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9 The Humanities Curriculum Project[1]

Basic information

Sponsors Schools Council and Nuffield Foundation.

Grant £234,328 (£174,328 from the Schools Council and £60,000 from the Nuffield Foundation. Of this, £68,000 went to evaluation).

Location Philippa Fawcett College of Education, ILEA, then from 1970 at the University of East Anglia.

Period of development 1967–72.

Designated pupils 14–16 average and below average who did not experience special reading difficulties.

Organiser Lawrence Stenhouse, previously principal lecturer in education at Jordanhill College of Education, Glasgow.

Project team Project director, with initially four and later six team members, plus a schools officer, film research officer (based in the British Film Institute) and research librarian. In addition, from 1968 an evaluation officer, later with three assistants.

Trials Conducted in academic years 1968–70 in 32 schools from 29 (pre-Radcliffe–Maud) local authorities in England and Wales, plus 4 approved schools.

Materials From 1970 onwards Heinemann Educational Books published eight packs of thematic materials for pupils, each pack including general teacher's handbooks to the project and teacher's handbooks specific to the packs. The packs are:

1. *War and Society*
2. *Education*
3. *Relations between the Sexes*
4. *The Family*
5. *Poverty*
6. *People and Work*
7. *Living in Cities*
8. *Law and Order*

In addition materials were prepared on *Race* but these were not published. Each pack of materials contains a resource bank of texts, pictures and sound tapes sufficient to

service a group of twenty pupils. The project also published many documents on project design, teacher preparation, dissemination and evaluation. Videotapes were also made available.

Cost Each pack of materials costs £48 to purchase. It is important to budget for fairly frequent film-hire and for pupils to travel on out-of-school enquiries. It has been suggested that the provision of student groups of not more than 20 is a precondition for success and this may be regarded as a budgeting item.

Evaluation Funded by the Schools Council; was conducted from 1968–72, directed by Barry MacDonald and published from 1975 onwards.

Humanities curriculum project

The Humanities Curriculum Project, sponsored by the Schools Council and the Nuffield Foundation, was set up in September 1967 to extend the range of choice open to teachers working in the humanities with adolescents of average and below average ability by offering them teaching materials and research support. The aims of humanities teaching had been outlined in 1965 in Schools Council Working Paper 2 *Raising the School Leaving Age* and the project's director, Lawrence Stenhouse, has referred to this as the point of departure for the project:

> 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.
>
> (Schools Council 1965, para. 60)

The Working Paper continued by hinting at two difficulties in implementing such a programme:

> All of this may seem to some teachers like a programme for people who have both mental ability and maturity beyond the reach of most who will leave at the age of sixteen. The Council, however, thinks it is important not to assume that this is so, but rather to probe by experiment in the classroom how far ordinary pupils can be taken.
>
> (Schools Council 1965, para. 61)

And later:

> But adult procedures in the classroom . . . 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 his 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'.
>
> (Para. 97)

These remarks were important determinants of the project and may be regarded as part of its 'prehistory'. By emphasising the common humanity of

teacher and pupil, and by inviting teachers to treat the school leaver as a young adult, they challenged the assumption of the Newsom Report (CACE 1963) that the leaver was a special case. Other important preconditions of the project are to be found in the writings (particularly his *Culture and Education*, 1967) of Lawrence Stenhouse. A propensity for academic rigour and an affinity with the Scottish encyclopedic tradition almost anticipate one of his later remarks to the effect that experience with the project tends to suggest that we have seriously underestimated large numbers of our adolescents.

When the project director was appointed to the project, he told his sponsors in the Schools Council and the Nuffield Foundation that he expected the right to fail, implying by this the right to experiment boldly. Although they were taken aback somewhat, they certainly accorded the project a great deal of freedom. The project itself preferred curriculum work that was speculative rather than evangelical, and cumulative rather than *ad hoc*. On the other hand, public opinion throughout would seem to have exerted continual pressure in the direction of advocacy of the project's position. The team wished to derive hypotheses from case-study in an effort to build theory. The notion of action research was under frequent threat from outside. Eventually, however, with quite vigorous independence the procedure adopted was presented in the following terms:

1. Select a cogent general educational policy statement in the curricular field in question.
2. By relating its logical implications to the realities of the classroom, produce the outline of a teaching strategy consistent with the aim which is feasible in practice.
3. Attempt to develop the strategy, testing its logical consistency in discussion and its feasibility in experimental schools.
4. Make case studies of experimental schools to generate hypotheses regarding the problems and effects to be expected in implementing the curriculum in a wider range of schools.
5. Use this case study experience to design dissemination procedures which will attempt to meet the anticipated problems.
6. Monitor the effects in dissemination both by case study and by measurement.

