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THE TEACHING OF CONTROVERSIAL MATERIAL AND THE RIGHTS OF
CHILDREN

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The Humanities Curriculum Project, of which I was director, was an English project sponsored by the quasi-governmental Schools Council and a private foundation, the Nuffield Foundation.¹ It ran from 1967 to 1972 and since then has provided continuing support to schools and teachers on a smaller scale. In 1979 its work will be related to problems in teaching through discussion in a new publication, Learning to Teach Through Discussion.²

The title of the project is somewhat cryptic. The term, humanities, was interpreted as a 'human issues' programme, human issues being defined as issues of enduring concern to mankind: issues such as war and peace, relations between the sexes, the family, poverty, for example. Such issues are, the project observed, controversial in an empirical sense. People do as a matter of fact disagree about them and feel keenly about their own views.³ A democracy on the British pattern assumes or, if necessary, legislates the rights of individuals to hold their own conscientious views on such matters. Limits may be laid down in some cases, but the basic assumption is that a pluralist society is the democratic ideal: Hence, we have many political parties and churches, and so forth.

Teaching in controversial areas in schools therefore raises the problem of the rights of children as minors to hold and to express their own views. In practice, these rights are complexly connected with the rights of parents to have their views respected by the

schools. Both those who believe that children should be accorded the right of self determination on value issues and those who believe that parents should have the right to determine the values taught to their children agree that teachers should not use their position of authority in the classroom to promote their own values as opposed to those of the child or the home. In this paper we are concerned with the implications of controversiality for the rights of children. And since our project worked with the age group 14 to 16, I shall argue the case in terms of that age group and then raise the issues of its application to younger and older groups.

The basic position I wish to argue is: in teaching controversial issues teachers should teach to the criterion of neutrality: i.e., aspire in relation to the controversial issues to be neutral as they teach. ~~And this, I propose, involves them in taking the role of a~~ neutral chairman of classroom discussions.

Before I pursue my argument it is as well that I meet some philosophical objections which have been raised.⁴ The position I am taking does not imply a relativist ethic. Indeed, a pluralism of tolerated values is better argued upon the basis of absolutist ethics or beliefs in conflict than on a relativist base. For example, the rights of a fundamentalist child in the face of a sophisticated relativist teacher imply for me that the teacher not oppose with his authority the child's position, but on the contrary assist the child to elaborate it in the face of objections. Such an elaboration may, of course, expose the weaknesses of a position or strengthen it: the object is not change of view or reinforcement of view, but that either of these should be a product of thinking the view through. The aspiration for neutral teaching in controversial areas rests on a belief, not in ethical relativism, but in the primacy of

conscience vis-a-vis the authority of the school.

The second objection I want to meet is that a deception is involved in a committed teacher 'pretending' to be neutral. This misconception seems to me to rest on an authoritarian tradition in schools whereby teachers do not feel obliged to explain to children what they are doing. The teacher is neutral qua teacher precisely because the fact that he is committed as a person disposes him to respect the commitments of the children. Like the editors of (some?) philosophical journals he is concerned rather to support contributors' search for truth than to impose his own truth upon them. Empirically it is difficult, but essential, to explain this to children, who can say 'He's a Communist (or a Catholic) but he's a good chairman'.

The third and final objection I wish to meet is the objection that no one can in fact be neutral as a chairman. It is interesting that this should create such difficulty: there are, of course, no perfect performances. What is important are the criteria for critique of performance, and that these criteria are taught to the children by the teacher. It is perhaps the apparent danger inherent in giving children access to the criteria by which to criticise one's teaching which is threatening here, but in practice children generally appear to be supportive in this situation.

The aspiration to be a neutral chairman of classroom discussions is founded on a belief in the primacy of conscience or reason over teacher authority in issues of ethics and value. Its implementation involves an explanation of this position to the children taught, and of inducting them into the criteria by which one's own performance can be criticised.

Having got to that point, however, we have not made our aspiration operational. We have a rather vague notion of classroom discussion unstrengthened by either access to information or principles of quality.

