The Humanities Curriculum Project:
The Rationale

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At present, the age of compulsory school attendance in England is five to fifteen. Beginning in 1972, students will be required to remain in school until they are sixteen. The project in which I have been engaged is part of the research and development program mounted in preparation for this extension of schooling. The Humanities Curriculum Project has been exploring the problems of teaching in the area of controversial issues with students aged fourteen to sixteen. We have produced teaching materials and experimented with methods. Although the pattern of curriculum and teaching which has emerged is appropriate to a wide range of ages and abilities, we have concentrated our attention on the needs of students who are expected to leave school as early as they possibly can. We have therefore had to reckon with low motivation and concomitant low school achievement.

In her book, *Deciding What to Teach*, Dorothy Fraser offers a definition of a controversial issue which we took as a starting point for our thinking.

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 suffici-

ent 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.[1]

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

Britishers and Americans do not need to remind one another that in modern pluralist democracies controversial issues abound. Even where there is a widespread consensus of principle, there is disagreement in the interpretation of principles in practice. Most will think war highly undesirable; but disagreement will flare as soon as we discuss particular wars. Ought the British to have gone into Suez? Should America be in Vietnam? What are rights and wrongs of the Arab-Israeli conflict? This is the front line of values: where principles meet practice.

[1] Dorothy Fraser, *Deciding What to Teach* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1963).

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The Humanities Curriculum Project explored the problems of teaching in controversial areas by adopting nine themes for study and experimental development: war, education, the family, relations between the sexes, people and work, poverty, living in cities, law and order, and race relations.

In considering the aim of teaching, we started from a working paper on the raising of the school leaving age, which had been produced by one of our sponsoring bodies, the Schools Council.

> 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 roughhewn nature of many of our institutions, and some rational thought about them.

Simplifying this, we adopted as a statement of aim: "to develop an understanding of human acts, of social situations and of the problems of value which arise from them."

For various reasons, we decided not to attempt to translate our aim into a specification couched in terms of behavioral objectives. The problems of experimental design which prompted that decision are not relevant here, but it may be worth noting that there is little in the literature of research about the nature of complex understanding and about its development.

To abandon the support of behavioral objectives is to take on the task of finding some other means of translating aim into practice. We attempted to analyze the implications of our aim by deriving from it a specification of use of materials and a teaching strategy consistent with the pursuit of the aim. In other words we concentrated on logical consistency between classroom process and aim, rather than between predetermined terminal behaviors and aim.

Given that one is working in the area of controversial issues, and that one wishes to handle them in groups and not through individual study, there appear to be three possible strategies the school can employ.

One might argue that the school should attempt to transmit an agreed position adopted as a matter of policy. This fails in practice 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 at policy level, 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 students. 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 to promote his own views. In the face of such criticism, the profession would be committed to defending a 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 to many at first view. In theory it might be possible to get around the difficulty by insuring that teachers whose opinions were relatively heterodox were not given appointments. Questions about a teacher's political, religious and moral beliefs and practices would then be appropriate during interviews for teaching posts. 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 devise a method of teaching which should make it possible for the teacher, if he is willing to train himself, to protect the

pupils from his own bias while advancing their understanding. This involves the teacher in a procedural neutrality which could be the basis of a professional ethic for dealing with controversy in the classroom.

It must be recognized that the position taken by the project at this point 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 in answering the question, what is worthwhile and therefore worth teaching?

Our decision here was significant for motivation. There are those who argue, at least partly on motivational grounds, first that the curriculum should grow out of the interest of the student and second that it should be founded in the student's own experience. We made educational decisions with regard to the subject matter in which we would attempt to interest the student, and we set out in many cases to extend experience in a very direct way, for example, in the area of war.

When a school principal claimed that his fifteen-year-old students were not interested in relations between the sexes, we did not attempt to justify our inclusion of this topic by assuring him that they were. Rather we claimed that they ought to be, and that it was his job to try to interest them in any topic as important as that one.