In so far as the project had a general (as opposed to a teaching) aim, it was the embodiment of this view of curriculum research founded on substantive premises in the curricular field (see below). Interestingly enough, although this aim concerns itself with research and experiment, it has implications for reform and development.

The project team also attempted to formulate a statement of teaching aims which would summarise the insights of the team into the logic of the teaching. The formulation changed and developed. And the central team itself did not

have a blanket consensus. The aim finally adopted for the *The Humanities Project: an Introduction* (1970) was: 'to develop an understanding of social situations and human acts and of the controversial value issues which they raise.' It was intended that this should imply an application of the perspectives of social science, history, the arts and religious thinking to the understanding of human issues. Such understanding should take account of the need to attempt objectivity on the one hand and to tap imaginative sympathy on the other. And it was believed that the crucial problem in handling human issues was controversiality.

The Project also stated five major premises:

1. that controversial issues should be handled in the classroom with adolescents;
2. that the teacher should accept the need to submit his teaching in controversial areas to the criterion of neutrality at this stage of education, i.e., that he should regard it as part of his responsibility not to promote his own view;
3. that the mode of inquiry in controversial areas should have discussion rather than instruction, as its core;
4. that the discussion should protect divergence of view among participants, rather than attempt to achieve consensus;
5. that the teacher as chairman of the discussion should have responsibility for quality and standards in learning.

(*The Humanities Project: An Introduction*, 1970, 1)

The overall task of the project was to discover a teaching strategy which would implement these premises in the classroom, to report this strategy and to support teachers who wished to develop it with training and, if necessary, with materials.

The experimental framework or design adopted by the project necessitated the involvement of teachers as experimental colleagues from whom the central team would be able to learn. The 32 experimental schools participating in 1968–69 and 1969–70 were seen as development schools rather than as trial schools, since, at that stage, the project's concern was with producing a prototype rather than with generalising or with statistical sampling.

In 1968 there were induction conferences for the experimental schools who were introduced to the project's aim and premises, informed of possible problems and chaired in discussions by central team members who had carefully considered the role of teacher as chairman. The central team thought that the inquiry into human issues would involve research on the part of pupils, written work, visits, improvised drama, art work, and so on. The inquiry would deal with controversial issues, would be undertaken by young adults approaching independence, would involve teacher neutrality and would necessitate the provision of materials. The experimental schools were asked to test and develop hypotheses about teaching method and to test, and perhaps to add to, the materials offered by the central team.

Experimental materials were provided by the project for the schools in 1968–70. Basing their approach on the notion of areas of inquiry (see Schools Council Working Paper 11 *Society and the young school leaver*), the project team

had assembled packs of material on eight main themes – education, war and society, relationships between the sexes, the family, people and work, living in cities, poverty and law and order. These themes contained issues which would divide society, especially a pluralistic society, and were thus controversial. The themes were also adult in content and, in some respects, interrelating. From very large initial collections the editor of each pack pared down the collections in the light of the experimental schools' suggestions to about 250 items – printed, pictorial, and audio-taped. In each collection there was also a list of recommended films. These basic resource collections were eventually published by Heinemann Educational Books from 1970 onwards. The materials collected on a ninth theme, race relations, were not published at that time but formed the basis for a further continuing project. Each pack contains 20 copies of each item of so-called paper evidence, plus two teacher's kits containing a general handbook to the project, a handbook specific to the theme, a sound tape and a single copy of the students' printed items.

