

NEW EDUCATIONAL VENTURES

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The International Secretariat for the Lasallian Educational Mission (MEL), recently undertook a survey of what has been happening in the Lasallian world by way of educational innovation. In June 2002, they asked all the Brothers Visitors to supply a list of what they considered to be genuinely Lasallian educational initiatives undertaken in their District in the past 10 to 15 years. Replies were received from forty Districts in the five continents. They involved 190 different locations. The next step was to contact the organisers of each of these projects and ask them to complete a questionnaire that had been drawn up for the occasion by a team of educational specialists. What follows is an extract from their analysis of the answers to the questionnaire, picking out the aspects which seem most relevant to our situation in Britain today. The full text is available in MEL Bulletin No. 4, June 2003. The database built up by the returns reflects a scene of great vitality.

The initiatives described in the responses can be listed under six headings.

- 1) Accompaniment and formation of young people
 - Centres for street children (Ivory Coast, Rwanda, Kenya, Brazil, Mexico, Philippines, Pakistan, Great Britain, Thailand...)
 - Local centres in town districts (Brazil, Spain, France, USA, Sri Lanka...)
 - Tutoring centres (USA, Spain...)
 - Handicapped (Malta, Rwanda, France, India, Egypt, Poland...)
 - Help for families, teenage mothers (India, Australia, Ireland...)
 - Accompaniment of young delinquents (USA, France, Italy, Australia...)
 - Accompaniment of drug addicts (Spain, Italy, Quebec, Colombia...)
 - Study and Leisure centres (Quebec, France...)
 - Service for migrants (Spain, Quebec, France, Belgium, Italy, USA, New Zealand...)
 - Development of international relations (Mexico, Spain, France, Philippines, Colombia, Great Britain...)
 - Formation in affective life (Cameroons, Malta, Colombia...)
 - Centres for the promotion of justice (USA, Sri Lanka, Spain...)
- 2) New kinds of educational establishments
 - Educational centres for children who have abandoned school (Ivory Coast, Conakry, Togo, Brazil, France, Great Britain, Eritrea...)
 - Primary and middle schools (Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea, Argentina, Egypt, Turkey...)
 - Technical training centres for young people (Vietnam, Brazil, Argentine, Guinea, Kenya, Portugal, Cameroons, Chad, Niger, Djibouti, Congo-Kinshasa, Spain...)
 - Technical training centres for adults (Togo, Madagascar, Mexico, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Eritrea...)
 - Educational networks (USA, Panama, Argentina, Togo, Nicaragua...)
 - Universities (Spain, Mexico, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, USA, Indonesia, Philippines, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Palestine...)
 - Evening courses (Colombia, Mexico, Italy, Haiti, Ecuador, Peru. ...)
- 3) Sharing ideas
 - Teaching methods (Colombia, Spain, France, Argentina, Mexico)
 - Works, didactic materials (USA, Spain, Peru, Argentina, Cameroons, Colombia...)
- 4) Adult training
 - Training of catechists (Guinea, Sudan, Argentina, Haiti, Cuba, Pakistan...)
 - Training of teachers (Panama, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Kenya, Rwanda, Colombia, Mexico, Peru...)
 - Training prison teaching staff (Brazil...)
 - Running base communities (Argentina, Brazil...)

- Training headmasters and educational board members (USA, Spain, France, Argentina...)
 - Lasallian formation (Italy, France, Argentina, Spain, USA, Australia, Philippines, Colombia, Belgium, Egypt, Lebanon...)
 - Training of young teachers (France, Spain, USA...)
 - Training of Lasallian volunteers (Mexico, Philippines, USA, France...)
- 5) Promotion of spirituality
- Spirituality centres (Ireland, Great Britain, Spain, Quebec, France, Sri Lanka, Australia, Switzerland, Brazil, Venezuela...)
- 6) Promotion and preservation of culture
- Training and promotional centres (Panama, Guatemala, Bolivia, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, Australia, Cameroons, Turkey, Palestine, France...)

