Handling controversial issues in the classroom

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How should hot topics be handled? A thorny problem. Here is a discussion of the method being tried with encouraging results by Britain's Humanities Curriculum Project.

A PROBLEM, bound to be of central concern to any democracy which emphasizes and values the responsibility of its citizens, is the problem of handling, within the curriculum, areas of study which involve highly controversial social, ethical, or political values. How is a democracy in its schools to handle controversial issues?

What do we mean by a controversial issue? I take as my definition that proposed by Dorothy Fraser, in her book *Deciding What to Teach*.

"A controversial issue involves a problem about which different individuals and groups urge conflicting courses of action. It is an issue for which society has not found a solution that can be universally or almost universally accepted. It is an issue of sufficient significance that each of the proposed ways of dealing with it is objectionable to some section of the citizenry and arouses protest. The protest may result from a feeling that a cherished belief, an economic interest, or a basic principle is threatened. It may come because the welfare of organizations or groups seems at stake. When a course of action is formulated that virtually all sectors of society accept, the issue is no longer controversial."

In short, a controversial issue is one which divides teachers, pupils and parents.

Such issues tend to come into the classroom when pupils become old enough to want to interpret particular cases which present themselves as dilemmas in the adult world. It is specific cases which make for controversy; but there can be no interpretation of practical values in the adult world which does not deal with specific cases. Thus, that war is an undesirable thing is scarcely controversial, but whether the war in Vietnam is justified is highly controversial. That sexual control of some kind is necessary is scarcely controversial, but whether this necessarily excludes active sexual relationships between those who love one another under any given and specific circumstance is highly controversial. Value issues

cannot be taught effectively at high levels of generality. Values inevitably express themselves in practical judgments.

The problems of handling value issues is most acute in that sector of the curriculum variously called civics or personal relationships or social studies, or the humanities in England. The Schools Council speaks of the humanities in these terms:

The problem is to give every man some access to a complex cultural inheritance, some hold on his personal life and on his relationships with the various communities to which he belongs, some extension of his understanding of, and sensitivity towards, other human beings. The aim is to forward understanding, discrimination, and judgment in the human field — it will involve reliable factual knowledge, where this is appropriate, direct experience, imaginative experience, some appreciation of the dilemmas of the human condition, of the rough hewn nature of many of our institutions, and some rational thought about them.

The Humanities Curriculum Project decided to explore the problems of teaching in controversial areas by adopting nine themes or topics for experimental development. These are: war; education; the family; relations between the sexes; people and work; poverty; living in cities; law and order; and race relations. Schools Council Working Paper Number 2 suggested that the aim was to forward understanding, discrimination and judgment. We assumed that in fact full understanding implied the capacity for discrimination and judgment and we adopted as our aim, "to develop understanding of the nature and structure of certain complex value issues of universal human concern." We were careful in formulating this aim not to make assumptions about the transfer of understanding from one topic or situation to another.

There may be some interest in comparing this position with that outlined in a recommendation of

the American National Education Association project on Instruction.

Rational discussion of controversial issues should be an important part of the school program. The teacher should help the students identify relevant information, learn techniques of critical analysis, make independent judgments, and be prepared to present and support them. The teacher should also help students become sensitive to the continuing need for objective re-examination of issues in the light of new information and changing conditions of society.

There is a great deal in common between this position and ours. The main points of contrast are that we have laid more emphasis on the emotional and imaginative, and that we have stressed the idea of understanding rather than component skills. For us, understanding means more than a sum of information, affecting responses and skills. It implies a structuring of these appropriate to the situation of the person who is studying it. Understanding is the achievement of an interpretative map answering both the needs of the situation and the needs of the person who is attempting to understand it.

Given that we are working in the area of controversial issues and attempting to achieve understanding, there appear to be three possible strategies which can be employed in the school.

One might argue that the school should attempt to transmit an agreed position adopted as a matter of policy. This fails in practical political terms because it is impossible to obtain the agreement of parents or policy makers on the huge range of issues involved. Moreover, even if it were possible to lay down an agreed line, the teachers would still disagree among themselves and the schools would find themselves involved in an organized and systematic hypocrisy which would make them extremely vulnerable to the criticism of pupils. This approach is also unacceptable in terms of our aim, since it cannot possibly further the understanding of a controversial issue to pretend that it is not, in fact, controversial.