We have also made value decisions at another level. We have asserted that procedures and materials must be justifiable in terms of certain values fundamental to education. There must be a preference for rational rather than irrational procedures, for sensitivity rather than insensitivity, for imaginativeness rather than unimaginativeness. Education will always be concerned with examining criteria and establishing standards. The attitude of teachers to pupils has to involve respect for persons and consideration of their welfare.

Finally, even in the area of substantive controversial issues in which we ask the teacher to accept the criterion of neutrality, we are asserting the democratic values that call for open debate and dialog 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 controversial issues should be taught?

On the basis of the considerations outlined above, the project team felt that it must attempt to develop 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 on controversial issues.

3. The teaching strategy must maintain the procedural authority of the teacher in the classroom, but should contain it within rules which can be justified in terms of the need for discipline and rigor 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 indoctrinate 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. On sensitive issues, thought must be given to preserving privacy and protecting students; e.g., illegitimate children, children from broken homes and children of prostitutes should be kept 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 toward opinions or premature commitments which harden into prejudice. Nor should one see particular virtue in a change of view.

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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 the pupil changes his point of view is not significant for the attainment of understanding.

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 the issues which form the agenda of the group, but he should accept responsibility for the rigor and quality of the work. Accordingly, the teacher is seen as a neutral and relatively recessive chairman, though not a passive one, since it would be his job to develop quality in the 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 inquiry fed by information. But it is almost impossible for the teacher to be a source of any but the most rudimentary information in a discussion group without breaching his neutrality and taking a dominant role. Therefore the group's best means of access to information is through the consideration of evidence.

It is important to be clear as to what is meant by evidence in this context. The group needs sources of stimulus and information which place before it facts, insights into other 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 the group to evaluate and interpret each piece of evidence.

It is a faulty 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 so have underwritten his decision as to allow him to escape responsibility for judgment. This is what is meant by "the buck stops here." Evi-

dence 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 becomes evidence when it is used effectively to explore a problem.

The discussion of issues by a group in the light of evidence should generate research by both pupils and teachers as they find further 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 central development team decided therefore that it should attempt to produce rich, diverse and, as far as possible, balanced collections of evidence as foundation collections for school documentation centers. These collections could stand in relation to the teacher's and the 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 biographies, memoirs and historical works, readings in social science and journalism, advertisements, questionnaires, statistical tables, graphs, maps and plans, cartoons, photographs, slides of paintings, and audiotapes.

In preparing these materials we made two decisions which are highly relevant to the problem of curriculum development.

We assumed that materials cannot be written or adapted by the project team if they are to be regarded as evidence. This meant that they were collected or anthologized, and we were immediately faced with an acute problem in reading levels, taking into account the fact that we were dealing with early leavers. On the whole we adopted an ambitious policy, including a lot of material which would be at or even beyond the limits of our students' reading capacities. We hoped that students would be taken farther than they had been before in at least

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grappling with such materials. We did not court the desire to learn by simplifying reading levels.

Further, we reproduced our materials either in facsimile or in plain and easily read type. We avoided the enticements of decoration or illustration unless they occurred in the original, both because of the desire that our materials should be authentic and because an illustration is already an interpretation. I do not think that our materials are by any means unattractive, but we have not employed design in an attempt to make materials particularly attractive.

The structure of the collections is intended to insure that the teacher will have at his disposal at least one piece of material to cover any issue likely to arise within a given topic area. A subsidiary function of the structure is to help the teacher find his way around the collection in the same way as structure helps a reader use a library.

The structuring of the materials does not imply that they are intended to be used in a predetermined sequence. Rather they are to be made available to the group in response to points arising in the discussion. A teacher prepares for this kind of teaching by knowing his way around the collection—not by making up his mind in advance what pieces of evidence he will use in any given discussion session.

For the purposes of the experiment we offered a collection of about 200 items on each of the themes to 36 experimental or development schools in different parts of the country. These experimental schools have worked with us during sessions 1968–69 and 1969–70, both in testing the materials and in developing teaching methods.