It is clear that the teacher cannot be the source of information for the discussion and at the same time maintain his neutrality: such information as can be neutrally transmitted does not suffice to inform a discussion. Hence access to information for the children must be documentary: verbal or visual. However, the documents contrast with textbooks, for a textbook is, as it were, endorsed by the school as a source of information. The documents must be regarded as evidence, not as instruction. This means that the discussion group must have access to varied resources of evidence for critical assessment and that the teacher must treat such evidence as problematic i.e. he must not in any way vouch for it or support the idea that it is to be accepted. In short, the children need to handle information more as a historian or an investigator would: they need to develop a critique.

This attitude towards evidence, and the critical skills and standards to support it, are not easily and immediately operationalized even among adults.⁵ They have to be taught, but they constitute a substantive educational value and not merely an instrumental pedagogic skill. That is to say, it is an aim of education to develop the capacity to handle evidence critically. It is not merely an ad hoc technique for learning.

In our project we published exemplary collections of evidence to support teachers in getting started, but in principle any evidence is admissible. The principle to keep in mind is that

evidence is admissible if it is relevant to the issue under discussion. Truth is not the criterion of admissibility: the evidence, once admitted, has to be 'tested for truth' by the children.

The convening of a group of children under a teacher as a neutral chairman to examine evidence on controversial human issues, when the pedagogy is pursued rigorously in terms of logical and psychological analysis, proves to demand a radical shift of perception and technique on the part of a teacher. He must learn to embody educational values in rules of procedure and in interventions from the chair which are neutral with respect to discussion issues but express commitment to educational values which, he is bound to assert by his actions are not controversial, at least within the context of the process founded on them. Such values may, for example, be: reasonableness (~~rationality tempered by a conception of its own limitations~~), aspiration towards truth, goodness and justice, respect for others, imaginativeness; and at a lower level willingness to listen, reflectiveness, recognition of the need for orderly procedures. These values are controversial educational values of course. We are concerned with confining the teaching within an educational value position, which may also be debated, but which is clearly defined and adopted - subject to modification in the light of reason - and excluding from the teaching a range of substantive value stances with respect to socially controversial content.

The principles of procedure which constitute the value stance of the school may be characterized as 'a logic of inquiry'. The assertion being made is that it is reasonable to demand in areas of controversial issues that the teacher aspire to found his teaching on these values and to avoid teaching a substantive position on the human values at issue in the learning group. Of course, this is a

substantive value position regarding education. In principle, this itself can be subjected to critical scrutiny by the group, but alternative group procedures might have to be adopted, just as it is necessary to change procedures when shifting from science to philosophy of science.

Principles for handling information and for pursuing an inquiry do not constitute of themselves a sufficient basis for an educational enterprise. There must be a critical basis for the assessment of achievement. This could be an assessment of skills of information handling and inquiry, but we took the view that education was concerned with achievements less instrumental than this. Accordingly, we suggested the following teaching aim: 'to develop an understanding of social situations and human acts and of the controversial value issues which they raise'.⁶ This aim needs elucidation.

First, let me make it plain that in general I regard it as a distinction between instruction and education that the aims of instruction can be analysed into behavioural objectives and those of education can not. The outcomes of education are performances judged more or less good by criteria: the performances cannot be specified: the criteria only can, at least, in principle. The overall aim of education is to enable its recipients to create unpredictable achievements which can lay claim to excellence: to make relatively successful essays.

In this context, an aim proposed within a specific research project such as ours should serve to highlight the issues which need to be on the agenda of the teacher.

Understanding was chosen as an aim because it has two opposites: not understanding and misunderstanding. The first is related to the individual's experience of closure and satisfaction; in respect of it the aim is to place the individual child in the position of making a claim -- however provisional -- to understand. (Many children do not often experience in school the subjective experience of such a claim to understand). The second opposite, misunderstanding, implies the existence of tests for truth in respect to claims of understanding. The aim, then, is to develop in children the experience of understanding, the capacity to formulate it (make a claim) and the perception that behind this is a second-order problem of understanding how an understanding can be tested for truth.

