

Engagement, Depth and Challenge:

Peers becoming Peer Workers

November 2017



BRIO: Introduction

'I am a participant on the BRIO programme and I have been working on my recovery from drug addiction. I am doing well since starting the project. The BRIO programme is run by SAOL and the Probation Service and it's for women who want to change their behaviour and attitudes towards drugs and criminality through peer to peer education.' (Peer Participant)

There are many influences on BRIO – from Probation, from SAOL, from Ireland in 2016/7, from the oppression of women, from poverty, from religion and politics and from the North Inner City itself. When a group of women came together in 2016 to 'learn' how to become Peer Support workers, the challenge was not 'what' to teach them (that was easy!). The challenge was 'how' to teach them. A typical profile of those attending BRIO includes early school leaving, basic education, drug addiction, poverty, poor housing, and in some cases homelessness and criminality. Therefore when SAOL was designing the BRIO programme it had to take account of the needs of complex group of women.

How do you take a group of culturally oppressed, traumatised women and build them inwardly and outwardly into Peer Support workers who can sit alongside professionals and bring hope to people on a similar journey to themselves?

The answer is straight forward enough. Implementing that answer requires fortitude and consistency and continuous reflective practice. The following is a brief overview on that process, our influences, highlights of how and what we taught and the lessons we learned as we went along.

BRIO: 4 Core Influences

- **The Wounded Healer**
- **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**
- **The Magenta Principle**
- **Trauma Informed Care and Practice.**

At the heart of BRIO lies Jung's concept of the '**Wounded Healer**'. It suggests that the one with particular experience of an issue is often best placed to work with other people journeying through a similar experience or issue. But it also suggests that while a person is busy 'healing the other', a second healing continues, with the Wounded Healer strengthening and recovering from their own issues through the act of caring for another.

Originally named after the Greek centaur, Chiron, (who was a great healer but could not heal his own wound) it is a concept that encourages us to live with imperfection. Recovery is not about making everything flawless; rather it is about building with what we have and using our imperfections as a way of reaching others.

BRIO builds recovery inwards and outwards: inner healing reinforced by the generosity of outward giving. In this case, outward giving occurs in group training and then peer work. BRIO's 'wounded healers' are women who are either drug free, stable or working on their stability; they are also women who have a relationship with the Probation Service and are either currently on probation (or recently completed it), have lately left prison or are in danger of going to (or returning to) prison in the near future.

Some of the women in BRIO have used SAOL services before but many are brand new to us; so they are getting used to a new group and a new service. *Many come because they have an interest in becoming*

Peer Workers; however, just as many come because they want to be part of something, anything that might help life move in a new direction. And there are some who come because they are referred and have little idea of what lies ahead.

Women with addiction and criminality in their story are hard to reach; they have a multitude of issues and their patterns of behaviour have been caused by and are the cause of pain and trauma. They are imperfect healers; perfect for Peer work!

Paulo Freire's '**Pedagogy of the Oppressed**' has been an influential text for communities across the world since its publication in 1968. At its core it calls for a change in the way we educate. Liberation and change happens when there is an awakening of critical awareness and the thinking process in the individual and this occurs when there is a new style of education, one where partnership exists, where students or in this case Peers, are empowered to 'enter into a dialogue' and begin the process of what Freire call 'humanisation through thought and its correlative, action'.

Freire believes and teaches us that all education should work at the level and life experience of the learner. He believes that Peers are the best experts at 'Naming and articulating their own world'. He advocates there is no need for a fixed curriculum or learning agenda and that tutor and learner can 'best make the road by walking' and that by listening and sharing as equals the learning journey can meet all of the learning needs of the group.

The core aspiration behind BRIO is the desire to provide an opportunity for a cross section of women who are traditionally hard to reach, and to teach such as those described above. Many of the participants in SAOL and in similar projects find it difficult to obtain

employment because of past drug addiction, or prison and Probation charges; not to mention social class or gender or basic education experience.

Therefore, this call to meet such women with an educational style that calls them to action after 'owning' their thinking was an excellent fit. No longer would we attempt 'banking education' (traditional information imparting teaching) but rather create a freeing system where the Peer will be active, thoughtful and leading. Freire encourages the creation of objects for study that come from the group themselves. Audio interviews, video work, posters etc. are all media that we have used to assist the group in creating dialogues.

