses on the mutual enrichment.

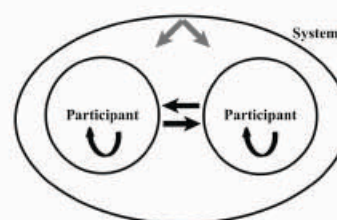
## Third approach

Humanism is not without its critics. One of the most frequent criticisms is that humanism emphasises the "here and now" ignoring "the past and the future" and on another level denies the importance of common ethical or spiritual values. A second criticism is that humanism is sometimes believed to be a highly selfish approach to life. Typically, the argument goes something like this: "If an individual is concerned primarily with personal growth and development, how can that person truly be concerned with what is good for the whole society?"

At the end of the 60's the so-called "system theory" became very popular. A lot of social political, economic structures and their inter-relations were described as systems: "economic system", "political system" "social system" "values system" "welfare system" "ecosystem".... "In the last resort, however, it is always a system of values, of ideas, of ideologies - choose whatever word you like - that is decisive." (von Bertalanffy)

The system theory was derived from General System Theory (GST), applying the principles of the natural sciences systems to social sciences. Systems theory involves the basic idea that objects and subjects in the world are interrelated to each other. Those objects and subjects and their interrelations form systems. Each system needs to be looked at as a whole rather than as individual components, which then can be put together. The system is greater than the sum of its parts because the system includes elements which cannot be broken down and applied to individual members. It is possible then for the system to have characteristics which no individual element possesses except when they are put together.

The system theory looks at society from a more general perspective; the reasons and answers are located in systems and only then it puts the questions to individuals: "how do you like a system? how do you want to act in it? do I want to influence it? how to find my place in it?"



Educationally, this approach invites us to analyse how the different systems affect individuals, without necessarily trying to solve the problems that a system puts on them. The focus is on the importance of the context and how it influences individuals.





To do so, in training sessions, systems related with social realities are created or reproduced. Some of the methods where participants are put into a system - in order to learn from the immersion on it - are: the statements exercise (or "where do you stand?"), many of the outdoor training exercises, simulations when the roles of participants are pre-determined and clearly defined, multimedia projections in which participants are spectators... In this approach there is a growing integration of methods and disciplines.

At first, the role of the trainer consists in defining very precisely the system and controlling it during the running of the exercise with all the characteristics. The facilitation of the learning process puts the focus on analysing and reflecting how the different characteristic of the system affect the participants. In this kind of method, communication is essential.

Those kinds of methods allow the trainer to plan and decide the learning fields in advance. By using them, the trainer can go "directly to the point". For the achievement of the learning objectives - at least in terms of contents - this is clearly an advantage of those methods. They are normally very powerful educational tools.

As disadvantages we could mention that they can be too directive. In that sense, and if this kind of method is not combined with others, they can damage the personal learning and group dynamic. This is because there is a lack of real possibilities, for the group and for the individuals, of influencing the educational frame in which they are involved.

#### Fourth approach

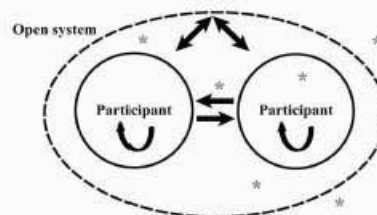
The so-called "theory of open systems" tries to overcome the rather static and rigid nature of the system theory and to "explain" the growing complexity of societies. Open systems are non-stationary structures, dynamic, multidimensional and self-organised. This approach is based on the latest developments of social and empirical sciences and it can be related with the ideas of existential psychology and the post-modern way of thinking.

Existential psychology doesn't have a single founder. It has its roots in the work of a rather diverse group of philosophers (such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger or Sartre) in many senses as different as night and day. But all of the existential philosophers and psychologist have something in common; they take as their standpoint real people, real life. They believed that human existence couldn't be captured in systems whether they are rational, religious or philosophical.

With the development of the so-called Phenomenology and through the inter-subjectivity, the interest is no longer to get to know the personality but to reflect upon how the individuals LIVE in a group, inter-act in this complex society,

go beyond themselves, transcend.

