Evaluation of Residential ***War – and Peace*** at WHall May 2014

We had over **90% written response evaluations**…

The great majority were very **positive about the overall experience**. Everyone gained something of value, educationally and socially. A

A really encouraging feature from comments this time has been several new and younger participants expressing particular appreciation – 'very interesting and informative' … keen to come again….

The Lecturers were praised: '.. given by people who believed in what they were saying'; 'informative' and 'inspiring'. 'Both thought-provoking. Paul Rogers gained several 'excellent's and a 'worth coming just for him' comment. Janet Lees' focus on her project with young school students 'a valuable project'; 'presentation and discussion -very lively'; 'video showing the research... great to see young people getting involved'. But 'a shame.. we could not hear the words the boys had written'.

The big negative this time was the **failure** to achieve the live link up with Chomsky. Despite the best efforts of several richly experienced with the technology, including one especially brought in and paid for the event we only managed so see Noam Chomsky on our big screen for a few seconds. He had given some time to engage in conversation with us and good work had been done by groups during the morning sessions preparing four specific concise questions for Chomsky.

Lessons can be learned, as ever, from failures and we hope to follow-through, without relying on skype, to engage further building upon the reading and work done.

A good number **prepared well with advance reading** of the notes (which were found useful) and several at least read books recommended and expressed appreciation for preparatory material. For example: 'Re-read sections of RW's *Keywords*, early Chomsky, WW1 poetry including CA Duffy's *1914 Poetry Remembers*'; 'RWF web very helpful – useful to read beforehand'; 'I read some library books before attending'; 'I particularly like the recommended reading'; 'e-mail information was very useful'; 'good notes during the conference'; 'thorough and relevant prep. and guidance'; 'always worthwhile to go back to *Keywords*...' 'lots of good suggestions … Rae's book on Chomsky especially useful and informative.'; '...have to admit I did not read any of the books (recommended) – perhaps I will now....'.

'**Discussions** are very valuable – better than some didactic "'transfer of information" lectures..'

That comment made is evidently shared by many. The difficulties, however, when sessions are dominated by those who talk too much were again apparent in some cases. A suggestion that 'groups be limited to about 10 – if oversubscribed can be run again' may be worth trying? How best do we engage with the 'discussion domination' issue? The skills of facilitators are a key factor?

This maybe relates to the **aims and objectives** of the whole project (which one participant wanted to be made more explicit). The RWF website has essays, articles and references on all this, with guidelines for facilitators and participants. The detailed programme gives some guidance but a brief summary of key points and quotes could be produced and 'posted'/sent to all participants in advance in future? This could include the John Donne quote which EP Thompson used at the beginning of a long polemical Open Letter to a Polish Marxist in the 1970s:

"On a huge hill,

Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will

Reach her, about must, and about must goe;

And what the hills suddenness resists, winne so."

In other words: discussing and debating, going round in circles, to get at the 'Truth' - the actual, changing, situation – before and during active engagement is always essential?

Several at the final plenary session wanted **advice on what to do**, where to go next, action-not-words… RWF is, and must be, non-party and unsectarian. Nonetheless, most if not all of us are 'activists' in one way or another. The aim of these courses is to educate, stimulate, and better inform our individual active involvement wherever. What we do, outside and beyond, is up to us. '"I've often defined my own social purpose as the creation of an educated and participating democracy" as RW says on the front of our leaflet. Is that a fair general statement of what we are aiming to achieve? It starts with the ability of each individual to think for her/himself?

Wortley Hall as venue gained high praise: 'Excellent' 'wonderful to see the gardens at their very best', 'beautiful location', 'fabulous setting'. 'delightful'...' 'Excellent facilities, food and service'; 'nothing less than excellent'; 'a great environment in which to learn, share and discuss'; 'very good all round'; 'absolutely fine'; 'staff unfailingly friendly and efficient';

Some specific constructive suggestions for improvement in minor spheres will be communicated to management.

Fees and Subsidy issues. Strong support expressed for the principle and the specific policies (amounts) of RWF subsidy. Eg: 'Good … it was well supported by grants, increasing the range in terms of age and background'; '...recently unemployed (so) without subsidy would not have been able to attend'; 'fees reasonable – no deterrent'; 'the low subsidized fees make it helpful for those on low incomes'; 'about the right level of cost for me'; 'grateful that this assistance is available'.

Basically, low fees help keep viable numbers, filling all available beds.

The Future

Wortley Hall booked for **November 28-30th weekend**

The theme will be ***Participation Now*** using the Open University and openDemocracy's project materials. This will be an ambitious partnership event also involving, WEA, U3A and others…

It will include a review of informal, new and radical participatory democracy projects across many countries.

This could include school children/student participants showing their film about big issues as they see them, followed by cross-generational discussion for a session.

Follow through (written &/or video) from the May questions put to Chomsky may also feature linked to new OU online learning about public participation.

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Suggested future themes for May 2015:

Climate Change Technology; Trade Unions, Social Democracy and Socialism (key-note speaker, TUC General Secretary; 'The Way We Live Now' Up-dating Trollope…; Capital - Key-note speaker Thomas Piketty; 'What Can We Do About It?' ('It' being everything awful?); 'The Life and Work of Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall'; 'RW and the Future of Adult Education'; Revive RW weekend subjects covered over a decade ago: eg The Country and the City; 'More of the same, please'; 'The American Political System'; 'More Chomsky' (several want this!). More RW Keywords…;

Provisional title and proposal based on the above:

'***The Way We Live Now***' , allowing two key-note speakers to interpret this as they wish, but suggesting that they also look forward …

Frances O'Grady, TUC General Secretary and **Thomas Piketty** may be approached for key-note lectures.

The advantage of this general title is that ten or more small-group discussion options could engage with almost all of the suggested issues as above, including Trollope and Hoggart! Also, RW's ***Keywords***: ***Community; Welfare;*** and ***Ideology***? which both key-note speakers could be invited to comment on?

The RWF website will report on developments.

DT May 2014