

## **Report on the internship programme 2002/03**

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First of all - any report such as this is inevitably subjective. I will make no effort to pretend that it is otherwise. I was one of the four interns, and also worked as Andy's support person for the internship programme. I intend to examine the internship from several angles, including its practical organisation, its scope, the impact of Braziers on the interns, and theirs on Braziers.

So, here goes...

On 16th October 2003 the Internship Programme officially began. Present at that first meeting were Andy, the main originator and tutor of the programme, Daniel and Freddy, two Bolivians who had originally come to Braziers some months before to work as volunteers and improve their English, Lucie, a Czech whom I had met that summer, and me, who had quite unwittingly been the catalyst to cause the whole thing to take off. At that stage we had only the haziest idea of what we were going to do or how this internship was going to work.

We met regularly, most Wednesdays, and usually did a mixture of classroom work and practical or outdoor learning. When Andy couldn't be there for a session, we had occasional 'visiting professors', including Sarah, Simon, Peter Lang and Paul Jennings, in his place. Later on in the course, we did a few trips out, to visit RISC and other places of interest. During the six months of the internship, we covered the equivalent of a permaculture design course. This formed the basis of our learning, and includes a whole range of topics, from permaculture ethics to urban 'biotechture' and from sewage solutions to soil building. We also looked at group and personal process (re-evaluation counselling, community building theory, transactional analysis), economics, action learning, organisational structures and social history. For me the interns' days were usually interesting, challenging and good fun. Andy's excellent teaching style brought a lightness and sense of mutual learning and discovery to the group.

A few weeks into the programme, after a phase of consultation with the community, we started working on individual projects. These were projects which provided an opportunity for research, design and implementation, and which could be of practical assistance to Braziers. They included reducing waste, sourcing more ethical food, and designing the poly-tunnel. In theory, a day per week was set aside for project work. This never quite worked out though we struggled to pin down the reasons why. Some contributing factors were: difficulty in getting hold of 'client' residents, unrealistically ambitious projects, perceived lack of support in project work, and difficulty in finding time in the busy Braziers schedule when it seemed okay to be working on individual projects. Non-materialisation of project work caused frustration and misunderstandings from all parties. However, some useful work was achieved, especially with waste reduction and food sourcing.

About halfway through the course, after a mid-term review, Andy proposed introducing Tuesday afternoon tutorials. These were one to one sessions which happened fairly haphazardly but which were very useful for getting some individual

attention and motivation. If they had been in place from the start, they might have made project work more possible. This bit of personal attention also helped to solve the difficulties of having such a diverse group of students.

We were indeed a diverse group. Both Lucie and I had come from an ecological 'alternative' perspective, whereas Daniel and Freddy had come from a much more mainstream environment and had embarked upon the internship primarily as a means of staying in the UK. Then there were of course cultural differences, and gender differences, and personality clashes. This diversity of experience, knowledge and ethics brought great richness to our learning and provided many challenges and opportunities. However, though we could usually manage to get along fairly well on a superficial level, we did not function as a group. It would have been helpful if we had done more work on personal process and especially group process so that we might have been able to develop some techniques for dealing with our differences or accepting each other more fully.

Apart from the one 'Interns Day' per week, and the somewhat mythical project day per week, all the interns were working three or four days a week on the house team. It is easy to underestimate how much we learned just from being here as volunteers, living and working in the community. I imagine that we were all learning on different levels and from different aspects, but there were certainly some experiences we held in common, Braziers provided an excellent backdrop for examining theories in action - looking at the ethics of weed management, the potential of chicken tractors, and the disastrously eroded neighbouring fields helped bring the course to life. Watching the continual unfolding drama of the community caused amusement, puzzlement, anger and joy, and regular Monday morning volunteers' meetings gave us a chance to test our skills and theories around meetings and organisational structure. Practical work on coppicing, roofing, cooking, shepherding and gardening gave us new skills and insights. More opportunities were provided through various extra activities, such as yoga, forum and green woodworking. Although the intensity and limitations of living in community caused frustrations and conflicts, I felt that in many ways it was also a great opportunity for growth in a relatively supportive and flexible environment.

