

# Don't just sit there! Exploring Nonviolent Direct Action (NVDA)

by Anna Brown

## **NVDA workshop June 13<sup>th</sup> 2009 facilitated by Hannah and Alison**

The group for this session consisted of nine participants from the year group, three day visitors, Zoë the film-maker and Denise.

### **Blockading Role Play**

Our day began at the top of the stairs with a questionnaire designed to focus our thinking onto our own feelings about, and understandings of nonviolent direct action. Meanwhile Hannah and Alison were setting up Room 1 for a Blockading Role Play. When we entered, we found ourselves with just five minutes to respond to the discovery that our friend was shortly to be deported; the van bringing her from the detention centre was on its way. Some of us quickly decided to lie down in the 'road'; others then aligned their actions to what was already happening. Afterwards, we thought about our individual approaches to the group response, recognising that in a real-life situation there would have been many other actions leading up to this moment.

### **What is NVDA?**

This led us into a discussion about what constitutes NVDA; what is direct action, and how is it nonviolent? Do we commit violence if we damage property? If we'd let down the tyres on the van, would that have been a violent action? It was clear that we have different experiences and thoughts about this.

### **Approaches to direct action - fishbowl**

After a break we took part in a fishbowl exercise to think about the challenges posed by different approaches to direct action. (In this exercise, small groups represent particular affiliations. One person from each group comes to sit in a circle to discuss an issue. Other members of the small groups can replace the person in the central circle at any time). The situation was taken from the real experience of the G20 protests, at the point in which the Climate Camp protestors had been kettled, and was an imaginary meeting between five affinity groups: a dancers' collective; St Ethelburga's (a nearby centre for peace and reconciliation); Climate Camp; and two separate groupings from the Black Bloc. The aim was to find a nonviolent but effective response to the problems going on outside.

In contrast to the blockading exercise when we responded as ourselves, some of us found ourselves performing out of character, and it's hard to make an argument when you really agree with someone else. Quite fun though! To begin with we all pushed for our own agendas, but we did listen to one another and within the allocated time we came to a consensus about our intended action. But as one of the day participants who works as a mediator commented, concessions were made and it was a consensus that was arrived at rather too easily. It raised the questions: what happens when there are people in the meeting who are not 'trained' in nonviolence? In a real situation, would the more aggressive speakers dominate the conversation? Could a conclusion be forthcoming if

participants were diametrically opposed? We realised that it takes particular skill to bring a successful outcome in a situation such as this.

### **Planning for the July workshop**

After lunch Alison took the day participants off to do a spectrum exercise and Selina led the discussion about what we're planning to do in July. We'd talked in May about the use of forum theatre, and although the fishbowl exercise had some of the same principles, it was decided that Anna will provide a short piece in which to demonstrate the process. Then we'll divide into two groups and each will produce a piece of forum theatre to present to the other; we'll see what we learn from this.

We also want to include sessions on facilitation practise (Chris and Kiyo to organise); consensus decision making (Santi and Caroline) and evaluation (Hilary and Selina).

We'll open the session up to day participants, but we want them to know that it's being facilitated by the year-group (implicitly ~ that it could go pear-shaped!)

### **Responses to conflict - hassle line**

The setting was a demonstration outside the gates of an arms factory. In a hassle line we took turns in role-playing demonstrators with, successively, the police simply asking the protestors to move on; workers with families to feed trying to get past the protestors; angry locals; and finally the police determined to break up the protest. The responses were too numerous to write down but we did notice certain things. As protestors we felt real sympathy for those inconvenienced, and that different actions by the police inspired different emotions in quick succession. As police, we expressed some undesirable human responses to protestors' actions, particularly silence, and lack of eye contact. My own response, as an angry local, to the calm active listening I received from a protestor was to feel totally patronised and consequently angrier than ever. We also realised that although sitting in a line, one in front of another with legs and arms holding the person in front is considered a 'strong' position, the big disadvantage is that it's impossible to see what's going on further back and therefore potentially disempowering. The exercise gave us real and valuable insights into the feelings of people who are affected in different ways by the protest. And it raised the question: if others are adversely affected by what we do, are we in fact committing a violent action?

### **Affinity groups**

Alison got us thinking about the many roles needing to be filled within affinity groups, and brainstorming what it is that makes a good group. We thought about the different forms that NVDA might take.

### **Action Planning**

In two groups, we thought about the kind of action we could devise to highlight an issue that matters to us.

Overall, this was a stimulating and thought-provoking workshop, leaving many questions unanswered .... very good for the learning process .....