The most widely available piece of teacher's material produced by the project is, of course, *The Humanities Project: An Introduction.* In addition to exploring the project's aim and five major premises, it offers advice gleaned from the experimental schools on the materials, the nature of group discussion and the climate of groups. Furthermore, it identifies the responsibilities of the chairman by suggesting that he ought to:

1. set a context favourable to discussion;
2. encourage group identity and group loyalty;
3. foster in the group a commitment to the inquiry;
4. ensure a clear articulation of the subject under discussion;
5. keep under scrutiny the relevance of the contributions to the discussion;
6. protect divergence of view;
7. introduce appropriate evidence;
8. maintain continuity between discussions;
9. see that the rules of discussion which have been accepted are observed;
10. mediate critical standards which support work of quality in the group;
11. ensure that an inquiry is rounded off in a way which organises the understanding gained.

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The handbook provides advice on how to get discussion going and also suggests reasons for which a chairman would introduce new materials or people:

1. to enable the discussion to progress along lines being developed by the group or to provide a new stimulus when discussion flags or goes round in circles;
2. to represent a view which the group has not considered or to document a minority viewpoint not adequately represented in the group;
3. to challenge consensus or complacency;
4. to sharpen the definition of a view by asking its proponents to face critical evidence;
5. to offer concepts which would clearly be helpful to the group.

(23)

Furthermore, the handbook lists the main types of useful contribution made by chairmen to the discussions:

1. asking questions or posing problems in relation to resources;
2. clarifying or asking a member to clarify what has been said as a basis for discussion;
3. summarising the main trends in the discussion;
4. keeping the discussion relevant and progressive;
5. helping the group to use and build on each other's ideas;
6. helping the group to raise and define issues for discussion and to decide on priorities;
7. by questioning, providing intellectual stimulus and encouraging self-criticism.

(25)

One very important result of the experience of the development schools is the 'Self-Training Procedure for Teachers' included in the handbook, with an important checklist of points to bear in mind when playing back and analysing tapes of discussions. The handbook also contains notes on activities other than discussion, assessment, notes for planners and annotated transcripts of audio-taped classroom discussions in extract.

The publishers of the materials, Heinemann Educational Books, seem to have worked in fair harmony with the central project team and were not, by testimony of the director, over-prescriptive about design. During the dissemination phase, however, many teachers were critical of the quality of the print in the students' materials and of the publishers' policy not to market individual items to replace losses.

Naturally enough, a project that was acutely aware of its procedures published many of its own documents informally and formally. Some of them are reports on individual experience, others are advice and recommendations to organisers, others again are the results of evaluation. An extended list is to be found at the end of this account, together with a bibliography of other writings about the project.

The evaluation unit of the Humanities Project differed distinctly in role from those of many other projects. In the first place, the evaluation of teaching materials was in this project taken to be part of the task of the development team. Secondly, the project offered the evaluator no behavioural objectives. It was expected that the greater part of the evaluator's work would be in case-studying schools and, indeed, the title under which Barry MacDonald was appointed was Schools' Study Officer. In a 'non-objectives' approach there was no ready-made niche for the evaluator and this posed problems to the unit. After several shifts of emphasis the evaluation team eventually defined its task thus:

1. To ascertain the effects of the project, document the circumstances in which they occur, and present this information in a form which will help educational decision-makers to evaluate the likely consequences of adopting the programme.
2. To describe the present situation and operations of the schools we study so that decision-makers can understand more fully what it is they are trying to change.
3. To describe the work of the project team in terms which will help the sponsors and planners of such ventures to weigh the value of this form of investment, and to

determine more precisely the framework of support, guidance and control which are appropriate.

4. To make a contribution to evaluation theory by articulating our problems clearly, recording our experience and, perhaps most importantly, by publishing our errors.
5. To contribute to the understanding of the problems of curriculum innovation generally.

(Stenhouse 1973, 165–66)

Barry MacDonald himself has said that 'when curriculum development is becoming increasingly the concern of a number of new and relatively inexperienced agencies, there is a need for those involved in the field to contribute what they can towards an understanding of the problems of change' (Stenhouse 1973, 166).

One of the problems for the evaluation team in this project was that identifying the task took such a long time that delivery of findings tended to be slow. It is arguable that earlier publication of some of the work could have had an important effect on some high-level decisions.

The Humanities Curriculum Project had a consultative committee that was both influential and bold in its decisions: it tended to ensure that discussion was thorough and subsequent support strong. Its members included representatives from the local education authority administration, the Schools Council, the University of London, HMI, the teaching profession and the central project team.