A second possibility is that each teacher should be free to give his own sincerely held point of view. But the inescapable authority position of the teacher must in this case leave him open to the charge of using the classroom as a platform for his views. In the face of such criticism, the profession would have committed itself to defending the teacher who advocated pacifism to the children of regular army soldiers or who advocated premarital sexual intercourse in the face of parental disapproval. This position seems scarcely tenable in practice, though attractive at first view. In

theory it might be possible to get around the difficulty by ensuring that teachers whose opinions were relatively orthodox were more often given appointments. Questions about a teacher's political, religious and moral beliefs and practices would then become appropriate at interview. This is unacceptable to the teaching profession.

At first sight it does not look as if this second approach is objectionable from the point of view of enhancing understanding, but in fact our experience in classrooms suggests that the authority position of the teacher is much stronger than most teachers realize, and that it is almost insuperably difficult for him to put forward his own points of view without implying that controversial issues can be settled on the basis of the authority of others.

The third strategy, and the one adopted by the project, is to attempt to devise a method of teaching which should within itself guarantee that the teacher is doing all he can to protect pupils from his own bias, while advancing their understanding. This involves the teacher in a procedural neutrality in handling controversial issues which could be the basis of a professional ethic for dealing with controversy in the classroom.

Two points, however, should be expanded more fully: one concerning the philosophical position of the project, the other concerning methodology.

It must be made clear that the project is not value-free.

In the first place, the decision to include controversial issues in the school curriculum for adolescents implies a value judgment, and the choice of issues to be tackled is based on the value judgment that they are issues of importance. We have made decisions of value at the most fundamental level at which values impinge on the curriculum, namely, in answering the question, what is worthwhile and therefore worth teaching?

We have also made value decisions at another level. We have asserted that teaching procedures and curriculum materials must be justifiable in terms of certain values which are fundamental to education. Education must always involve a preference for rational rather than irrational procedures, for sensitivity rather than insensitivity, for example. It will always be concerned to examine and establish criteria and standards. The appropriate attitude of teachers to pupils will always involve respect for persons and consideration of their welfare.

Finally, even in the area of con-

troversial substantive issues in which we ask the teacher to accept the criteria of neutrality, we are asserting the democratic values which call for an open debate and dialogue on those issues for which society has not found a solution that can be universally or almost universally accepted."

We have, then, adopted value positions at three points by trying to answer the questions: what should be taught? what educational values should be realized in the way it is taught? what are the implications of democratic values for the degree of doubt and openness with which it should be taught?

Methodology. Something should be said about the methodology we have employed, particularly because I think it has a special relevance to curriculum design in any area which is exploratory or which implies that openness which we see as appropriate to value judgments in practical life and in the arts.

The main interest of our design is the absence of behavioural objectives from the conceptualization and planning of our curriculum. Any sophisticated curriculum worker is bound to be aware of the limitations of a design directed towards specified terminal student behaviour. Objectives are merely a simplifying device to help us choose from the range of hypotheses we could put forward about the effects of a curriculum innovation in a school or system.

The important point is simply that we are adopting an alternative strategy. Instead of taking our general statement of aim and analyzing it into specifications of terminal student behaviour, we analyzed it logically in order to derive from it a specification of a use of materials and a teaching strategy which should be consistent with the pursuit of the aim. One might draw a distinction between two ways of disciplining and structuring behaviour, including classroom behaviour. In one case, behaviour is disciplined by the pursuit of goals. In the other, behaviour is disciplined by the acceptance of a form of principles of procedure.

This type of behaviour which is disciplined by form can be seen in various settings. It is common in the arts. Often a poet has only a general impression of what he wants to say, which is given precision as he works it out in tension with an appropriate form such as a sonnet. The rules of procedure at meetings are a similar form specification. The goal is not specified in detail but the form or principle of procedure is defended as logically deducible from a general

aim. The sonnet is a proven form for the capture of a single unitary thought or mood with a twist in its tail. Committee procedure is a proven means of achieving consensus towards action.