The study of work in these schools, both through visiting and through monitoring audio-tapes of discussions, has enabled us to see the broad lines of a possible style or methodology appropriate to a discussion group which aims at understanding in a field where divergence is to be accepted. A lot more work is to be done, but in the introductory booklet to the project we have been able to offer to teachers a good deal of advice concerning discussion teaching. Since it does not seem right at this stage to attempt to harden off the definition of the chairman's role, much of the advice simply draws attention to the important variables in teacher performance, and invites the teacher to tape-record his own work, analyze it in respect to these variables, and consider the effect of the role pattern he is developing.

You will not be surprised to learn that in the classrooms of teachers working with us, students are sometimes undermotivated. It is true that some students say:

"Humanities is different. You just don't go in and sit down like the rest of them and write a lot of rubbish in your books and that, you know."

"I think you take more interest in it, because the questions we are asked are just the sort of questions we would ask for ourselves."

If the other teachers worked in this way "they would learn that we're not just boys who, you know, they tell us to do a thing, they put something on the board and you just write it down and take it for granted what they've written there you know is true. I think they could realize that we have opinions of our own and we have quite a good standard of opinions and we think for ourselves."

But others say:

"I'm opposite—I'd rather be sat in the class room writing down the work and listening to what the teacher says."

Problems of motivation interweave in this innovative pattern of teaching: what will emerge, I think, is a complex of problems and issues so inextricably interwoven that it is difficult to subsume them under a single theoretical approach.

Let us look at the role of the teacher as discussion chairman. Our model of neutral chairmanship has attracted a good deal of critical comment. Some of the reserve expressed has been on grounds of social, ethical or educational responsibility, but some has, I think, been related to motivation. People have argued that we are taking away from the classroom the teacher's personality and enthusiasm. Most of our teachers are used to seeing their own charisma and enthusiasm as a major, perhops even as the prime, element in motivation in the classroom.

Of course, it can be, but few teachers have this charismatic quality. Our model of teaching

calls for a different teacher role. If a teacher explains carefully to a group the task they are expected to take on, explains that he will support them within limits, and defines his neutral position and the grounds of his neutrality, the effect can be to induce the group to accept independent responsibility for the learning task. It is not inevitable—many variables are involved—and it takes time, and often a struggle with the students, before they will accept the redefinition of the situation; but this is a viable model from the point of view of motivation.

Of course, the teacher must live up to his definition of the situation, and this is not easy when his new role cuts across habits that come from instructional or charismatic teaching. Few teachers appreciate the extreme subtlety and strength of their authority position in the 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 as a working group and as individuals. 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 behavior in order to understand what he has in mind than with interpreting the issues before them in the light of evidence. The teacher needs to see that the students are rewarded by being carefully listened to and fed with questions which help them to articulate and express their own points of view.

The teacher himself needs to learn to listen. Some teachers, even in running a discussion, interrupt as many as 80 percent of all student statements. It often appears that they are trying to be helpful, to re-express more effectively what they think the student is trying to say, to main-

tain pace and movement in the discussion. But this runs counter to the pattern of motivation organic to the discussion situation, and is dysfunctional and frustrating to the student.

Many teachers have been trained to ask eliciting questions, to lead pupils toward the answer which is desired. In the discussion situation this is undesirable. Again, students focus on the teacher. They are readily aware that his questions are intended to lead them to some answer. It is all rather like the game of hide the thimble where the audience sings louder as the searcher gets nearer and more softly as he moves away again. The motivation is that of a puzzle, not that of a task.

Eliciting questions is particularly destructive when they are used to guide the interpretation of evidence, and it is in this context that the teacher finds them most difficult to avoid. He has read the piece or seen the picture before, and he has decided what they ought to see. Knowing this, the students lean on him as an interpreter who will intervene and mediate between the evidence and themselves.

Of course, one might say that the teacher does know better and ought to point to the conclusions to be drawn, or direct students to the correct interpretation of a poem or short story or photograph. But it seems that this is not easy in practice, for when one plays tapes of teachers using eliciting questions in this way, one finds that his own colleagues seldom agree with the interpretation they are trying to evoke from the students.

