

Name: Stephen Turner

What did you do prior to applying for the course?

My job for 2 years before the course was as a long-term volunteer with VSB supported by the Rank Foundation, in Suffolk/Lenadoon. The post had various duties including advice centre work, but mainly detached youth work working from a Methodist community house. This was run on both sides of the peace line and this made the work quite difficult. It was 1975/1976 and it was a rough time everywhere, but in that Suffolk/Lenadoon area there had been a big population movement; so it was chaotic.

When did you do the course and what led you to apply?

I applied for the course in 1976 when I was only 19. I had taken a break from academic stuff and I looked at the Course and thought I'll try that - I had been involved in youth work over the years. But Derick Wilson said 'Nah, you would need to go and get more experience'. So I went to VSB. I ended up in the 1978 intake and the course had only been going for about 5 years. At that stage it was still finding its feet – the main people there were David Warm, Stanley Rowe, Richard Loudon, Frankie McNally.

Key milestones or memories from the programme.

There was lots of fun stuff and lots of crazy stuff.

I was a wee Prod, and middle-class at that – I spent 8 weeks in the Bogside Community Association in 1979 which was quite a shock to the system; there was a lot of trouble – riots and army searches going on all the time. It was quite a risk by the University to place us there; but I met some of the main paramilitaries as part of that, quite a steep learning curve for a young student.

The Social Policy and the Sociology inputs were very impressive – that was Bill Rolston and Mike Morrissey. Both of them and their inputs were very political and that shaped the conversation and shaped a politicised view of the role of youth and community work.

We did a County Clare placement, which was set up by the students themselves. Four of us went down to County Clare with a list of contacts, told to set up observational placements for the class, organise the accommodation; organise everything else. This was part of your management learning. It was fascinating, but the visits were really life-changing. For example, there were two days in what was then called the 'mental asylum' and it was really life-changing. There were literally bars on the window but some of the kids in it were just neuro-diverse; they weren't in any way ill but heavily sedated and I suspect that some families had given up on them.

The other thing that had a lasting impact on me was what used to be called SSST training, which was Simulated Social Skills Training. This is where you were filmed having a conversation with somebody and then the whole class gave you feedback. It was hilarious.

People telling you 'You didn't have the right eye contact' or 'You stumbled over your words', 'you looked intimidating' or 'you didn't look intimidating'. I remember that being impactful.

Overall the peer learning was massive. We had a couple of people who had very strong experience of doing community work. The class was animated, very engaged, very powerful but they were very hard on the tutors and argumentative and, looking back, maybe we were not very nice to each other. There was much more challenge coming from the class than from the tutors. Which is partly the fact that they were much older, average age 23, and didn't think twice about telling a tutor 'You don't f'ing know what you are talking about'. It was quite blunt and adversarial.

What was the impact of the University years on your career in youth work –

University training was different at that time – it wasn't about having a career path. The Course was almost superfluous for us; for example I don't know if anybody went to their graduation. I certainly didn't because the qualification was not about status or a career - It was more like 'We are all activists and this will help us be better activists.'

I worked in the statutory sector first; then joined International Voluntary Service and had a very fortunate career particularly on the international side including later with the YMC. I only really valued the University experience when I started in this career. You began to value and understand the process that you had been through in the course. The learning at University only began to impact in the five years afterwards. I would say that you are planting seeds at the University but you are not seeing the harvesting of this knowledge until much later. The harvesting happens in the workplace.

