

## **Synecetic Methods in Vocational Education and Training in Prison**

**Laurie Fraser** B.A.

NSW Dept Corrective Services

### **Abstract**

*This paper discusses the use of some of William Gordon's et al precepts of the synectic model of education and training within the context of the Audio Engineering and Production program at the John Morony Correctional Centre at Windsor, NSW. It argues that the nurturant effects of synectic methods provide authentic outcomes, especially for rehabilitative purposes. As well, it identifies and rejects the "retail ideology" of education, wherein training is regarded as a commodity, and where training methods consequently employ utilitarian models. It demonstrates, through examples from the Audio Engineering and Production program at John Morony, how creativity can be applied structurally to a training program to produce an integrated set of conceptual, training and pro-social outcomes.*

Tom Wolfe, in *The Right Stuff*, his book about the NASA Gemini program, relates a story about Gus Grissom, one of the seven US Air Force test pilots assigned to the program. The story goes that, in the early test flights of the Gemini craft, chimpanzees were trained to perform various tasks under high stress conditions during the flight. On stimulus, the chimps would pull levers and push buttons while undergoing high G and weightlessness. The aim was to see whether the conditions of space flight would affect human functioning. NASA planned that the manned flights would be completely controlled from the ground; there were no flying skills allocated to the actual occupants of the spacecraft. Wolfe quotes Grissom as saying that, if the entire flight was to be controlled from Cape Canaveral, and the astronauts were merely to be monitored as they pulled useless levers and pushed unconnected buttons, why not just leave the monkeys in?

The point is, of course, that Grissom and co, all highly trained test pilots, resented the simplicity of the tasks they were assigned. To them, the whole idea was to discover what flying could be like under such alien conditions; they wanted to fly those birds themselves. Such was the pressure of their argument that NASA finally and reluctantly agreed to put more control for the actual flying and manoeuvring into the hands of the astronauts. This policy paid off spectacularly for the astronauts during the ill-fated Apollo 13 mission; it is extremely unlikely that the three astronauts would have returned safely to Earth if they had only been monkeys in a tin can. What set them apart were both the creative and reflexive abilities acquired, on top of a high order conditioning, from years of complex training.

For educators in the bold new age of "training", the point of this story is illuminating. We have to be very careful with our choice of language and methodology when we undertake to "train" people, or "skill" them, as I've heard at least one teacher put it. Like the trainers of Grissom's monkeys, we can be content to observe the pulling of levers and the pushing of buttons, and consider the job done. But behavioural observations of, well, behaviours, are only one measure of how well we have done our jobs. Particularly in prison education, we have come to realise that a prisoner's educational outcomes are always integrated with his personal and social changes, as he undergoes the ordeal of finding out just how he will make a life on the outside. Like NASA, we can produce excellent pullers of levers and pushers of buttons, but unless those skills are accompanied by conceptual, intellectual and social changes, the prisoner will not only be half-educated, but may also suffer from a further alienation; we can actually do some damage into the bargain.

A new threat to authentic education, to me, is what I will describe as the “retail ideology” of education and training. As an as yet unreconstructed socialist, Marx’s aphorism “The ruling ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class” has even more resonance to me now than they probably did for Europe in 1844. In educational circles now, it is common to hear the language of the marketplace describing our work. In NSW TAFE colleges, where I also work, I hear of “corporate strategies”, of “customer interfacing” (really! – I think it means “teaching”), and to work in the “Business Access Centre” means you have moved to the high end of town.

My argument is that there is simply no good reason to use the language of economics and the marketplace in discourses about, or the internal methodology of, the education system in general, and prison education in particular.

But there are plenty of bad ones.

The retail ideology of education fosters a mind-set of division – class division (no pun intended), knowledge division and social division – between educators and the educated. If we start to think of our students as clients, or even more hideously, customers, we begin to valorise, to use Marx’s expression, the teacher-student relationship. Instead of establishing the authentic educational relationship - the professorial or mentoring relationship – we are drawn to establishing the market relationship of education, where we become the merchandisers of a commodity, and our students the customers. In this relationship, we have to convince our customers that our product is beneficial, and to do so we must overcome the natural and entirely justified suspicions that consumers have for the snake-oil merchants who routinely invade our lives. We are refused the right, or capacity, to share with our students what is in reality the true value of education – its power to broaden, enhance, and strengthen our students’ critical faculties. If they become skilled along the way, as they certainly should, so much the better.

What the retail ideology does is assume that half the educational job is good enough – indeed, that it is important not to provide the “other” bit – the critical bit.

Colleagues who oppose my views complain that there is really nothing to worry about - education is just catching up with the real world; nothing has changed, the language is only another way of saying the same thing, in other words, my objections are nothing more than the pedantic fantasies of the old-fashioned.

I remain unconvinced by all of this. I believe that there is a deliberate intent in the movement towards the commodification of education and training. This commodifying puts education in the same place as all other relationships in a capitalist society. It separates aspects of education that are intangible but nevertheless real, and valuable, from those that can be carried to the marketplace and sold. Those intangibles include a sense of achievement, an enhanced self-consciousness, the sense of value afforded by group cohesion and productivity, and, most importantly, the emergence of critical power. In addition is another important relationship, particularly in gaol: that of the student and teacher. Commodification represents a withering away of these values, and any others that are not immediate, in the sense that they are in tension with that which can be bought and sold.