We adopted a research plan based upon the specification of a procedure of teaching which should embody the values implied in the aim in a form which could be realized in the classroom. This means that the changes which we specify are not changes in terminal student behaviour but in the criteria to which teachers work in the classroom. These changes are defined by enunciating certain principles of procedure or criteria of criticism which are expressions of the aim. They are, if you like, specifications of a form of process.

The difficulty in designing an effective curriculum experiment which does not use behavioural objectives might be expected to be most acute in the field of evaluation. Our evaluation officer has devised an evaluation strategy based on the premise that the main function of curriculum evaluation is to inform decision-makers. This enables him to bring in the questions which decision-makers do, in fact, ask us in order to assist him in selecting what effects to measure. Questions can be gathered from our funding agencies, from educational administrators, from parents and from teachers.

I believe that this experimental approach to curriculum design and evaluation has a considerable potential, and in certain situations, marked advantages over the approach through objectives as a way of translating a value position which has been stated as a general aim into a practical teaching strategy. For the moment, however, it is enough to say that the value position which asks the teacher to accept criteria of neutrality and impartiality in handling controversial issues demands that we face the technical problem of devising and specifying a teaching strategy which is both pedagogically effective and ethically justifiable.

Characteristics. Hence, the project team felt that it must attempt to develop experimentally and evaluate a pattern of teaching with the following characteristics:

1) The fundamental educational values of rationality, imagination, sensitivity, readiness to listen to the views of others, and so forth, must be built into the principles of procedure in the classroom.

2) The pattern of teaching must renounce the authority of the teacher

as an "expert" capable of solving value issues since this authority cannot be justified either epistemologically or politically. In short, the teacher must aspire to be neutral.

3) The teaching strategy must maintain the procedural authority of the teacher in the classroom, but contain it within rules which can be justified in terms of the need for discipline and rigour in attaining understanding.

4) The strategy must be such as to satisfy parents and pupils that every possible effort is being made to avoid the use of the teacher's authority position to indocrinate his own views.

5) The procedure must enable pupils to understand divergence and hence must depend upon a group working together through discussion and shared activities. In such a group, opinions should be respected, and minority opinions should be protected from ridicule or from social pressure.

6) In sensitive issues, thought must be given to preserving privacy and protecting students, e.g. illegitimate children, children from broken homes, children of prostitutes, should be borne in mind when discussing the family or relations between the sexes.

7) Above all, the aim should be understanding. This implies that one should not force pupils towards opinions or premature commitments which harden into prejudice. Nor should one see particular virtue in a change of view. The object is that the pupil should come to understand the nature and implications of his point of view, and grow to adult responsibility by adopting it in his own person and assuming accountability for it. Whether or not the pupil changes his point of view is not significant for the attainment of understanding.

Discussion. It seemed that the basic classroom pattern should be one of discussion. Instruction inevitably implies that the teacher cannot maintain a neutral position. In the discussion the teacher should be neutral on issues, but he should be able to accept responsibility for the rigour and quality of the work. Accordingly, the teacher was seen as a neutral and relatively recessive chairman developing rigour and quality in his students' work by shrewd though sparing questioning.

A discussion which aims at understanding cannot be merely an exchange of views. It must be a reflective enquiry fed by information. But it is almost impossible for the teacher to be the source of information in a discussion group without breaching

his neutrality and taking a dominant role. Therefore, the group will best feed information into its discussion by considering evidence.

Evidence. It is important to see what is meant by evidence in this context. The group needs sources of information which place before it facts, insights into other people's points of view and perspectives on life, opportunities to project oneself imaginatively into other people's experiences, and some general impression of the cultural resources available in our civilization. No evidence is, in the last analysis, objective; and it is important for people to interpret and evaluate each piece of evidence.

