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An Appeal for Evidence of the Effectiveness of an Alternative
Role to that of Neutral Chairman in Promoting rational Inquiry
into Moral Issues

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The Humanities Project did not address itself to moral education as such, nor did it question whether it is legitimate for teachers to influence the moral beliefs and opinions of their pupils. However, it has a relation to the problems as Hyland poses them: it is relevant to the development of rationality and autonomy in students, since it explored experimentally the conditions constraining an appeal to reason in the schools.

It is important to grasp that the Humanities Project from the outset described itself as a research project. ⁽¹⁾ It attempted to suggest how teachers might by a course of educational action present to themselves and study some of the problems in the interaction of the authority of schools and the nature of knowledge which have subsequently come to be discussed under the rubric, "knowledge and control". An initial and tentative statement of these problems by the director of the Project ⁽²⁾ led into, but was superceded by, the work of the Project. The problem was also stated in Schools Council Working Paper No. 2 where the aim of forwarding understanding, discrimination and judgement in the human field was suggested and the hypothesis that such an aim would be frustrated by the authority of school and teacher was adumbrated.

Crucial to an understanding of the Project is its criticism of the objectives model. Since the effects of a curriculum cannot be reliably anticipated (it is argued) principles of procedure must be justified in terms of premises at the outset. Subsequent experience will enable an evaluative judgement to be made in terms of effects.

Now, the context of the Project provided an unusual opportunity to explore the modulation of authority in teaching because the humanities could be construed as involving controversial issues and this provided a justification for teacher neutrality. This justification was a political one, based on the empirical definition of controversiality proposed by Dorothy Fraser, the principal point of which is that a controversial issue divides the citizenry, taken with the suggestion that some teachers would see themselves as accountable to the citizenry. Such teachers would, it was felt, be interested in the possibility of teaching to a criterion of neutrality in order that they could reassure parents that they were doing everything in their power to absolve themselves of the charge that they might be using their authority to promote views which conflicted with those of the home.

The Project has worked with such teachers in pursuit of a teaching aim: to develop an understanding of social situations and human acts and of the controversial value issues which they raise. The inclusion of 'social situations' in the aim was intended to hint at the social sciences, and of 'human acts' to hint at history and the arts. The value issues might be aesthetic as well as moral. A helpful way to think of the Project is in terms of a study of "contemporary history" and like history it is largely concerned with the judgement of the particular and substantive. Its focus is not on the formulation and justification of ethical principles. But like literature or sociology or history it involves a discourse into which moral sensitivity and moral judgement are inevitably woven.

In this context Hare is right in characterizing the position of the Project: "in discussing substantive questions the teacher ought not to set himself up as an authority on the right answers, but . . . he may try, nevertheless, to ensure that pupils examine

issues in the light of appropriate evidence and with due respect for critical standards." (3) For example, the teacher should help students to gather evidence and conduct discussion on whether it is better to live in city or country, or what might be the motives of the officers involved in the Hitler bomb plot, or what are the arguments for getting married or whether to tackle the cycle of deprivation by removing children from their parents; but he should not (within the Project strategy) argue for living in the country, or that the bomb plot officers were all patriots or that marriage is for mugs or that slum children should be institutionalized. All these examples are drawn from real instances of work in classrooms.

Now, of course, the distinction between substantive and procedural values is not clear-cut; but Hyland is quite simply in error if he argues that only clear-cut distinctions are significant for practice. The distinctions drawn here can be used as criteria in teaching and, when these are interpreted within the MCP tradition, the result is a teaching style so radically different from that normally observed as to constitute an alternative pedagogy.

So far I have argued that the specification adopted by the Humanities Project can be defended in terms of certain premises as an intelligent experimental response to a dilemma in the accountability of schools and that, effectively operationalized, it provides the framework of an alternative pedagogy.

Moreover, although it is extremely difficult to meet the criteria of the neutral chairman role, the evidence strongly suggests that the main barriers are not logical, but are associated with teacher skills, pupil expectations and the authority of the school. In the face of these difficulties the question naturally arises whether it is worth tackling them merely for the sake of

accountability to the citizenry. On the whole, I think not: if I am right, then the ultimate justification for the Project must be found in its effects.

I assert that the observational evidence suggests that in the development of oracy, literacy and the capacity for reflective inquiry the procedure of the discussion of evidence under a neutral chairman is quite unusually effective as compared with orthodox teaching procedures. The test might be to compare tapes of good ECP work with tapes of alternative procedures, and it is, of course, comparative judgement of the sort this would allow which has convinced the body of teachers who value the strategy.