The substantive areas towards which the development of understanding is directed in the statement of aim are intended to characterize in a short formulation the recurrent (situations) and the unique (acts). The problematics behind this include the distinction of the contribution of the humanities on the one hand and the human sciences on the other to the understanding of human issues.

Finally, 'the controversial value issues which they raise' implies that within the project the value issues will be contextualized in a study of 'social situations and human acts'. Whereas in much conventional teaching of ethics (for example) principles or propositions are discussed at a considerable degree of abstraction from real situations and acts, this is not so in the present case.

In this context, we are not teaching ethics and politics and aesthetics systematically. Rather we are concerned to help people to see value issues as integrated with psychological insight and sociological analysis and imaginative grasp in our understanding of the helicopter pilot judging whether or not to order the bombing of a village or the couple attempting to focus their relationship and perceive it clearly.

So much for the theoretical position. The important feature of the Humanities Project was that it was put to the test of practice. We found that it was clearly possible for teachers to learn to work as neutral chairmen, and that the role contained a considerable variation in style. On the other hand, the learning involved was too threatening for many teachers, who were asked in part of their teaching to turn their back on the resources of their established skills and experience and adopt a style of teaching unfamiliar to them, voluntarily taking on, as our evaluator, MacDonald, said, 'the burden of incompetence'.

Schools, too often felt threatened by the new style which sometimes appeared to imply that teachers using instructional methods should be able to support their instruction with evidence, and more threateningly still that the use of authority in the school should be capable of rational justification. These problems were anticipated in the Schools Council Working Paper no. 2 from which the Project set out.

But adult procedures in the classrooms....will not be successful if a different kind of relationship between teacher and pupil obtains in the corridor or in extra-curricular activity. If the teacher emphasises, in the classroom, his common humanity with the pupils, and his common uncertainty in the face of many problems, the pupils will not take kindly to being demoted to the status of children in other relationships within the same institution. Indeed, they may write off the classroom relationship as a 'soft-sell'.⁷

In short, although it was possible to train teachers for the neutral role and indeed the training procedures were unusually effective, nevertheless there were psychological and social barriers to its implementation facing even those who were initially attracted to the idea. The experiences of some individual teachers have been reported in a book.⁸

The present situation is that there are many teachers involved in neutral teaching both of controversial issues and now of some other subjects where they have found it an effective pedagogy, but it remains a minority tradition and still a controversial one.

Most important in this paper are the reactions of children and the effects on them.

Certainly their reactions are mixed. Just as some students prefer small-group discussions in higher education while others prefer lectures, 14-16 year olds are divided. On the whole the work seems to be more consistently favoured than university seminars, probably because the techniques of chairmanship which help to ensure that there is a wide participation in the group are fairly well developed.

However, it is very difficult to get the children started, because the situation is unfamiliar to them. We now believe that early exposure to video-tapes of other children working successfully in this way is a good way of helping the group.

The edited version of the newsletters which were produced by the evaluation team during the Project condenses pupils' comments to 28 pages. The balance is favourable to the procedure, though there is also evidence of some misunderstanding and of difficulties. There is, of course, ample evidence of the kind which puts flesh on the theoretical position I have outlined.

Question: Do you understand why he says, why he has to be neutral?

Pupil: Well, I think because we've always been used to doing what the teacher says, and if he's going to give his point of view, we're going to follow it.....

.....

Giving you responsibility, this is a shock. Speaking your own words in class and speaking to each other and not to the teacher, this is a shock.

.....

I think one of the things teachers must do is to make us more aware of the importance of the decisions we make, and the importance of us making our minds up on these various issues. I think this is the big fault in the teachers. The pupils think it's got nothing to do with them what they're talking about, but if they don't get down to these things, then there's no hope for anything. We've got to learn to talk to people, to communicate, to talk to people who we disagree with, not just to our friends, and to find solutions to the problems.

