

PRE AND POST CONFERENCE REFLECTIONS

GARY ROBINSON (Chair of DAFT)

Pre Conference Event

This year the DAFT Committee had hoped to generate a real sense of warmth and welcoming in relation to the conference and we hoped to enable people to mix and mingle at the outset to reproduce the informality and sense of connection that people often comment upon in relation to DAFT events. To this end, we had the idea of introducing a pre conference event and the thinking went something like “let’s do something that’s fun, but we also need to have something a little serious to enable people to justify taking time from work and explain to their managers why they need to be there a little earlier”. When we decided to have a family therapy music quiz and a question time type panel with a little supper and a free drink, we hoped that we might get 30 or 40 people attending. We were astonished to see 160 people congregate on the Thursday evening before the conference began!

The feedback seems to indicate that our panel, which was beautifully chaired by Ged Smith and included Sue Jones, Brian Cade, Mark Rivett, Carmel Flaskas and Paolo Bertrando, did a great job in responding to the questions from the floor relating to the conference theme of “Extraordinary Practice in Ordinary Circumstances”. Six or seven questions were explored and they generated a great deal of discussion around the tables which were organised in a cabaret style fashion with ten people to a table. This was followed by a lovely supper and people were invited to mix and mingle by moving to tables which had a card relating to the month they were born. Some people chose to stay with friends and remained comfortable where they were seated, however the vast majority of people took up the invitation to move around and meet new people. Stories were shared about their favourite music and the meanings related to them.

The tables then became teams to participate within the family therapy music quiz which involved fourteen tracks of music with sometimes a clear and sometimes an ambiguous connection with the field of family therapy and systemic practice. This included tracks relating to engagement, social constructionism, intergenerational patterns, gender, post modernism, lifecycle issues, culture and ethnicity, solution focused practice, strategic therapy and much, much more. Again the feedback demonstrated that the event was a huge success and achieved the aims of enabling people to settle in, have fun and to meet new people. The cheers and laughter from the tables as each answer was relieved in the quiz will live long in the ears of the committee and the participants.

We know that the question time panel has become a frequent feature of AFT conferences and perhaps the family therapy music quiz may make appearances at future conferences too. Certainly the idea of a pre conference event seemed to work very well and hopefully set the context for what has been reported to be a friendly, vibrant and participatory conference.

Post Conference

Everyone in the DAFT committee is a little amazed and very pleased about some of the consequences connected to hosting the conference this year in Derbyshire. Here are a few of the things that are happening.

- ❖ The Derbyshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust are following up on commitments made at the conference by senior managers in attendance to develop business plans aimed at developing systemic thinking and practice and family therapy posts within the Trust. This includes the family therapy provision within the Early Intervention Service working with psychosis, systemic services relating to complex safeguarding issues relating to children and adults, proposals to develop new posts within Adult Mental Health, and the development of a training strategy ensuring that all mental health practitioners experience mandatory training which includes an introduction to systemic thinking, practice and therapy. A training strategy has also been developed to ensure that there are clinicians qualified at foundation, intermediate and qualifying level throughout the service.
- ❖ The Derbyshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust and partner agencies within education and social care within Derbyshire are collaborating to develop joint projects within the Think Family Agenda. This includes multi-systemic therapy projects and training strategies relating to systemic thinking and practice for social care and primary care managers and practitioners.
- ❖ DAFT itself has gained three new committee members thanks to the conference and our next day conference on the 17 November focusing upon systemic thinking and practice with neurodevelopmental concerns and conditions is oversubscribed with 150 professionals, parents and young people attending to offer their expertise by experience.
- ❖ Like many university courses the systemic training programme has been jeopardised by Government cuts in education and small courses like ours have been jeopardised locally and nationally. The profile of the university working in partnership with AFT and the Derbyshire Healthcare NHS Trust undoubtedly contributed to securing the future of the programmes for a few more years yet. We are already receiving a greater number of applications for next year's courses than in previous years.

Final Thoughts

In essence, we felt a little bit daunted after we offered to host the AFT conference a year or two ago however we would certainly recommend it to any area of the country where you might want to generate interest and raise the profile of systemic thinking and practice. We at DAFT are happy to offer our help to those of you who might consider hosting in future as Ian Lea and others so generously did for us.

We want to again offer our thanks to all of the excellent facilitators and to the conference participants who contributed to such a magnificent experience for us all. Special thanks to Sue Kennedy, Barbara Thurston, the AFT office and AFT committee who made all of it seem manageable when we thought it may all be too much to chew. Their generosity, skill, rigor and humour are testimony to the core values of AFT. The hard work was well worth it for us and we have a host of treasured memories we will take forward from our time together in Buxton.

Best wishes from everyone at DAFT.