



# Mutual and co-operative learning

## - At the foothills of the Himalayas

*by Marianne Munis*

Most experienced teachers know that all teaching contains an aspect of learning, and that they themselves learn a lesson, almost every time they teach one. The prerequisite of this is of course that the teacher is not stuck in the same old topics, working to the same objectives and with the same messages in mind, and always using tried and tested methods with similar groups of students. But even the fact that no two groups are completely alike gives the teacher an opportunity to change her thinking, make a different choice, act alternatively; to learn, and improve her teaching in the process.

The Tibetan Transit School (TTS) Project, 2004-2005, which will be presented briefly below, proved to confirm this phenomenon.

The TTS Project reminded us of this fact many times. "Us" being the group of 5 professional and experienced lecturers and trainers, who were given the opportunity to be in charge of a unique in-service teacher training programme, sponsored by Danida.

Having finished the project only recently, we are still full of gratitude for all the lessons we - the trainers - learned and all the experience we gained from teaching our teacher-

students in various educational and psychological topics under continuously changing conditions, through 5 one-month- periods starting in January 2004. Having seen and listened to evaluations we now feel ourselves to be on "safe ground", when talking about mutual learning. Our students agree that the project has turned out to be very successful.

### **Where, Who, Why**

Tibetan Transit School is situated in green grassland next to a riverbed among rice fields in the Kangra Valley. It lies at the foothills of the Himalayas, ten minutes' drive from Dharamsala and McCleod Ganj, where H.H. The Dalai Lama has lived, and the Tibetan exile community grown, since 1959. This was when the Tibetans gave up fighting the Chinese Army and fled from Lhasa, Tibet, over the Himalayas to settle down in the Himachal Pradesh province in India.

TTS receives present day refugees and immigrants who have crossed the mountains driven by various motives: Some have to escape Chinese ruled Tibet for political reasons, others want to meet H.H. the Dalai Lama and others want to see if they can possibly make a living in another country. The school now consists of solid buildings sponsored by various donators, but it started as a tent camp, and

later with tin sheds for shelters as well as classrooms. TTS was established in 1992. The purpose of the school is to educate newly arrived refugees from Tibet, between the age of 18 and 30, and prepare them to get along in society, whether they remain in exile or return to Tibet. The approximately 600 students are taught Tibetan language and culture, English, Mathematics and Computer skills. Furthermore they receive daily instructions in Buddhism. TTS also offers Vocational Education, which qualifies the students to work as thanka-painters (a thanka is a traditional Tibetan painting with religious themes), carpenters, tailors and other traditional craftsmen and as computer operators.

TTS is financed and administered by the Department of Education under the Tibetan Central Administration (CTA). The CTA is financed by donations from the 110.000 Tibetans in exile and by foreign contributors. Department of Education operates 84 schools for Tibetan children and young people in India, Bhutan and Nepal.

The students of TTS are a demanding group since some have almost no education, while others have a High school or bachelor degree from the Chinese school system in Tibet. At the same time the students have very different personal, physical and mental backgrounds. Some are traumatised, or at least slightly dysfunctional, after the exhausting winter journey in snowy and freezing cold mountains.

Although the teachers are extremely well motivated and want to support the students, they had had no training in working under such difficult conditions as these when the course commenced. None of them had received any training in adult education, and one may assume that many of them were themselves the product of authoritative systems of education, and they did not feel capable of dealing with the students' emotional problems, or managing the conflicts among the students or between students and teachers.

So the background and the challenge for the project was that the teachers of TTS desperately lacked training in adult education and democratic learning processes. This competence was not presently available in the Tibetan community.

It was a group of teachers from the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution who first identified the problem, and took the initiative to do something about it. This happened in connection with another project where they were teaching exile Tibetans conflict resolution skills. This workshop at the TTS was the starting point for developing a project concept for ap-

proval and finance from Danida, a department of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The title of the project outline and application for funding was:

### **The Tibetan Transit School Project**

#### **In-service training for TTS teachers:**

#### **Adult Education, Democratic Processes and Conflict Management**

#### **- And Education of a Task Force to Promote Adult Education for other Teachers in the Community.**

A partnership project between Tibetan Transit School (TTS) and Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution (DCCR)

The DCCR invited SPF to contribute to, and participate in, the project by involving the principal of the experimental school in project preparations as well as in the planning and teaching of various topics. Later the Youth Town leader became involved in final examination and evaluation programmes.

#### **Overall objectives**

- That the TTS teachers should - by participating in in-service training, strengthen their abilities to teach adults.
- That the TTS students' education would be improved and thus prepare them for their future life - in exile, or in Tibet.
- That a group of TTS teachers (called task force) were, in receiving special training, able to pass on knowledge and promote skills of adult education to new TTS teachers and other teachers in the exile community.

With these in mind, and Dewey's well known educational concept of "learning by doing" as the basic approach, the





first group of Danish teachers met the 39 TTS teachers for the first time on a cold day in January 2004 to develop a new concept of "Mindful Adult Education" during six intensive training periods. Both parties were very curious and at the same time somewhat nervous, since nobody could really imagine what was going to happen when modern didactics based on western democratic concepts would meet eastern thinking, Tibetan culture and traditions, and the Buddhist way of life.