Moreover, neutrality is motivationally important. When we first explored a neutral role for the chairman, we did it on political grounds, but neutrality appears also to be pedagogically functional, in at least two ways.

Whenever a group is given a task to handle in discussion and it accepts the task and works on it, then the intrusion of the teacher on one side of the discussion short circuits and devalues the process. Students say: "You can only have a proper discussion if the teacher doesn't take sides." Only in that way can one make it genuinely their discussion. If they are working on a problem, keep out. This even applies to giving one's opinion when the discussion is over. Teachers have found that at the end of a session when they have yielded to the temptation to give their point of view, the students have

often come to regard the previous discussion as a competitive situation. Those who argued the point of view endorsed by the teacher are triumphant, the others crestfallen.

The second point about teacher neutrality is a negative one, though nonetheless important. There are indications that the teacher's assumption of a neutral and nonauthoritarian role weakens his tendency to transmit to his students his low expectation of their performance. Recent researches have suggested strongly that low teacher expectation is a major element in holding down the achievement of pupils of average ability, and there are some indications, as one might expect, that the power of teacher expectation is muted by his adoption of the role of chairman. One might hypothesize that when the teacher is neutral and recessive enough to wean a group of students from dependence on him and induce them to accept responsibility for achieving understanding, then the reading level of the group will be higher than that of any individual in it.

To sum up, and to generalize beyond our context of controversial issues: if the topic is suitable for teaching through discussion, then the taught group should take on a task. The teacher as chairman of the group should not intervene to advance a view or influence a conclusion, though he should offer open questions which ask for reflection and self-critical thinking on the part of the group, and he should help them toward information they require. This means that *he seeks to interpret motivation, not to organize it.* He tries to be aware of the currents of the desire to learn in the group and to know how to feed them: he is responsive, not directive.

In many teaching situations the teacher prestructures for motivation. In discussion situations he must also contribute to structure, but his task is to sharpen and form what is already immanent in the work of the group.

Of course this involves some understanding of group dynamics, or at least some sensitivity toward it. One must, for example, understand how voting splits a group, and learn to work instead toward negotiated consensus. One must be immediately aware when one's own responses grate across the grain of the group. And certainly, teachers' work often does suffer from such difficulties but often the problems are more

narrowly educational. They are connected with lack of clarity of aim or lack of mastery of subject matter.

I shall now consider some factors in promoting the desire to learn in discussion situations of the kind we have been exploring, dealing first with factors in the field of group dynamics and then with factors that are more clearly educational.

Prominent in the minds of most teachers is the problem of participation. Should one try to get every student to speak in discussion, and if so, how? Since the teacher's professed aim is understanding, there is no prima facie reason why we should value participation. The problem seems to be that most nonparticipant students wish to participate and are undermotivated if they do not, while some students do not want to participate, but want simply to listen, and are likely to become hostile if pressed to participate. It is easy to say that the teacher should encourage, but not press; but students have said that when the teacher encourages and is obviously pleased when nonparticipants come into discussion, he makes them self-conscious and puts them off.

The important point seems to be to prevent the discussion from being commandeered by a subgroup. Asking distributive questions, like "What do you other people think?"—inviting comments spread round the group—seems to be a helpful technique. But it looks as though the most important factor may be to slow down the pace of discussion in the group, aiming at a reflective discussion with pauses for thought and the examination of evidence. This allows slow reactors whose style is naturally reflective to get into the discussion. It may be that the kind of slow discussion which is least entertaining to the lay observer is the most highly motivated within the group. There is also some evidence that the pace of discussion can gradually quicken, once a reflective style has been established, without cutting people out.

The chairman can within limits control the pace of the discussion by the pace, hesitation and thoughtfulness of his own contributions. Also, he may ask people to think for a period before anyone comes in.

Closely related to this point, and fundamental to the style I have called reflective discussion, is the need to teach a group to accept

discussion as a way of cooperating rather than competing. It is important that a discussion aimed at understanding should not become a forum in which each person struggles to enlist support for his particular view. Competition motivates, but not toward the thoughtful understanding of other people's points of view.

