

My experience of Turning the Tide s year-long course

by Hannah Lewis

I took part in the year-long Turning the Tide course in nonviolence in 2007. The people I met and the skills and knowledge I gained over the year have become an important guiding force in my life.

What were my impressions when I began the course?

I was looking for projects to get involved with. I had just come back from working on farms in France and wanted to hook into British life again. I didn't have a background in nonviolence – all my activism until then had been around ecology. I was in a 'well, why not?' kind of mood, so decided to go ahead and book onto the course.

When I began I felt completely overwhelmed by the whole process – never before had I been in such a participative learning environment. I struggled with talking in small groups, with people I didn't know, about issues I was completely new to. I was the youngest participant and had the impression that I was the least experienced – it was true that some had decades of experience as activists. On the first day I was so far out of my comfort zone that I couldn't really learn much. I was a bit like a rabbit in the headlights, stunned with this totally new way of going about the world. After this day I decided that I wouldn't continue with the course – I wrote to one of the facilitators telling her that it wasn't for me. Somehow her reply persuaded me to continue.

How did my impressions evolve over the year?

The second session was bearable as I knew what to expect, but still felt unable to fully participate. The third was a lot easier and by the fourth I was looking forward to seeing my friends and being in this safe learning environment. By the end of the course I was even running some sessions!

As I got used to the methods and the people, I became more involved. The variety of topics, facilitation methods and case studies used was a great way to keep things fresh and energy up. I remember there were lots of discussions, not just about the material, but about how people reacted to the material which sometimes can be the really juicy bit! It was great that space was made for these tangents, which were often where the real learning took place. Talking about each other's experience was important, and of course the better we got to know each other the easier this was.

The facilitators were very flexible to the group's needs, so the course adapted to what we needed from it as time progressed. Having spent so long in academic institutions where teachers can be rigid with their curriculum, I was amazed at the facilitators' ability to morph with us; I'd say that was a great

strength of the course.

I developed friendships over the course that have supported my growth as an activist – its great to know that I'll probably bump into fellow TTT'ers at a demo! I'm so glad I stayed on to complete the course; it has certainly nudged my life direction.

How have I used any of the skills and knowledge I gained on the course?

I can think of four areas in which I have used what I gained on the course:

1. Perspective shift

The course involves a lot of 'deep' learning. It taught me to see through a nonviolence/violence lens. For me this has become more than a tool, it's now part of how I see the world. I remember after one of the training days I came home and switched on the telly. The children's film Shrek was showing – all I could see was the physical violence used by the goodies to beat the baddies. I've also learnt to 'see' other types of violence: for example environmental violence plays out as Climate Change and cultural violence is seen in the treatment of the Australian government towards Aboriginal peoples.

2. Becoming a Resource Person

Once I got used to the participative learning methods, I understood that the more I got involved, the more I learnt. I also learnt a lot from the facilitators about how they managed the group. Towards the end of the course I ran a couple of short sessions. We were encouraged to do this, as many of us were being trained up as Resource People or volunteer trainers for the Turning the Tide programme. When I started the course I wasn't part of the Resource People group, but as the year progressed and I grew in confidence I joined it. This year I have started to co-facilitate workshops for TTT. As I am effectively a trainee I am always coupled up with a more experienced trainer.

3. Working with International Alert

During the year I successfully applied to be a QPSW 1-year Peacemaker, and was placed at International Alert, a peacebuilding NGO, where I worked with the training team as student outreach worker. The facilitation skills and group-working skills I learned through the TTT course gave me a great foundation to build on at Alert.

4. Activism

Becoming part of a community of nonviolent activists was a great inspiration for me – to be part of bunch of committed people grappling with nonviolence was just the support I needed to develop myself and help me realise that actually I've been an activist all my life. Since completing the course I've become involved with Climate Camp, and have trained as a community mediator. I take these 'deep' lessons of nonviolence, and the tools that go with them, into many parts of my life. I still hum 'Be the change you want to see' under my breath.