Prison inmates are notoriously capable of smelling a rat. When education becomes a consumable, we corrupt it. In prison, we cannot disconnect the skill-giving properties of our pedagogy with the enormous pro-social benefits that should go hand in hand with our teaching. Teamwork, self-identity, tolerance, communication; all of these increasingly important characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century person can be acquired by those who have been on the short end of the stick throughout

their lives if our teaching methods harness the joy of creative pursuit. In other words, we have to make the experience of learning so rich that all of the anti-social pursuits of our charges pale into insignificance by comparison! This is a tough ask, I think you will agree. But, there you have it – our task is, after all, to provide alternatives to recidivism.

To counter the insinuations of the retail ideology, we need to adopt, integrate and expand models of education that, at least implicitly, polemicise a broad range of educational ideals, and, explicitly, bring to consciousness both the instructive *and* nurturant effects of an integrated pedagogy. I for one am heartily sick of the assumption that there is actually *something* to the marketplace approach to education; I further believe it is important for teachers to reclaim the philosophical high ground with respect to educational models and methods – after all, *we are the experts*.

As teachers, we develop a pattern, a method, of teaching that enables us to best produce the results we require. At some stage, we find that somebody has come up with a theory perfectly describing our method – so, at last, we can justify the way we teach because Professor X said it was OK! In my case, I discovered the synectic method several years after I had been using it. Briefly, synectics describes education as a creative process that actually suffers – becomes mechanical – without creative input on the part of both learner and teacher. It argues that strategies that integrate creative thought and planning with a reasoned pedagogy succeed better *because* they enhance the reflexive intentionality of the student. In other words, a student's creativity, which cannot be perfectly taught by rote, or other behaviouristic methods, becomes a kind of wonderment to the student. In my class the typical response is “How did I do that?” when they listen to their first major mixdown.

Synectics assumes that creativity is fundamental – each of us has the desire and skill to do something creative, no matter how brilliant, or, in my case when it comes to painting, how woeful. By harnessing the creative urge, we can enhance the educational reward. You get two for the price of one – the necessary skills, and the critical power to reflect on and analyse the educational process itself. I don't think that the parents of synectics would be so presumptuous as to claim exclusivity for their baby in this regard – but who cares – teaching was always meant to be a cooperative, not a competitive field. Wasn't it?

Anyway, enough theory! I want to describe to you the processes I use in my program that, I hope, supply my students with these lofty ambitions.

The overall goal of the Audio Engineering and Production program is to equip students with all of the skills they will need to work in some capacity in the music or related industries.

The program uses a small studio incorporating a range of technologies that is typical of studios anywhere. Thus, you will find mixing desks, various microphones, instruments, synthesisers, effects racks and a computer that records audio and MIDI information. It is sufficiently sophisticated to be able to produce high-quality work, and fortunately does this on a shoestring budget. In my studio, there is about \$15,000 worth of equipment. This may sound a lot, but I have built it up over seven years, gathering bits and pieces when we can afford them.

The students are introduced to the program through a demonstration of advanced students' work, with the understanding that they themselves will become as proficient if they apply themselves to it. (This is the “carrot” element!) They then spend some ten sessions studying the theory of sound, electronics, physics, occupational health and safety, and the basics of studio operation. Gradually, I introduce the students to the control surfaces of the studio and ask them to perform simple

operations such as file management (some students have no computing experience at all, so this is quite a challenge), cable routing, microphone set-up and placement, headphone monitoring level adjustment, etc. The lovely thing about my program is that various advanced students always have some project going on, so I give them one or two introductory students on a kind of “work experience”, just so they can get a taste of what it is to produce recorded music.

At first, most students are *completely* baffled by the technologies and processes. One day, recently, I asked my students to count the number of control mechanisms in the studio. The answer was over 500! Each of these mechanisms must be thoroughly understood and competently utilised, and so, just like Gus Grissom and co, these students have to master a huge *complexity* of tasks, because there must be an integrated outcome: the bird must fly. But the most significant part about this is that the outcome has an *aesthetic* purpose only! So, the combination of mechanical/logical/technological skills with aesthetic sensibility requires an enormous effort on the students’ part, and those of you who are musicians will understand completely what I am talking about.

Over time, the students overcome their fear of the technology and begin to see it for what it is: merely a creative tool. It is then that they begin to fly – firstly, by producing coherent mixdowns of others’ works, and then by fashioning their own productions. Obviously, not all of the students are musicians, but by the time they have mastered the technological processes, they generally have a very good “ear” for what sounds right.

It is throughout this process of learning that I see synectics in action.

Now, for a bit of that action, I want to demonstrate the equipment and processes that we use, and allow you to get an idea of the complexities of the technological applications we employ.

[Practical demonstration]

To conclude, let me say that music is a very powerful tool for a creative pedagogy. Whether you are teaching inmates to play the guitar, or doing something along the same lines as me, the “creative transformation”, to coin an expression, often has the effect of changing at least one area of a person’s life. To be allowed, and encouraged, to be creative, and to augment that creativity with technical skills, gives those who have been deprived, or who are simply frustrated, a chance to not only acquire “transportable” skills, but a renewed sense of identity. My students leave the program with at least one CD of their work in their hand; some of them now classify themselves as “artist”, rather than as “criminal”.