Problem-solving education is the proposed approach recommended by Freire. This specific approach has been used in BRIO every Thursday afternoon where the group processes and creates its answers to being a Peer worker. How do we listen? How do we reach out to professionals? How do we support each other? The answers are not pre-determined. Rather, they are experienced and spoken about so that they can become embodied and owned by the Peers themselves. This process has taught us much more about 'training Peer workers' than we thought we knew at the start. We decided that there should be a strong experiential component to the programme.

This use of experiential learning was judged to be the best way of working with very different education and ability and life experience. By combining the tried and tested community education methodology alongside those of Paolo Freire, BRIO believed that it could build a strong group identity. Therefore creative expression, role play, communication skills, drama and group facilitation skills helped the group to grow and feel safe, especially in the group forming stage of the work. These sessions were designed and delivered with a light

touch to raise discussion about what peer work should look like, feel like and how peer working sessions with women in need of the service and support should be structured. As Hughes suggests (see below), the participants did more talking than we did.

BRIO uses everyday language. Clinical and formal language tends to be problem-focused and deficit-based. It typically describes what is 'wrong' with the person and what needs to happen to solve the problem. Everyday language, how we speak to our friends and family uses the language of human experience, talking about 'what happened' so that women are invited to talk about the totality of their experience. Everyday language:

- Has a non-clinical focus
- Creates the type of relationships we have in the community rather than service relationships or "helping" relationships
- Provides a context for understanding what is going on for the person
- Supports individuals to move beyond the identity of 'addict', or 'inmate'
- Allows us to make meaning out of our experiences and to have that meaning understood by others

Role play, in particular, in this context, allowed us to put the group in new situations and set questions about how peer work should be structured and it led to lots of laughter and fun as the group tried out new skills and explored new learning. Then the business of analysing each other's role play enabled us to build group cohesion and trust and group work skill and assisted further learning – being perfect is impossible, being good enough is the goal.

Leaders, for that is what we are training our Peer workers to be, can be oppressive or revolutionary. Oppressive leaders tend to take-over, causes division, manipulate and create 'cultural invasion' (ignore the cultural gifts of others). Revolutionary leaders or BRIO Peer workers

aim for cooperation, act as a unifier creating freedom and welcome cultural synthesis. Working with women who are moving away from the influences of addiction and criminality, it is easy to see how Freire's call for cooperation, freedom and cultural synthesis is appealing and guiding.

What is exciting in Freire's vision is that such an approach becomes freeing for humanity. It's a grandiose thought but it is not one to be ignored. When you change one part of a community, they will go out and change others. Who knows where the process will end? Indeed, Freire argues that it is only the oppressed (in this case women who have addictions and criminality in their story) who can save themselves and from there, the oppressors. The ones oppressing do not see that their approach is dehumanising.

Addiction and trauma and crime come from poverty and oppression. Of course there are jealous, greedy and selfish crimes and addictions. In the end, however, the systemic issues that create addictions and trauma and crime are rooted in poverty and oppression. The journey out of this process will be a long one but the hope that comes from seeing women who have been oppressed and lost in 'the system' for so long, step forward and speak and work as Peer workers, is not only hopeful but incredibly radical.

'It's all about building recovery inside and out. It's a peer to peer, or woman to woman training programme and we are currently learning how to deliver training such as 'Reduce the Use', which is a harm reduction module and 'RecoverMe', a personal development module and 'Solás sa SAOL', dealing with domestic violence and learning how to stay safe.