Dissemination had not been built into the project's experimental design but had begun to be considered by January 1969. In order to avoid anything as haphazard as 'diffusion' the team decided to organise dissemination through a network of understanding people who would act as points of reference in their areas of the country. Initial communication via open days was followed by training via central courses and later by support via local associations of teachers. The responsible task of leaving something by way of after-care placed immensely heavy staffing burdens on the central team who yet recognised the importance of what they were doing. Some eventual conclusions drawn from the experience of dissemination, as expressed by Jean Rudduck, who was responsible for organising this aspect of the project, are that 'innovation is difficult to accomplish, that there can be no effective curriculum development without teacher development and that dissemination, if it is to breed a continuing experimental attitude, must depend on education rather than on training' (Rudduck 1973).

The project caused considerable hostility. Critics in the main attacked the notion of neutrality often without understanding the reasons for its introduction: i.e. the emphasis on student learning, the nature of divergent society, the dangers of indoctrination and of polarised discussion. Particularly affronted were inspirational teachers with wisdom to transmit and those generally opposed to change of any kind, especially in the traditional roles of student and teacher. Others, not understanding the project's definition of evidence as proof of the existence of a point of view, accused the collections of materials of many

shortcomings, some of which had to do with 'truth'. It was also claimed that the materials were too difficult from the point of view of reading level.

To these few and the many other criticisms the project's main reaction was that of fostering public debate so that at least the issues could be better understood after full discussion, for example in the press. In the main, teachers and press have given credit to the team for this openness that insists that it is the project's job mainly to ensure that a fully informed discussion takes place. Pupils, be it noted, have for the most part approved of the project, albeit for widely differing reasons.

It is difficult to assess the present situation of the project. It may be that it is in the process of disappearing as such, but that it has given impetus in many areas to an investigation into learning theory and to teacher awareness. That may have been its main effect.

LAWRENCE STENHOUSE

The Humanities Curriculum Project: A Response

A brief account inevitably tidies, making the process of curriculum research and development sound less excitingly speculative, more efficient, than it is. The logical structure of the project unfolded, often in response to contingencies of action or challenges to theory.

The major achievement of the project was the exploration of the role of neutral chairman which embodies important strategies appropriate to all discovery and inquiry teaching. In this role the teacher maintains his position in authority but moderates his claim to being *an* authority by insisting that students do not rely on him as an arbiter of truth. This expresses a concern that schools should be about knowledge as understanding, not merely inert facts, and that pupils should not be asked to acquire competences without enhancing their powers. I believe that interest in this aspect of the project's work is at present increasing, and that it will endure.

The principle of neutral teaching is apparently subject to misunderstanding. The most common misunderstandings are these:

1. People tend to think that the teacher is being asked to represent himself to pupils as a neutral person whereas he is assuming the role of a neutral chairman because he is a committed person who wishes to make room for others to develop their commitment;
2. It is apparently assumed that the project made the elementary error of believing that a chairman could be perfectly neutral, whereas, of course, there are no perfect performances and neutral chairmanship represents a set of criteria for the judgement of teaching;
3. Teachers often neglect to explain and negotiate their role as neutral chairman with the students, whereas it is clear that they too should be in possession of the criteria.

The aspect of the project which most worries me now is the problem of reading levels. The project was attempting to produce the conditions which would induce students to struggle with reading matter of serious content – it

was, as Aston hints, a throwback to the tradition of the nineteenth-century encyclopaedic reader and a protest against the devaluing of content in pursuit of motivation. We have evidence that teachers persistent in the face of initial discouragement can shift from the pattern 'we read, we understand, we discuss', to the alternative 'we read, we do not understand, that's why we discuss'; and that when they do so, the project yields marked improvement in reading performance. But it is difficult to persist in the face of discouragement. It would be ironic if the back-to-basics movement led to HCP! For back-to-basics is most often a call for a return to competence *without autonomy*.

I still believe that any pupil who cannot read the kinds of evidence provided in HCP by the time he leaves school is disadvantaged.

Note

1. A general introduction to this project in action appears on pages 7–12 of Schools' Council Working Paper 56, *Curriculum Innovation in Practice*.