It is a false strategy to look for authority in evidence, both because of this lack of objectivity, and because the kind of value problems which are at stake in the discussion of controversial issues can never be solved without going beyond the evidence. When Truman, as President of the United States, made the decision to drop an atomic bomb, the evidence on which he acted was necessarily incomplete, and however complete it might have been, it could never have allowed him to escape the responsibility of judgment. This is what is meant by "the buck stops here". Evidence can never take responsibility from our shoulders.

Thus, the use of the word, *evidence*, must not be taken to imply authoritative documentation. What is meant by evidence is simply any kind of material or experience used, not simply for its own sake, but in relevance to an issue. The word implies a way of using information and not the status of that information. Anything can be evidence if it is used effectively to explore a problem.

Research. Discussion work in a group should generate research by both pupils and teachers as they find evidence to feed the discussion and illuminate the issues that confront them. In theory, a group with the assistance of a teacher can build up its own collection of evidence, but in practice it is scarcely feasible for teachers with the limited time and facilities at their disposal to collect enough materials. The project therefore decided that it should attempt to produce rich, diverse and, as far as possible, balanced collections of evidence as foundation collections for school documentation centres. These collections could stand in relation to the teacher's and pupils' collections of evidence as the school library stands in relation to the personal books of teacher and pupil.

The materials provided by the project include songs, poems, extracts from novels and plays, letters, extracts from biography, memoirs and historical works, readings in social science, journalism, advertisements, questionnaires, statistical tables, graphs, maps and plans, cartoons, still photographs, slides of paintings, and audio-tapes.

It has been assumed that materials cannot be written by the project team if they are to be regarded as evidence. Experimental materials used in schools are selected from a much larger collection assembled by the team.

The collections have a structure which is intended to ensure that the teacher is likely to have at his disposal at least one piece of material to cover any issue likely to arise within a given topic area. In other words, the structure is there to help achieve coverage. The materials are not intended to be used in a predetermined sequence, but rather to be brought into the discussion in response to points arising from the group. A teacher prepares for this kind of teaching by knowing his way around the collection and not by making up his mind in advance what pieces he will use in any given discussion meeting. The collections are at this stage being tried in a diverse sample of between 30 and 40 schools.

Although it is, of course, an important part of the task of the project to produce materials which have been adequately tested in use, the more interesting part of our work is in the study of the teaching situation. Our teachers have been regularly sending to the central team 20-minute tapes of discussion sessions. The study of these tapes is enabling us to work out the implications of our basic premises and aims for discussion-based work and we have been able to move towards a first draft of a self-training program for teachers.

At this stage we have only completed the second year of a five-year experiment, and what I say about our findings must be treated as personal reflections on the work in hand and not as secure results.

One of the interesting things is that one encounters a tradition which seems to go back to a misinterpretation of Dewey. I believe that Dewey was deeply concerned with intellectual values, and that the nearest attempt to explore systematically the implications of his conception of reflective teaching is Griffin's Ph.D. thesis from Ohio State University, which is reported at some length in Gage's *Handbook of Research in Teaching*. But Dewey has notoriously

been misinterpreted, and one encounters this misinterpretation in teachers who feel that the function of discussion is social rather than educational.

For many, a discussion group is a kind of performance, and the values by which they judge it are a desire for fluency, animation, balance of contribution, and social adjustment within the group. Of course, it would be wrong to underestimate the importance of an understanding of group dynamics for any kind of work in discussion, but in proposing an aim of understanding, we find that we have called into question the values which are often taken for granted in such work.

For example, it is clear that learning to listen is quite as important as learning to speak, and that we cannot be satisfied with a pace of activity which gives no time for reflection. There are all sorts of patterns of discussion and activity which need to be looked at afresh in the light of the aim. For example, is it a good thing that in a discussion group only two people can speak in a 20-minute sequence? If we refer this to our aim, the question can only be answered by discovering whether the understanding of the group as a whole was enhanced. Although these points seem simple and obvious, in practice the effect on a group of their understanding that they are trying to achieve understanding rather than converting one another to deeply held opinions is quite radical in its implications for discussion work.

Another point which has emerged is the extreme subtlety and strength of the teacher's authority position in his classroom. It is often transmitted by barely perceptible cues. For example, the chairman of a discussion group who persistently asks the group questions to which he himself thinks he knows the answer implicitly asserts his position of superiority and authority and indeed often makes the group feel that the discussion is merely an oblique teaching method which cloaks the teacher's instructional position.

