I write these notes while I can still remember some of my experience as a correspondence course tutor of back-of-book indexing (hereinafter referred to as 'indexing'). The views I express are purely personal, but they derive from dealing with some hundreds of students on two correspondence courses. About a third dropped out before or after the first exercise, realizing that indexing was not for them. My own course had allowed for this, charging only a modest initial fee; but I was a little disappointed by the considerable number who dropped out when it came to the hard work of extended exercises, though few of those were very promising students. More disappointing was the relatively small number who gave me, and themselves, the satisfaction of my being able to write a note of recommendation to publishers, and, sometimes, a recommendation that they should seek Registration.

These failures, as I often had to explain, were not necessarily due to lack of intelligence. Indexing demands an intelligence that is adaptable to the peculiar tasks that it presents. These are well described on the first page of this issue. In particular, I found to my surprise, and theirs, that the large proportion of my students who were qualified librarians had no headstart. At one time I was persuaded to plunge them into the middle of the course, but we almost always found that they had to go back to basics. The reason is simple, and again I refer to the editorial, 'Inside the rainbow'; all that librarians have in common with back-of-book indexers is that they both deal in books, and, rather confusingly, share the same name, 'indexing'.

It is not difficult to learn the basic rules of indexing from a clearly presented manual. The difficulties begin when it comes to selection and omission; but the most difficult skills to learn, and to teach, are those of compiling sub-entries and cross-referencing. A glance at indexes on a library shelf, and the experience of Registration Assessors, would confirm that this is where many indexers fail. After some years of teaching and experiment, I came to the conclusion that these skills can be learned only by compiling realistic indexes from fairly full and complex texts, requiring of the student twenty hours or more each, followed by personal advice and criticism. I was pleasantly surprised to find how close the relationship on a correspondence course can be between tutor and willing student, who only meet pen to pen. I do not believe that short day or weekend-courses, however valuable and stimulating for specialist studies, can cope with relatively full indexes. My experience with students who had attended them suggested that it should be made clear that they are not designed for beginners.

I have often been asked for advice by indexers aspiring to Registration. It was for them that I started, not then very successfully, SI's Supervision Scheme. I was a novice teacher at the time, with little experience as an Assessor, and thought, mistakenly, that it would be necessary for the Supervisor to be so familiar with the text that it should be a book that he/she had personally indexed. This presented obvious difficulties, and later, when I sent my own students' work for Supervision on specialist subjects, I found that it was an unnecessary requirement. As the Supervisor is teaching a relatively advanced student, and not searching for every minor fault, it is only necessary to sample the text against the index. My colleagues found two or three hours sufficient for a valuable and fairly thorough teaching exercise. I would advise almost any indexer, before applying for Registration, to present an index for critical examination to a colleague, to a Supervisor, or to the advanced element in a teaching course.

So, do training courses achieve anything? Many, perhaps most, of our distinguished indexers are self-taught—but I wonder what sort of indexes they produced as novices. Judging by my own beginnings, and by the standards of most candidates for Registration, many of them learned the hard way—hard on publishers, authors and readers. After advertising that I could offer tuition to 'advanced students', I turned away only one applicant on the grounds that he needed no further teaching. I have now retired from teaching, so I hope that my opinion is fairly objective. I believe that a correspondence course can be valuable, often essential, for those able to use it properly. By 'properly' I mean, carrying out the exercises under the same sort of deadline conditions that will be required of them when they join the field. Very few students are prepared to do this, and the results show.

Thesis and antithesis

From the index to Karl Popper's Conjectures and refutations (Routledge, 1963):

Marxism, 125n, 331ff, 342;—made irrefutable, 34f, 39, 333;—refuted, 37 & n. 333.