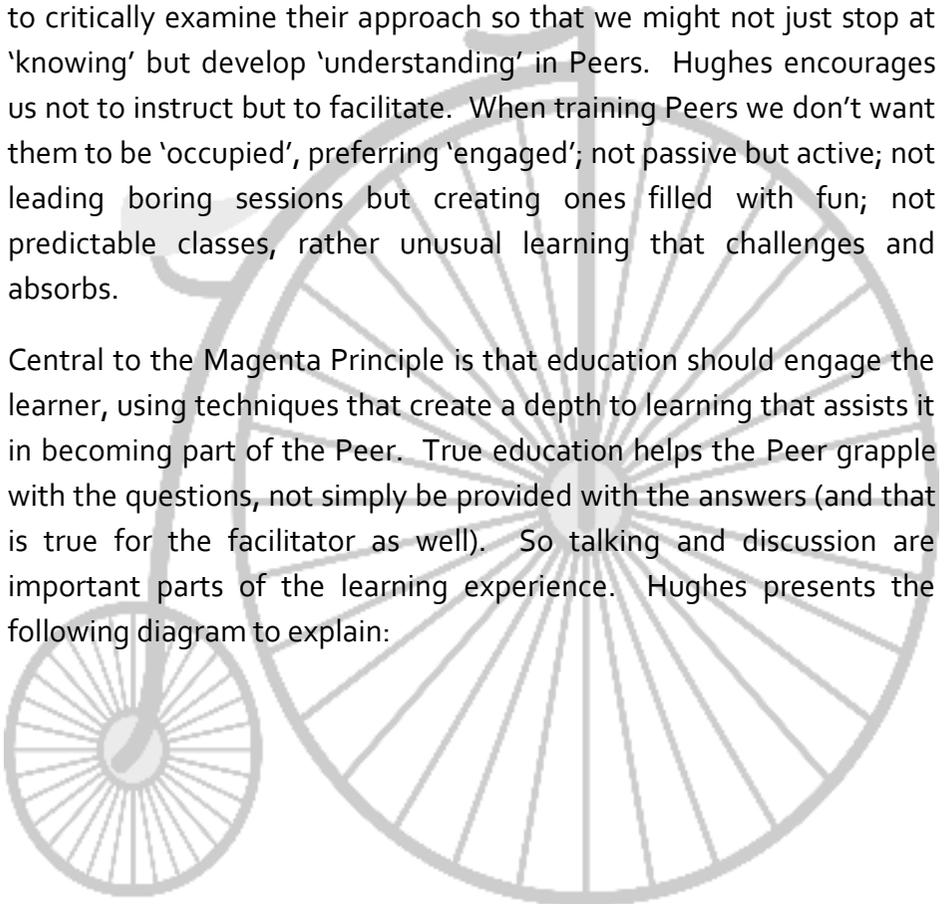
BRIO teaches us to explore our own issues of drug addiction and criminality and for me, the best use of BRIO is to be a voice for other women and for children who cannot be heard.

I feel that by doing peer to peer work with the mothers, you can help to ease the stress and the difficulties for her and for her children”.

(A Peer Participant puts Freire into action)

The **Magenta Principle** (Hughes, 2014) might be the least well-known influence on BRIO’s education style but it encourages the ‘facilitator’ to critically examine their approach so that we might not just stop at ‘knowing’ but develop ‘understanding’ in Peers. Hughes encourages us not to instruct but to facilitate. When training Peers we don’t want them to be ‘occupied’, preferring ‘engaged’; not passive but active; not leading boring sessions but creating ones filled with fun; not predictable classes, rather unusual learning that challenges and absorbs.

Central to the Magenta Principle is that education should engage the learner, using techniques that create a depth to learning that assists it in becoming part of the Peer. True education helps the Peer grapple with the questions, not simply be provided with the answers (and that is true for the facilitator as well). So talking and discussion are important parts of the learning experience. Hughes presents the following diagram to explain:





The Magenta Principle,
Hughes, 2014, page 66

Language and learning, talking and thinking are inextricably linked – talking helps people learn with the best learning when the facilitator talks less and the Peers talk more. By listening, the facilitator gets to understand where the Peers are at with the subject. Thinking, talking and doing are now the core of how BRIO thinks about training for Peers.

The fourth and final influence on our educational approach is one that permeates throughout all that SAOL does: **Trauma Informed Care and Practice** (TICP) knows that trauma exists and is extensively prevalent among our client group, and that together with this awareness, a sensitivity to its dynamics needs to be present in everything that we do. We try to be coached and guided by our understanding of the impacts of trauma – biologically, psychologically and socially. Interpersonal violence is destructive and leaves more than bruises; and it is present in most of the women who come to BRIO. In BRIO, the work of Lisa Najavits (see *Seeking Safety*, 2002) and Stephanie Covington have been particularly helpful.

