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## Hilary Dixon

# Sexual Health Skills: A Learning Process

It is often said that everyone should identify ten things to do before they die. One of mine was to write down and publish what I have been teaching for most of my adult life.

### Sex education lessons

In 1972, three years into a teaching career, I found myself head of social studies in a girls' comprehensive school in Hackney. The headteacher was very concerned about the number of pupils who were getting pregnant, and she suggested that I should include sex education lessons in the social studies curriculum.

Apart from being married (and, remember, in those days that was the context in which many of us learnt about sex) and the product of fairly enlightened parents who were willing to talk about sexual matters, I had no training in how to undertake such a task, no support or guidance and very few resources.

So it was that I began my career as a sex educator. I remember the day a biology inspector sat in on my lesson about contraception - he lasted about five minutes, then made his excuses and left.

I also remember the lesson where a fairly mature young woman pulled a scrappy piece of paper out of her bag and said 'Miss, I've been reading this book with lots of long words that I don't understand. Will you tell me what they mean? Cunnilingus, fellatio.....' Instantly, I realised how much I didn't know, and instinctively said 'Come and see me at the end of the lesson and I will see what I can do.' I went home that night to the dictionary and some sex education of my own, and the next lesson told the girl what the words meant.

Gradually resources were produced and one in particular was a highly successful serialised 'soap' about a teenage girl who got pregnant. After the first episode girls would be queuing at the door to get into the classroom for the next episode and the discussion which followed.

### Family Planning Association

A few years later, as a result of a chance contact with the Family Planning Association (fpa), I was offered a job as Training and Development Officer. I had always assumed that once a teacher, always a teacher and almost turned the job down because I couldn't imagine myself working 48 weeks a year in an office in central London

whilst being the single parent of a five-year-old.

The move to the fpa was a significant one. Not only did I receive high-quality training which enabled me to move on from a failed marriage, I joined an exciting and supportive team, discovered that I loved working with adults and was learning fast. During my first course as an assistant trainer to an experienced colleague, I sided with participants in a difficult discussion. Afterwards my mentor left me in no doubt that my loyalty should always be to my co-trainer. This was the first of a series of lessons well learnt.

I remember too a very challenging training-for-trainers course where, again, I was an assistant. The participants rebelled - or, in the jargon of training, 'stormed'. I was scared witless, having no idea how to deal with such anger and distress. Then, over the next couple of hours I observed how the course leaders analysed what was going on, listened calmly and respectfully to participants' views and challenged constructively. Slowly the group rebuilt itself, stronger and more confident. I learnt to train teachers to deliver sex education; I learnt to work with staff in the learning disability field, helping them to acknowledge and support their clients' sexual and relationship needs; and I learnt to run my own training-for-trainers courses.

### AIDS Education

When HIV and AIDS became a major issue in the late 1980s, I moved on to manage the AIDS Education Unit in Cambridge. The challenges of management fascinated me and I quickly recognised the links between sexual health and relationships training and people-management training. And so I found myself not only managing a broad spectrum of sexual health and relationships courses, but also running management courses focusing on processes such as team-building, managing change and handling difficult situations. Many of my training 'highs' include the intensive summer schools and certificated courses I ran for the Faculty of Education in Cambridge.

### Freelance

By the early 1990s the NHS was starting the now familiar cycle of review, reorganise, bureaucratised and make cuts, and I was finding less and less joy in the job. This was

the opportunity to launch a freelance career. I gradually built up an extensive toolkit of activities, theories and models that worked for me and my participants over the years. Many activities were my own; some of the models were other people's used in their original form; and others were modified to suit my needs.

There is one very well-known groupwork model developed over time by Jones (1973)<sup>1</sup>, Tuckman (1965)<sup>2</sup>, and Tuckman and Jensen (1977)<sup>3</sup>. It describes the stages of group life in terms of forming, storming, norming, performing and mourning, but I have reinvented it in a new form because it does not match my experience of groups.

### Training Manual

I have selected from my toolkit and produced a training manual for a new generation of sexual health and relationships trainers. The manual includes guidance for trainers on negotiating and planning training, creating a safe environment, managing groups effectively and how to end a course. There are also forty practical activities on getting started, sexual health information, exploring values and attitudes, skills for sexual health, groupwork, sex and relationships education and endings. The manual is on CD so that activities can be printed as needed and the material shared easily within an organisation.

### Workshops

I will also be leading a series of practical two-day workshops to launch the manual. These will provide an opportunity for participants (from health, education, social services, youth services and the voluntary sector) to familiarise themselves with the content and processes of quality training in sexual health and sex and relationships education. A copy of the manual will be provided free of charge to all participants.

### References

- 1 Jones, J.E. (1973). *Model of Group Development. The 1973 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators*. University Associates, La Jolla, California, pp 127-129.
- 2 Tuckman, B. (1965). Development Sequences in Small Groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol 63, pp384-399.
- 3 Tuckman, B. and Jensen, N. (1977). Stages of Small Group Development Re-Visited. *Group and Organizational Studies*, Vol 2, pp 419-427.