It is crucial to remember, that whilst the community may have helped the interns to grow, the presence of the interns has also helped the community to grow, in at least equal measure. The interns caused 'the volunteers' to be transformed from (as I understand) a generally passive, near-silent group into a demanding and vociferous force to be reckoned with. This was due to the combination of fluent English, assertive personalities and a long-term stay leading to familiarity and accumulated grievances. The volunteers' meeting, newly created by Freddy, became a vehicle for voicing complaints and making the bigwigs accountable in some way. A dialogue between the two groups began, acknowledging the divide, and challenging the community to define itself and act. One significant step was the formal opening up of the sensory meeting to all volunteers (though few ever attended) and the policy of inviting a representative of the volunteers to part of the bigwigs meeting. There were some times of high tension and deep disillusionment

but I think, in retrospect, that these confrontations pushed the community forward in a positive direction.

Aside from the formal, institutional changes, there were many more developments, Interns with a near-fluent level of English and a real interest in the aims of Braziers were easier to deploy and more able to use their initiative than the average volunteer. New youthful energy in the community made it possible for the pantomime to happen, and introduced a range of (sometimes short-lived) initiatives such as the internal Local Exchange Trading System, a programme of evening activities, a Braziers shop and new work systems. In a few cases, suggestions originally made by the interns / volunteers were the first inspiration for changes eventually implemented by the residents - a new work system, and a 'buddy' system are the two examples which come to mind.

For the first few months, the interns' curriculum evolved week by week. We had a general idea of what we were teaching / learning, but the planning for the day's session usually happened only a day in advance. 'Just in time' planning was made possible by Andy's long teaching experience and the experimental nature of the course. In contradiction to the accepted academic norm of rigid planning and tight scheduling, we had a wonderful degree of flexibility and unpressurised time for exploration. However, this slightly haphazard and unplanned approach did contribute to an atmosphere of exclusivity and almost secrecy about what we were doing. I am aware that many of the residents felt that they would like to have been more closely involved with the interns' programme, through teaching, supporting projects or attending sessions. The situation was not entirely due to lack of communication on the part of Andy and the interns - residents, too, could be inexplicit, passive, or difficult to get hold of. Wider involvement and participation could have taken some pressure off Andy, as the main tutor, and would have brought a broader range of knowledge, experience and styles to the course. After a midterm review we made some effort to resolve these issues by creating an outline plan of topics and activities for the next six months. We occasionally remembered to write our plans on the blackboard and pin up notes from sessions. It is a tricky task to find the right balance between inflexible plans and vague muddle so that everyone can feel involved and empowered.

The relationship between interns and volunteers is also worth examining. Though it was the fashionable thing in the group to unite against the residents, there were some difficulties between volunteers and interns as well. Volunteers resented the opportunities to learn (and escape house-team work) given to the interns and denied to volunteers. I, and I think the rest of the interns, also felt a certain amount of discomfort about this apparently unfair arrangement. We went some way towards addressing this by agreeing to do all the washing up on our learning day, and by inviting the volunteers to a few afternoon video sessions. Making it clear to volunteers before they applied to come here that there are two separate programmes running might also have helped to pre-empt more recent difficulties more recently.

As with many things in life, the full value of this experience will not become clear to us for many years. Looking back, I can already begin to feel more appreciation for the internship than I felt at the time. I think all the interns would

acknowledge that we learned a huge amount while at Braziers; perhaps even go so far as to agree with Freddy that it was 'life-changing'. I am sure that the community, too, would agree that they have learned a lot from our presence. As we go through a period of reviewing the past Interns' Programme and designing the next one, there are a number of new thoughts emerging. It seems to be widely agreed that we need to reconsider the longstanding tradition of 'foreign student' volunteers at Braziers. Projects and design work done by interns may have long term and unexpected spin-offs. Perhaps most significantly, there is also a new movement towards restructuring life at Braziers around the concept of active, conscious learning. This would mean among other things, that everyone living at Braziers would have some kind of learning pathway, which the rest of the community would endeavour to support and facilitate. In some sense we could all be interns...