The above list of initiatives is representative rather than exhaustive, and no doubt others exist for which no information has been received. In general, the ones we know about exist in conjunction with a particular educational establishment as a base, while serving the wider community in a given area. Many other the initiatives are being undertaken within more traditional structures which are also characterised by great dynamism. By studying the returns, we can draw some conclusions regarding the trends in Lasallian educational innovation today. Thus, for example, the data shows that, in creating Lasallian initiatives, two general approaches are being adopted: an institutional approach and a personal approach.

Institutional Initiatives.

Some initiatives were taken in order to implement the propositions of the General or District Chapters. Others were decided by the District Council or by an ad hoc committee. The controlling idea behind them is to try and set up something in line with a Chapter proposition. The aims are fixed in advance, and the means and structures are chosen in the light of this. The effects and results are "foreseen". Normally, all this takes place in a context of what is known and predictable: a pre-established educational policy is being implemented.

Personal Initiatives

These initiatives are the result of a individual decisions, in which service of others is a priority. A need has been perceived as a result of an encounter or of a situation that has arisen. Subsequent discussions with others lead to the conclusion that it is possible to do something together. This marks the beginning of a process of which the probable development and the possible results are foreseen, but they are not certain. The relationships between the partners are more important in these personal initiatives than in those of an institutional nature.

In time, the two approaches tend to come together, but they are always distinct. In fact, the origin of the initiative continues to be important and to play a major role in the way in which things develop subsequently, because the initial insight contains the seeds of future life. Experience teaches us that initiatives which originate from individuals have a better chance of becoming concrete projects than those which result from planning by institutional bodies.

The bias towards people.

The replies received reveal that there are two main areas in which Lasallian initiatives take place. They are the ones involving the accompaniment and formation of young people or adults, and the ones which promote cultural developments on the human, spiritual and Christian levels. Even a quick glance through the titles and descriptions of the initiatives shows clearly that the Institute is more concerned with people than with structures. It is people in their concrete, cultural situations who are targeted. They are the initial inspiration of an idea which may develop into a project. Contrary to what might be imagined, we are not inspired mainly by predetermined, idealistic goals but by the particular needs of the people we meet and live among. It is people in need who inspire us to act.

The aims people say they set themselves, in order of importance, are as follows:

1. the knowledge of young people/adults in their cultural, religious and home backgrounds,
2. human, spiritual and Christian development,
3. appropriate teaching styles and methods,
4. establishing suitable structures.

This points to the conclusion that we need to ask ourselves, as Lasallians, whether we have made an adequate study of people's needs, and whether we understand them properly. This takes time, patience and a certain cultural mobility. The most significant innovations all come about as a result of such mobility, the readiness to cross boundaries and change one's lifestyle. St John Baptist de La Salle understood this; and the Lasallian founding act was an example of it. The projects reported show a certain amount of divergence in this area. In some cases, the analysis of needs is followed immediately by the setting up of operational structures. Other examples show a greater amount of searching around during the analysis and hesitation in deciding which options to follow. Things are given more time to "cook" in the melting-pot of ideas.

Lasallian Innovation

Some of the reports touch on the feelings of the people involved. They have clearly invested a great deal of themselves in the new project. They have taken a risk, a risk that includes their own credibility. They have, at some personal cost, rethought their commitments as human beings, as Christians, as religious and as Brothers. For them, the project was not an experiment or a way of testing the validity of an educational or pedagogical insight. For them, it meant answering an interior call, a call to a deeper personal integrity. Here we touch on the real meaning of innovation, in the Lasallian sense. It is a matter of personal attitude and commitment. It has to do with passion, inspired involvement and risk-taking. This is a feature which has marked the Lasallian story from the beginning.

The Lasallian approach to innovation means more than just responding to problems by analysis and planning in a process whose results are foreseeable. It includes the readiness to put oneself at risk without being able to define all the factors in advance. "Being in control" is not the most important thing. The essential element lies in being ready to set out on a venture with others and to question our ideas in the process. Innovation implies a risk of being altered and changed. It calls for mental as well as physical mobility. New ventures challenge established positions. They cause disagreement and disturbance, because people's personal views of life are being called into question. Innovation, is not simply an adaptation to a new situation, but a different way of seeing reality, allowing oneself to be transformed by a new relationship to it.

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