**SALUTATION IN LETTER**

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

From 1995 to 1996 I was employed by Packet Well College [PWC] as a full-time facilitator. It proved to be a seminal experience that inspired most of the decisions I subsequently made regarding my work career. When I arrived at PWC I already had twenty-five years work experience as a lecturer in Further Education in Scotland, France, and England. The reason why working at PWC was so different from all my previous work in education was due to its uniquely supportive working environment created by teamwork that combines professional workers and people who themselves have learning difficulties and have usually had negative experiences within mainstream education. At PWC the balance of power and responsibility functions in an inverse way from how it functions in mainstream F.E. Colleges. At PWC I was there, first and foremost, to listen, to take and give advice, to give support as a writing hand, to use my skills to enable the confidence of others, but ultimately it was not up to me – or any other paid worker – to make decisions about the nature and content of the courses provided by the college. We worked in mixed groups and made all our decisions together. These kinds of groups do sometimes exist in mainstream colleges, but they fail in the same way because everyone involved knows that ultimately it is 'the powers that be' who will make the crucial decisions. This is not the case at PWC where it is the Board of Directors consisting of people who experience reading and writing difficulties or mental health problems, who ultimately take responsibility for such decisions. I had to listen very carefully to their concerns, and in doing so I also learnt a great deal about myself. I learnt about my own vulnerabilities: about risking criticism in a group, about being more imaginative in my thinking, about giving and sharing praise, and, above all – along with everyone else involved in PWC – I learnt that it is possible to dare to fulfil one's dreams.

I left PWC with regret, but I went on to study, train and become an oral historian working with National Life Stories at the National Sound Archive of the British Library. I owe the pleasure and personal fulfilment I get from my work today to my involvement with PWC and their way of working: its distinctive strength was in its management structure, and how small groups worked to establish trusting relations where individuals feel supported, safe, and are inspired to take steps to tackle their own difficulties. I am just one amongst many who have been affected in this positive way by working and studying at PWC. It was good for me, but more importantly, it has transformed the lives of many people with reading and writing difficulties, who thought of themselves as 'no hopers' but left the college with new confidence, new skills and the will to tackle and overcome their difficulties. Far from facing closure, I would love to see the example of PWC being used to inform other FE institutions in how to work more creatively and effectively with people with reading and writing difficulties, low self-esteem, learning difficulties and/or mental health problems.

Jenny Simmons

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