Such a comparison will, I believe, show among other features a development within ECP of moral discourse and moral judgement. At this point the Humanities Project touches Hyland's concerns for moral education, and the point is surely so heavily empirical that it cannot be considered adequately without the careful comparative analysis of classroom transactions. It is the philosopher's conviction that he can do the work from his armchair that is the problem! This is what allows Mrs Warnock to conclude that the teacher who tries to be neutral will fail as a teacher - without observing the activity itself.

I am claiming that the Project procedure does markedly better than any other teaching strategy I have been able to observe in emancipating students from dependence on authority to acceptance of the need to justify judgement by reasons. In this sense it is adult education.

The most contentious value position built into the Project is the belief in the use of speculative reason operating upon doubt as the medium of advance towards truth. "Men who do not know what is true of things take care to hold fast to what is certain, so that, if they cannot satisfy their intellects by knowledge (scienza), their wills at least may rest on consciousness (coscienza)." ⁽⁴⁾ This position associates the Project with those

in religion who believe in the primacy of conscience, with Charlotte Mason's doctrine of neutrality as a form of respect for the pupil as a person, with NAE: a course of study's injunction to the teacher to "validate the search". With Freire, it shows concern for education as an instrument of freedom through the development of students' powers. With Cransci the idea that "the last phase of the common school must be conceived and structured as the decisive phase, whose aim is to create the fundamental values of 'humanism', the intellectual self-discipline and the moral independence".⁽⁵⁾ Across a whole range of religious and political views we can find the dispute between knowers and seekers. The Humanities Project strategy validates the students' right to be a seeker by containing the teacher's need to declare himself a knower.

The aspiration is necessarily unsuccessful to some degree; but complete success is inevitably so rare in education (as in all human endeavour) that we must be sure that we have committed ourselves to something worth failing in - both in terms of worth of aspiration and in terms of the effects of flawed performance.

It is within such a context that I turn to some of Hyland's problems.

First, respect for persons expressed procedurally is a matter of respect for persons in the working group. There is a dilemma in the face of the expression of, say, a racist view which shows a lack of respect for persons in a broader sense. The choice is to oppose the view and place one's position as chairman at risk or to settle down to a long process of discussion within the group in the face of evidence (including evidence expressing the view the teacher would represent in his own person). It is an agonizing choice. A group with whom one had a good understanding might tolerate a procedural failure in a chairman under such stress. But

in our project on teaching about race relations we have actually found that in direct confrontations of the kind we are envisaging even the non-neutral, non-HCP teachers tend towards the HCP response. "We ought to send all the wogs home" evokes "what makes you say that?" or "How would that look in practice then?" rather than "I won't have that kind of talk" or even "Let me argue against you." A majority of teachers in practice appear to incline to a more neutral role in precisely those circumstances which Hyland and others visualise as most invalidating it: to be argued down by the teacher in such circumstances is not, they believe, to be convinced, but to be defeated.

Bailey's position that the Project seems to imply that value judgements cannot in the last resort be rationally defended seems odd in the face of the fact that the Project appears to be attempting to implement rational discussion as a means towards value judgements. If a licence to discuss value judgements implies relativism, then surely all those who discuss ethics are implicated!

But the plot thickens when Wall asserts "that thinking for oneself about moral issues must satisfy certain criteria and be subject to certain restrictions".⁽⁶⁾ Is he arguing that autonomous morality is dependent upon the special expertise of the moral philosopher? If not, the development of a grasp of the appropriate criteria is surely likely to depend upon progressive attempts at moral reasoning. The application of HCP to moral education would on this argument rest upon the effectiveness of the strategy in evoking moral inquiry among the pupils: it stands up well to this criterion I think. For it appears that the ordinary procedures and climate of the school are not favourable to the development of moral inquiry, or indeed of reflective discussion, at any rate among adolescents of average attainment. I think this is because of the use of authority to warrant knowledge. But I'd be glad to learn from audio-tapes of classrooms of roles other

than that of neutral chairman which seem to Hyland - or to other readers - to offer alternative approaches to the problem of developing autonomy based on reason. How does a teacher "ask if honesty is more important than kindness in a particular situation" while at the same time declaring his own answer and at the same time encourage inquiry? As to the problem whether honesty and kindness are virtues which make up the framework within which moral thinking can take place, those who can raise such a problem need to seek an answer; but it isn't an issue we have found raised so far, for the normal assumption seems to be that they do.

References

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- (2) Stenhouse, Lawrence, Culture and Education, London: Nelson, 1967
- (3) Hyland, John T. 'Teaching and Legitimate Influence in Moral Education' above, p. 3
- (4) Vico, Scienza Nuova 1925 para 137, translated, Bergin and Fisch, Cornell, 1968
- (5) Gramsci, Antonio, Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971, p. 32
- (6) Hyland, John T. above, p. 12