With headlines for all six periods and drafts of content and curriculum for the January, May, September and November training periods, we began creating a day to day programme by checking qualifications and assumptions and listening very carefully to the expressed needs of our students. In order to make contact very quickly and build a common store of experience, we found it important to introduce a lot of energisers, and to alternate pair and group activities with the lectures we wanted to give. These had to be short - not only because of the language barriers between us, but also because of the learner centred teaching approach we believe in. The important thing was to present learning by doing from day one, as well as learning by reading and listening, and to introduce a simple way of seeing a lesson, course, or learning period, as a matter of successive activities - or an ongoing process of Action-Reflection-Learning- (new) Strategy . (Strategy is about making new plans for action)

On the first day, we divided the teachers into two groups, one English speaking, and one Tibetan, and went through the following: Group work on the TTS teachers own positive learning experiences, dialogues on trying to describe students needs and potentials, lectures on the difference be-

tween teaching and learning, the specific challenges of adult education and teaching based on inductive and deductive principles.

Even with a very competent interpreter it takes a long time to translate everything into Tibetan, and as the cultural backgrounds, conceptions and notions soon proved sometimes to be a barrier for comprehension, we had to be careful to take one step at a time.

In this first exploratory period of getting familiar with each other's ways of thinking, every day was full of enthusiasm and effort on both sides - combined with fun and hard work. Winter and cold classrooms meant that everybody put on a lot of clothes. At night in our headquarters at Hotel Kashmir House, we discussed and evaluated events of the day before dinner and later we revised the programme, wrote log-books and devised teaching materials - or revised theory, and adapted it to fit our current context. Our learning corresponded to that of our students, so even if classrooms were freezing cold and even if it was difficult to hold a piece of chalk with gloved fingers, we felt privileged and encouraged that our students were so willing to learn about the Didactic Circle for planning meaningful education, the theory of the human brain and learning processes, Observation of students, Consciousness, and about multiple intelligences and Learning styles.

After evaluating the first period we thought that, by practising learner centred teaching ourselves, and by explaining ideas, theories and the meaning behind each activity, we had been able to answer at least one of the initial questions the TTS teachers had asked us the very first day:

*"Backgrounds and conditions are different in Denmark, so, how can our students benefit from this programme?"*

We also imagined, that we had given a proper answer to a question from some of the most sceptical teachers, who asked, "Which is the quickest way to learn as much as possible?"

Stating that we found that there is no such thing as an easy way to effective teaching, was, however, not enough. There was still a great need for a specific tool, - as one student put it - to teach like we did in their own classes.

This question was very essential and occurred again and again over the next months. If we hadn't fully realised how serious some of the students problems were, and how desperate their need was for new ideas and tools to help them cope with students, we certainly became aware when the same question came in the guise of protest against the "home work" we had given the teachers while we were back in Denmark. Even though - by the end of period one - everybody seemed very optimistic and enthusiastic about trying out e.g. group work, activities to develop the students' many intelligences, discussions in the classroom, different assignments and more psychological observation, one study group of teachers wrote us a mail explaining that they didn't agree that our approach would be able to suit their students. Among other things they argued that in their school, students did not need to learn by experience, they had to be taught by speaking, that students didn't listen to polite speaking and that circular or other arrangements of seats in the classroom was not appropriate.

A long letter responding to this and giving ideas for small changes to be practised as a starting point was not enough to convince everybody of the relevance of a more democratic classroom.

When the next period started in May, the Danish trainers, even if they were welcomed warmly, had to face the challenge of doubt, low spirits and, in some cases, resistance to the new ideas that we had presented during the previous period. The project had reached a crucial point and we, the team members who were not in action this time, received long letters from our colleagues telling us they felt dejected and full of reflections on cultural differences, difficulties, ethics and opinions. Feeling unsure as to whether or not our western educational ideas were, if not right or better, then at least suitable and worth trying in a foreign context, they began to doubt the whole project. Downheartedly they had to ask themselves, why are we here, and, can we give these teachers what they really need? Finding it difficult to reawaken the vi-

sions behind our fine objectives they felt however that it was a sign of success for our principles that the TTS teachers argued with and talked to them as equals. But the distance, differences and difficulties were evident and very painful. Then, since giving up was not an option, "it was necessary (as they wrote to us) to dig deep into a lot of dilemmas to revive the ideas and prepare a decent come back". The energy returned when our colleagues started to focus on principles that are true of all human development and learning, independent of culture. The means to overcome the depressive situation was - as our colleagues wrote- to dare to stick to their wish for *the students* at TTS, i.e. that a) their teachers got the understanding of what learner centred, experiential and interactive teaching and learning could mean and how it could be transformed from one culture to another, b) through the teachers' own practical experience in the classroom they would find out how much, how little and how at all they could use new methods and c) they implement only what they agree on in their daily work.

For the May training period, the next step was to decide to focus on different teacher roles (teacher, group leader, counsellor, colleague, role model and private person), set up goals according to this and present them to the TTS teachers along with criteria of success for the whole project. With new energy this was done and accepted, but it took another trip down into a gorge of dejection before the turning point came. The Danish trainers had to realise that the resistance they had detected was due to fear of losing authority, worries about curriculum, tests and exams, and lack of knowledge and experience. Everybody wanted change, but could not see how it was to be obtained?

To bridge the gap, Danish trainers and TTS teachers had to make a new start, and to discuss the hesitation, the doubt and the painful points, and end up with individual reflections on "What do I need to learn to improve myself, and what would be my first experiment with learner centred education?"

