

Experience of Andrew Basquille, EOC Businessman

The roots of LLI go back to 1989 when a friend of mine, Padraic Gilligan, was approached by an acquaintance in Italy to find an English language school in Dublin for his son and some friends to attend that summer.

Rather than recommend a school, we thought that we could teach these students ourselves, being secondary school teachers with generous summer holidays. And so in the summer of 1989, another friend, Eugene Murphy, and I taught 10 students in the dining room of my own house. I found accommodation for them in my neighbours' homes. They were here for four weeks and went home very happy with the experience.

The following summer we had 30 students and classes were held in the secondary school I taught in. In 1991, Chiara Lubich founded the Economy of Communion. We were very excited by this initiative and we decided to take the business more seriously.

Every summer, the number of students grew. By 1995 we were in a position to buy premises for a year round school. In 1996, we took a career break from our teaching jobs. This would give us a maximum of five years to build up the business. Then we would have to decide whether to return to our jobs or to resign. When 2001 came we felt that we were in a position to take the risk. There was no turning back. This was an act of faith. It's not easy to give up the permanent and pensionable but we saw that this was an opportunity which we could not miss. Our entry into the world of business was scary, but we felt that somehow we were part of a greater plan.

It was great to know that we were accompanied on our adventure by a worldwide network of companies living a similar experience.

Our goals from the beginning have been to build a profitable business based on gospel principles. We wanted to generate a culture of mutual love in our place of work and make a significant contribution to the re-distribution of wealth and the formation of like-minded individuals.

I'd like to share with you some experiences which illustrate our principles translated into action.

Like any business, we have to be profitable. But not at all costs. Particularly if it means compromising our principles. We believe in competition. Paradoxically, we believe that there is far more to be gained by building good relations with our competitors than by behaving in an aggressive or even neutral manner. LLI was a late arrival in the EFL industry in Ireland. We had no baggage, no enemies. We decided from the beginning to go out of our way to build bridges. For example, a number of years ago, we proposed to some of our nearest competitors that we conduct a joint training seminar for our summer teaching staff. Nothing like this had ever happened before. To everyone's delight, it was a great success. We have also initiated joint marketing projects, and mutual support in the provision of host family accommodation for our students.

Secondly, we believe that the quality of relationships is as important to us as monetary profitability. We seek to foster an environment where people care about one another's wellbeing. We start by setting an example ourselves. We believe that love is the measure by which we relate to fellow workers, clients, suppliers and the community. There is a culture of caring which is concrete in its expression. The following is a mundane but telling example. *A new member of staff only ever made coffee for himself and no-one else. Another member of staff remarked that the new arrival hadn't "copped on" to our culture yet. Without anything being said to him, he eventually began to offer tea & coffee to others. Rather than imposing a culture of giving, we allow it to be absorbed naturally in the workplace.*

On visiting a school in the Far East, it was suggested to me that in order to secure a group of students from that school I should give a small token of appreciation to a key member of the school staff. Apparently, this was culturally acceptable and indeed expected. We needed the business, I was far away from home in a different continent where things were done differently. Or were they? Of course no-one mentioned "bribes" but I have to admit I was tempted. It was only a small gesture after all and it was the way business was done in that part of the world. Not here of course. My decision not to play that particular game was an act of faith on my part. I believed that the most important decision of all was to be true to myself and our principles. I believed that we would get the business anyway, and indeed we did.

We provide a healthy working environment which fosters a sense of wellbeing. We are concerned not only with physical wellbeing, but also with the quality of interpersonal relations in the workplace. We make it clear to all who work with us that we expect people to treat each other with dignity and respect. However, we cannot legislate for stressful situations or personalities who might find it difficult to get on with each other. We make it a priority to help people resolve any conflicts which may arise. There have been many situations where people came to us with difficulties about a fellow worker. In such instances, our role is more counsellor than employer. We always listen and encourage people to resolve their difficulties together.

Our work environment should also be a place of physical and social harmony. We put a lot of thought into the décor of our school and the quality of our promotional materials. We have won the Dun Laoghaire Tidy Towns Award two years in a row for Best Business Premises with garden. Last year, with our design company, Red Dog, we won first prize in the Branding Category of the Irish Design Effectiveness Awards. We are an accredited ISO company and we have developed systems which foster teamwork. For example, each class has two teachers. This means that the students have the benefit of different teaching styles and that the teachers are encouraged to co-operate in preparing and assessing their students.

A recent experience highlights the value of Eugene and I making decisions together. When I took my career break in 1996, I went straight into the administration of the school. I deliberately didn't do a TEFL training course as I thought I never wanted to teach again. A couple of months ago, Eugene suggested to me that I should do a TEFL course as I should know my own business. I simply didn't have the time to do this, but I agreed, believing that somehow it was the right thing to do. So six weeks ago I began the TEFL course we were running. I took my place beside eight other trainees, my customers, to be taught by one of my employees. It was a strange place to be. It is a tribute to the professionalism of our trainers and the quality of our

relationship, that it didn't cost them a thought having me as a trainee. It emerged naturally little by little in the class who I was. I didn't make a big deal of it. I was immensely proud of the job our trainers were doing, having experienced it first hand. By the end of the five weeks, I had re-discovered my love of teaching. I couldn't believe that I could have enjoyed something so much. Even if I don't ever use it, I have been enriched by the experience and I am grateful for the "push" to do it. It was also gratifying to hear the other trainees say at the end of the course how much they admired the family atmosphere in the school.

Finally, a word about our most recent initiative. We have so many satisfied customers, that they wish to continue with LLI, even after they go home. So edu-Trust was born.

Our language training and testing solutions are delivered asynchronously by self paced tools and synchronously using live internet classroom technology either in an individual or group environment. This blended multi-modal solution is easily monitored and measurable. Learning can take place individually or in small highly focused groups. Participants need not leave their desks needing only a pc, internet access and headphones.

- eduTrust provides customised English language training solutions to corporations and organisations within the global marketplace.
- eduTrust has developed an innovative learning system consisting of live language tuition using internet based virtual classrooms and self-paced study tools . Course participants are given consistent support and feedback.
- eduTrust currently provides language solutions to Telecoms, Pharmaceutical companies and Financial organisations

We are grateful to Chiara Lubich for having the vision to found the Economy of Communion. We believe that we are making a difference in the world of work. It is a challenging and yet satisfying experience. Every day presents opportunities to build this culture of giving in very concrete ways. By sharing a portion of our profits, we are doing something concrete to heal divisions in the world and we are expressing our belief that to give is our true nature.

Andrew Basquille

February 2004