

Reflections on a difficult moment in a difficult day

One of the most challenging things I have been involved in over the last few years has been to function as a consultant to a number of national curriculum and materials development projects. The work has invariably involved training writers and facilitating their progress through the writing process, which usually includes the preparation and discussion of several drafts, piloting and feedback, during regular in-country visits. This task is often delicate as writers sometimes become defensive when their materials are under scrutiny. This diary entry is concerned with what I saw as a critical incident during a recent workshop with a team in a former Soviet republic developing materials for an INSET programme for teachers of English. Names have been changed to preserve anonymity. (Rod)*

Saturday 10th March

Materials writing is not an easy ride for anyone concerned. I finished the day absolutely wiped out and I need to think back over it in order to understand why.

It strikes me that this team has been together for over two years now and they've had very few breaks from the process of writing. It has become a bit of a grind for them, and some of the early pleasure and excitement of writing seems to have been lost. They also show signs of impatience with each other, particularly Marina* and Vladimir*, who are anyway as different as chalk and cheese when it comes to beliefs and principles. One incident today, towards the end of a long and difficult session, seemed likely to bring things to a head and I felt I had to intervene. Vladimir was talking us through a training session he had written, and as is often the case with him, he was pursuing his own interests through the material instead of trying to put himself in the position of the INSET course participants. Marina was ostentatiously ignoring him on the other side of the room, and it fell to another team member, Olga*, to challenge Vladimir with a question aimed at getting his feet back on the ground. Instead of listening carefully and responding, Vladimir glossed over the question quickly and returned to his theme. At that point, I interrupted and asked him to address Olga's question. He claimed not to have understood it properly and returned quickly to his own topic. Olga shook her head, Marina tut-tutted and I thought I had better intervene again. In fact, I took a bit of a risk in what I said to Vladimir. As far as I can recall at the end of a long day, I said something like: "I really have to stop you. Instead of addressing Olga's question, you have simply brushed it aside and moved the discussion back on to your territory. Will you please address the question you've been asked?" At this point, he said again that he hadn't understood it (in fact it was a really straightforward question and he simply hadn't listened because his head was full of his own stuff). I looked across at Olga, who shrugged. Marina and the others in the group just sighed in resignation, and so I decided to give Vladimir one more chance by paraphrasing the question to him. Olga and the others were plainly grateful for this but I was a bit worried that I had exceeded my role as a facilitator and had caused Vladimir to lose face. In fact, he did try to focus on the issue Olga had raised, though without making any real concessions in terms of

the material he had drafted. I was left wondering whether they are all too deep in their own trenches, and too personally adversarial to contemplate shifting their ground.

I understand their tiredness and the strain they are all under to meet deadlines. They've done a remarkable job so far in difficult and pressured circumstances. But I wonder, when I'm here on one of my visits, whether they don't just sigh with relief, gratefully hand over responsibility and let me take the strain. The co-coordinator, Tanya, had a word with me at the end of the session and thanked me for intervening, but I'm still not sure that I did the right thing.

And I wonder whether I'm also getting a bit jaded and am sending out that message too, without realizing it. They are under too much pressure now for me to raise all this with them, but I'm wondering whether we should review the whole experience more thoughtfully in the final project workshop, so that they gain something more positive from the process side of the project. It's such a small group and I sometimes feel that I'm almost too close to them and their concerns to see a way forward.