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## A Tolstoyan at Countesthorpe

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In 1972, during my year as a PGCE student at Leicester University School of Education, I worked on a small research project for Brian Simon based in Countesthorpe College, and this was where I met Michael Armstrong for the first time. My memory of Michael is of his immense energy and passion as he rushed around this dynamic community, and of how unselfconsciously charismatic he was. I came to meet him through another important mentor.

Brian Simon was my supervisor for some work I had done on Tolstoy and Education. Brian's neat and tiny handwritten comments on a piece I had written, with hindsight wonderfully illuminate some of Michael's aspirations within Countesthorpe and beyond:

I agree that the school (Yasnaya-Polyana) was essentially experimental, and one could hardly expect Tolstoy to spend his life at it, yet his writings on the school and education proudly remain among the most remarkable in educational literature. As you identify, there is a problem of the charismatic leader (ASN, Tolstoy are the best, but not the only examples – on a lesser scale we have them in the comprehensive school movement); and so the question is to whether their insights and procedures can ever be reduced to a system of general application.

From the depths of his customary enormous soft armchair, Brian quietly talked me through my work and encouraged me to join a small team focused on a scrutiny of some practice at Countesthorpe Community College.

When I was in the college, Michael Armstrong was, to my eyes, clearly at the forefront of engaging with and examining the values underpinning Countesthorpe in those early days, notwithstanding the model of participatory democracy and consensus there. The principles the school held to, reflecting Tolstoyan values such as freedom and non-authoritarianism, derived from the emphasis placed upon the child itself. Nurturing the child's original energy and attempting to support the child to adapt to the realities of the world outside the school are fundamental. These principles, as well as the constant testing of

them, prevailed for Michael long after his Countesthorpe days. Just as Tolstoy had used his school as an experiment out of which he formulated a series of insightful and often psychologically accurate statements and ideas, as well as gaining practical experience (we are told in great detail of the mistakes that were made and of the attitude towards them), so Michael was always essentially a practitioner. Like Tolstoy's 'anti-theory' (a term coined by Archambault), Michael's work was based on intelligent detailed observation of, and sympathetic attitude to, children in the light of his beliefs in general.

Sadly, I never met Michael after those Countesthorpe days, but there is a mass of evidence to demonstrate his phenomenal impact both on radical educational thinking and as an inspiration to others as well as to me.

In 1897 Henry James gave a rather extravagant warning to Tolstoyan followers:

Tolstoy is a reflector as vast as a natural lake; a monster harnessed to his great subject – all human life – as an elephant might be harnessed, for purposes of traction, not to a carriage, but to a coach-house. His own case is prodigious, but his example for others dire: disciples not elephantine he can only mislead and betray.

Without question Michael Armstrong's impact and influence throughout his life confounds this warning.

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