Indeed, most recent social phenomena such as interculturalisation, internationalisation or globalisation have been studied using this approach; on one hand identifying some general common trends (which would characterise a kind of "open system") and on the other hand focusing on how different individuals in different contexts were experiencing them.



This approach puts the emphasis on the complexity of phenomena and on the transformation of the "open systems". For the individuals involved in it, the focus is on their mobility and flexibility to intervene in the open system and interact with others. The question for them is Which perspective do we/I choose? How do I orient myself within complexity?

In non-formal education we can find several examples of methods based on this approach: open space technology, simulation exercises where the roles and situations are not pre-determined, forum theatre... In those methods the role of the trainer is basically to define and manage the few parameters of the "open system" for it to be manageable. Then to facilitate the learning process prioritising certain aspects - mainly just by naming without judging what happens.

The advantages of those methods are the big amount of different learning possibilities that they offer, their interactive and participative nature and their big learning potential. Among the disadvantages we could mention the difficulty of keeping a certain "red line" or "common thread" during the running, the difficulty of prioritising without being insensitive to the different learning processes. Contrary to what it might seem at the first sight, the use of those methods requires very competent and experienced facilitators able to deal with those difficulties and to make use of their full learning potential. The main challenge for a trainer in this approach is to be able to deal with everything that might happen.

#### Concluding comments

Psychology and social sciences in their evolution logically have followed the main concerns of society. Within those approaches we can see some of the most important socio-political preoccupations in the last century; knowing the human being at the beginning of the century, the socialisation process in the 50's, the socio-economical system/s in the 60's and 70's, and phenomena such as globalisation in the 80's and 90's.





In most cases, the evolution of Psychology and of Educational sciences has been integrative. This means that every new approach has incorporated a lot of the previous accumulated knowledge and experiences. The chronological order doesn't imply any judgement. It doesn't mean that the last approach is the best one and the first useless. As has been mentioned, all of them have advantages and disadvantages, potentials and limitations.

Different participants feel more or less comfortable with a certain approach. Apart from other reasons (cultural, geographical, personal...) the formal educational system has a big influence on this preference. The fact that different participants feel better working with different approaches should not prevent them from being challenged by all of them. Everybody can learn from all of them (probably specially from the one that each participant likes the least!).

For this reason, it is very enriching to combine the different approaches during a training activity, even during a session. Experience tells us that the order of this combination is very relevant; it has a strong impact on the learning process and the group dynamic. It will be very different if, for example, we start with an open system or with an inter-personal exercise.

Apart from combining them, the most important factor is to apply the different approaches correctly, specially in the debriefing. In most cases, it is the debriefing session which allows the trainer to introduce the main focus for an effective learning.

It is very difficult to find a method which purely corresponds to one approach. In almost every method there is a mixture of some of them. But at the same time, in most of the methods used in training we can clearly identify a predominant approach; we can see this in some of the methods mentioned as examples of the different approaches.

The use of a method whose main characteristics correspond to an "open system" - for example - for a "interpersonal learning" process, might be possible. But this kind of forced "stretching" of a certain method would probably lead us to an ineffective and confusing learning process. This, from my point of view, happens relatively often. The necessary creativity, flexibility and adaptation of educational practices in training should not play against the "respect" to the main logic behind the methods and exercises. And this simply because it will probably contribute to more effective learning.

Having said that, it is true that quite a lot of methods can be used taking different approaches. If we take, for example, the exercise called "low electric fence", the trainer could use it as a space for interaction on a personal and interpersonal level, or as a system or as open experience which gives to the participants the opportunity to learn about whatever happens

during the exercise. It is nevertheless important for the trainer to avoid any contradiction with educational aims and with declared approach. Trainers should avoid to declare that they are going to work with a system approach to learn how to work in teams, for example, and then go into personal interpretations about the reasons of a personal behaviour. It sometimes happens that there is a lack of coherence between the declared logic of an exercise and the learning focus - specially in the debriefing. This inconsistency prevents us from exploring the most important learning aspects of a certain exercise.

The last question would be: Do we see any new educational approach coming to the scene of non-formal education at the beginning of this new century? The answer to it might be an idea for another article.....

#### Reference:

Ludwig von Bertalanffy "The world of science and the world of value", Teachers College Record, 65:244-255

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