Again, because of his general authority position in the school the teacher is a potential source of rewards. If one is, as we are, attempting to get the group of students to accept full responsibility for their own learning, then they must find rewards in the task itself and in their own progress. A teacher as chairman cannot afford to say "yes" or "an interesting point". This sort of reward clearly tends to set up a guessing game in which the students are more concerned with interpreting the teacher's behaviour in order to understand what he has in his mind than with interpreting the issues before them in the light of the evidence. The teacher needs to see that students are reward-

ed by being carefully listened to and fed with questions which help them to articulate and express their own point of view.

There are indications that the teacher's assumption of a neutral and non-authoritarian role damps out his capacity to transmit to his pupils his low expectation of their performance. Recent researches have suggested quite strongly that teacher expectation is a major element in holding down the achievement of pupils of average ability, and there are some indications of a strengthening of the capacity of pupil groups to face difficult reading materials as a result of the work of the project. One might formulate this by suggesting the hypothesis that when a group of students is weaned from dependence on the teacher and accepts responsibility for achieving understanding, then the reading level of that group is higher than that of any individual member within it.

Another area in which our understanding has been enhanced by studying tapes of teaching in action is the nature and interpretation of evidence. Almost all evidence is ambiguous, and we are led to consider the significance of ambiguity and its interpretation. The natural impulse of a group confronted with evidence is to attempt to establish a solid consensus, but it may well be that understanding depends upon the acceptance of divergence and the exploration of its nature. It is quite clear that the majority of teachers approach the problem of helping pupils to understand a poem or a picture merely by transmitting their own personal interpretations, yet it is also clear from discussion groups held with teachers that highly qualified teachers of English diverge in their own interpretations of a poem.

The teaching approaches which we are exploring may have a relevance far beyond controversial issues. Within the whole range of the arts, we are dealing with value judgments which are in part the expression of personal responses. Disagreement about the arts is not controversial in the sense proposed by Dorothy Fraser only because the arts do not arouse the citizenry. Yet it may still be appropriate if we are to achieve understanding to treat the disagreements as important.

I have no doubt that we are encountering fundamental problems in the nature of understanding, the nature of authority in teaching, and the nature of evidence which are potentially of considerable significance beyond our field. The problem we are dealing with, that of discussion in the presence of value divergence, is clearly significant at all levels of adult and higher education as well as in the secondary school.

Such a style of discussion, which asks the participants to commit themselves to the aim of attaining understanding, may have a particular significance where value divisions tend to produce alienation between different groups in society. One would like to investigate the problems and possibilities of bringing together into a discussion group of this sort members with sharply divided value systems, divided for example by race or social class or generation. Of course, by no means all such people will commit themselves from the outset to accepting responsibility for achieving deeper understanding of the issues at stake and I am certainly not claiming that we have any easy technique for overcoming intractable problems of mutual understanding. We cannot create goodwill; we can only help it to work.

There are basic assumptions in our work which represent a value position, which would not be affected by our results.

First, we assume that an educator has a responsibility to choose curriculum content, the broad agenda of education, on the value judgment that certain activities, experience or forms of knowledge are worthwhile, and he has to make clear the grounds on which he believes them worthwhile.

Second, we assume that the educational process must embody certain basic values such as rationality, respect for persons, acceptance of consistent criteria and so forth. To call a process "education" is to assert that it embodies certain values as principles of procedure.

Third, that certainly in the face of controversial issues, and probably in a much wider field than that, a democracy has a value commitment which should be represented in its educational procedures.

In a democracy, ethical, political and social values must always be held open to question and discussion. To say this is not to express indifference to the values people hold. On the contrary. If you want to know what value problems most concern a dictatorship, you look for the area where it is most intent on indoctrination. If you want to know what values most concern a democracy, you look for the areas where it is most concerned to stimulate discussion. And it is the strength of education in a democracy that discussion rests upon firmer and more defensible educational values than does indoctrination.