As educators we have to change our assumptions, ensuring that we create a culture in our groups that is personal, creative, open, holistic

and healing and knows that we are working with women who have been harmed by someone or something and that this will impact on the way that they learn. TICP uses a strengths-based approach, emphasising safety (physical, psychological and emotional) for both Peer and professionals and tries to create opportunities for individuals to rebuild their sense of control and empowerment. Working together, TICP creates a dynamic where the group and each individual find a place of safety and build together from there: inwards to heal themselves, outwards to bring healing to others.

We hope that these values, informed by the 4 influences above, continue to be fundamental to our work in the 'classroom'. We believe that the pilot programme has indicated that it is a powerful approach that has already brought positive change for our Peer participants. This has led to a new acronym used by BRIO: LISTnRS and it holds the core principles outlined above, in the values of:

L – Supporting **life-long learning**

I – Working with **integrity** and living true to who you are

S – Promoting **social inclusion** and equality for all

T – Developing **trust** and safety among the group and beyond

R – Embodying **respect** by promoting kindness and warmth to all

S – Encouraging **self-determination** by respecting everyone's right to make their own decisions

We hope that all our BRIO participants will become excellent LISTnRS.

BRIO: A brief note on lesson plans

Freire's technique, as outlined above, has the learner at his core. It can teach learners of all backgrounds to read the world, as well as read the word. Essentially the learners own background and life experiences are as important as any educational topic, or process.

All groups begin with a 'Check-in'. This is a short exercise that is led by one of the Peers. It will ask a simple question, and that same question is asked of everyone in the room. It might be directive:

- "How have you been since the last BRIO group?"

Or it might be creative/funny/linked to something that is currently happening in the world:

- "What movie best describes to today?" or "If you were an item of clothing, what would you be?" or "If you were president of the USA, what Executive Order would you enact?"

The aim is to get everyone talking before the main work of the group begins. Sometimes it leads to some important work happening; but in the main, it gets the group underway.

The group will then engage in a piece of work. As there is often role play or sharing involved here, the facilitator will recall important ground rules that have been agreed at an earlier point by the group. Such rules may be amended or temporarily adjusted to facilitate the day's activity; but safety demands that clarity is achieved.

Role plays might then be used. These might be acted without video or audio recording; at other times video and audio recording will occur. Peers have a choice in taking part or not, in being recorded or not. All topics grow from the classes run Tuesdays, the needs of the group and/or activities on the BRIO calendar (speaking at conferences, presenting to Probation Officers in Haymarket etc.).

Analysis follows. Peers do more talking than BRIO staff with kindness and respect central to how the discussion takes place. Staff will assess understanding during this process and develop a deeper awareness within the learning where possible. Those who risked 'acting' are given a special role in this discussion and care is taken to ensure that Peers have a positive experience during the feedback. Challenges will and do occur but the facilitator will ensure that this is done respectfully and at a level that is suitable for the place that the actor is at. All BRIO participants have access to 1:1 support during and after classes – TICP informs that we cannot know how a process may impact those present and safety is paramount for positive learning to occur.

When Peers use 1:1 services, they demonstrate that they are caring for themselves and such self-care is vital for lasting recovery. As participants move through BRIO they begin to use other supports as well as 1:1 like their peer group, informal spaces (smoking area and kitchen are good places for support) and waiting for their appointments before discussing issues.

Some topics raise matters more quickly. RecoverMe (which explores emotions) was difficult; Solas sa SAOL (domestic Violence) was very hard for many, particularly when discussing the impact of violence on children.

All sessions end with a 'check-out' which is usually around the themes of "What did you gain from today's session?" and "How will you look after yourself until the next BRIO session?" (Safe plan).

At the end of every session, facilitators meet and record what went well, what didn't work (if anything), what was the key learning for them from the session and if there is any follow-up work to be done from the group (this may include contacting any woman who facilitators are concerned about as well as implementing self-care following the group).