Given the background of conventional classroom instruction, educational competition and habits of debating, and the assumption usually adopted by any group that it must try to achieve consensus, there is the danger of a group climate whose motivational dynamic runs counter to the aim of reflective understanding. The teacher needs to be clear about this aim of reflective understanding and its implications for the pattern of work in the group if he is to teach them to work toward it. This will be particularly difficult for him if the assumptions of the work are so unfamiliar that he cannot create a model in his mind, but must work out the problems as he goes in the classroom.

Two other problems of motivation are rooted in the content of discussion: the nature of controversiality and the nature of relevance.

Notionally, controversiality motivates. Dorothy Fraser (op. cit.) defines a controversial issue as one which arouses the citizenry. However, some of the teachers working in the experiment have claimed that the issues lack controversiality for the students. So far as we can gather from observation and tapes, this is most often due to the teacher's failure to see controversial issues, perhaps because he has a preconception as to what is the issue at stake. For example, if a teacher is discussing an anti-Vietnam demonstration and his students all side with the police rather than the demonstrators, he feels he is left without a controversial issue, whereas the issue clearly is: "What limitations do you wish to see on the power of the police? Could you lay down a code of conduct for police dealing with civil demonstrations? How would you react to breaches of that code?" In other words, the controversial question is how we control the power we create to keep the peace; but the teacher may fail to see this underlying issue because it is eclipsed by the issue foremost in his mind.

There is a need for the teacher to be familiar with a wide range of issues discussed in the literature of the subject he is exploring with the students, and to be sensitive to issues of importance which lie beneath superficial nodes of consensus in the group.

Relevance is a like problem. It occurs in two forms. Since the teacher is the curator of a large collection of evidence, he makes a judgment of relevance every time he introduces a piece of material; and since he has a responsibility to ask questions he must ask relevant ones. Often the teacher fails in his judgment of relevance in the eyes of most observers and pupils, apparently due to lack of knowledge of subject matter, and perhaps sometimes to lack of grasp of the principles of logical thinking.

There is an interesting tie up here between our observations and those of Richard Jones in his *Fantasy and Feeling in Education*. In reflecting on the observation of the use of Bruner's materials in the classroom he writes: "Relevance, then, is the key to availing the instructional process of emotional and imaginal issues." And he notes that "it has often been the disappointing case . . . that the more adept a teacher becomes at providing children with opportunities to express their inner lives, the more glaring may be her failures to establish relevant points of correspondence in the subject matter if her own knowledge of the subject matter is shallow."[2]

The loose ends begin to come together. American work in social studies with fifth graders throws up patterns discernible in an English controversial issues program for adolescents.

I think the underlying pattern is roughly this: The older academic tradition asked students to work without seeing the logic of their studies. Motivation was achieved through a system of extrinsic rewards and punishments embellished with the cosmetics of the teacher's personality and enthusiasm. The revolt of the progressives—saving Dewey, who was grossly misinterpreted—tended toward child-centeredness and intrinsic motivation, but neglected the systematic development of subject logic. Now authentic instructional materials produced by new curricular developments are challenging teachers to make a synthesis of the progressive tradition and the academic tradition.

In the developing situation it becomes clear that the difficulty teachers face is in having enough understanding of motivation and enough

[2] Richard Jones, *Fantasy and Feeling in Education* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 208.

grasp of the subject of instruction to recognize in flexible classroom situations those moves, bids and strategies on the part of the students which promise relevant motivation.

Of course, psychology is relevant to this problem as is research in the subject areas of the curriculum. But the most urgent need is for workers to face the problem of application by the close study and interpretation of the class-room. This means a good deal of pioneer exploratory work using tapes, videotapes or direct observation.

To help curriculum researchers, we need to face the problem: On what principles can curriculum materials, subject logic, student aspirations, group dynamics and teacher role be synthesized and harmonized to promote, rather than to frustrate, the desire to learn?

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