.....

Mr.....keeps out of it. He just listens. He starts us off and if we stop or if we're going off the point, he puts us back on it. He says that he's not allowed to answer any questions. But he asks questions.

And there is evidence not only of pupils' experiencing difficulty

in changing their learning style, but also of teachers' insensitivity to this difficulty.

You can't expect miracles. It's like going in and teaching the two-times table, you can't expect them to learn right away. You've got to get used to it first. The teacher should have known that.

.....

You suddenly get dumped in the deep-end. Suddenly they say they're going to teach us as adults, after teaching us as babies for years.⁹

~~At what point should one stop teaching children as babies and begin teaching them as adults? Quite simply we do not know.~~

However, we can say that in working with MAN: A course of study¹⁰ with 10 and 11 year olds teachers have adopted a style close to that of neutral chairman as the appropriate role for inquiry-based work, and have done so successfully, in one case after exploring with the children the concept of a 'hypothesis'.¹¹ Certainly, 14 to 16 year olds finding difficulty with the method tend to say they should have been given experience of it earlier.

At later ages the appropriateness of the approach is seen in the last quotation from a child above: it is a kind of adult education.

The rights of children perhaps mean that we should examine every case where we deprive them of the respect we would show to our equals to make sure that our behavior really reflects their needs and not simply ours. Indeed, failure to acknowledge such

rights may be disadvantageous to conventional achievement. There is interesting evidence from the measurement programme which suggests that the Humanities Project procedure may have striking impact on the improvement of reading attainment.

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NOTES:

1. See, for accounts of the Project: Stenhouse, L.A. 'The Humanities Project: the Rationale' and MacDonald, B. 'The Evaluation of the Humanities Curriculum Project: a Holistic Approach', Theory into Practice 10,3, June 1971, 154-162 and 163-67; 'The Humanities Curriculum Project' in Butcher, H.J. and Pont, H.B. (Eds) Educational Research in Britain No. 3 London: University of London Press, 1973 149-67. A full bibliography of the Humanities Project is available from the Secretary, Humanities Curriculum Project, Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia, University Village, Norwich NR4 7TJ, England.
2. Book and audiotape published by and available from: CARE, University of East Anglia, University Village, Norwich NR4 7TJ Price £4.00 plus postage.
3. For this empirical definition of controversiality, see Fraser, Dorothy M. Deciding What to Teach. Project on the Instructional Program of the Public Schools. Washington DC: National Education Association, 1963.
4. See, for example, Progress and Problems in Moral Education edited by Monica J. Taylor. Windsor, Berks. N.F.E.R. Publishing Co. 1975.
5. See Fordham, P. 'The Humanities Curriculum Project in an adult class' Studies in Adult Education (National Institute of Adult Education) 6,1, 1974.
6. The Humanities Project: an Introduction London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1970 p.1
7. Raising the School Leaving Age. Schools Council Working Paper no. 2 Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1965, p.22
8. Elliott, J. and MacDonald, B. (Eds) People in Classrooms Occasional Publication No. 2, CARE, University of East Anglia, University Village, Norwich, NR4 7TJ (Price £2.00 plus postage)
9. All quotations from: Hamingson, D. (Editor) Towards Judgement: the publications of the Evaluation Unit of the Humanities Curriculum Project 1970-72. Occasional Publication No. 1. CARE, University of East Anglia, University Village, Norwich NR4 7TJ.
10. MAN: A course of study is an American social science curriculum associated with Jerome Bruner, developed under his advice by the Educational Development Centre, Cambridge, Mas., and distributed by Curriculum Development Associates, 1211 Connecticut Avenue, Suite 414, Washington DC, 20036 U.S.A
11. The teaching referred to is that of Mrs. M.Gracie, West Moors Middle School, Heathfields Way, West Moors, Wimborne, Dorset, England. See MAN NEWSLETTER No. 2 Winter 1977 (from CARE University of East Anglia, University Village, Norwich NR4 7TJ (p.14)