

MANCHESTER POLYTECHNIC FACULTY OF COMMUNITY STUDIES

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

B.ED. DEGREE - THE EDUCATION STUDIES COMPONENT

Invited comments by Barry MacDonald, University of East Anglia,
Centre for Applied Research in Education.

Context

In June 1976 the CNAA validated a new B.Ed. Degree in Manchester Polytechnic. The first student intake has now embarked on the course. The Education Studies component of the course structure departs from conventional B.Ed. courses in several interesting aspects, and the Council asked the Polytechnic to monitor its experience of the new approach. I was invited, as a supposedly disinterested outsider with some experience in the evaluation of curriculum innovation, to visit the Polytechnic and comment on the developing plans for the monitoring exercise.

As it happens, I would hesitate to claim disinterest. My experience includes three years in the educational theory department of a college of education, and I share with the Education Studies teaching team the view that the relationship between discipline-based theory and classroom practice is both central and problematic in the professional preparation of teachers. I also care about teacher education, so I confess to both intellectual and emotional contamination. Nevertheless, I have tried to confine my remarks to the issue of Education Studies as an object of evaluation.

Data-base

My comments are based upon a one-day visit to Manchester, during which I spent:

- (a) About seven hours in conversation with John Pearce, mostly concerned with the Education Studies course.
- (b) About two hours in conversation with Peter Jones about plans for monitoring the course.

(c) About two hours discussing the course with other members of the course team, plus the head of the Department of Education and a member of the Polytechnic's Staff Development Unit.

(d) About half-an-hour discussing the course with six students from the first intake.

(e) About fifteen minutes observing staff and students on the course in interaction.

I also studied the following documents:

- (i) The CNAAs submission.
- (ii) Introduction to Education Studies, a document prepared primarily for students.
- (iii) "Monitoring the Education Studies component of the B.Ed." an outline paper written by John Pearce and Peter Jones.

Finally, I was able to read an example of student work, one of the first "policies" submitted, and the tutor's response to it.

Education Studies the Innovation and the Evaluation

What marks out Education Studies as innovatory? After the whole B.Ed. course constitutes an innovation in Manchester Polytechnic. To get at the distinctive new features of the Education Studies component; we have to ask, "To what extent does Education Studies call for ways of thinking and acting that are different from (a) the ways of thinking and acting previously engaged in by those involved in the course, (b) the ways of thinking and acting that characterise functionally comparable courses in other institutions, (c) the ways of thinking and acting that characterise the rest of the B.Ed. course and the institution as a whole?" It must be emphasised that at this very early stage of implementation, an assessment of this question must rest largely upon the rhetoric of the course, supplemented by knowledge of the organisational arrangements already in operation, and whatever experience of past and contemporary forms of institutional practice the respondent can bring to bear in determining the degree and nature of the discrepancies which define Education Studies as 'innovatory'. In the final analysis, of course, innovation has to be achieved rather than proclaimed, and the gap between intent and practice is well known. It will be one of the evaluation tasks in monitoring

the course to document any shortfalls in course achievement which require modifications of the rhetoric or the reality of what is provided.

Having established the criteria, it will be clear that my own assessment must be tentative. I have almost no knowledge of the particular institutional context and have had only a brief acquaintance with some of the principal participants in the Education Studies course. Fortunately, this is not true of Peter Jones, who carries the major burden of the monitoring exercise, and who could therefore formulate an adequate characterisation of Education Studies as an innovation. This is not an academic exercise, but an important focussing device which should enable those involved in the evaluation to anticipate and identify the forces of resistance which the innovation will inevitably mobilise. Any radical innovation, and I think this may be one, challenges established systems of beliefs and the systems of practice which derive from them. It introduces dissonance, into individuals and institutions, and neither will tolerate this condition for very long. The critical issue is how the dissonance, once manifest, is resolved.

What follows are a few brief comments on features of the Education Studies course that I personally find worth emphasising, both because I think them distinctive, and because they may generate problems which will require attention by the evaluation and by the course developers.

1. The course intends to give primacy to the authority of the problem rather than the authority of the knowledge structures embodied in the disciplines. The main thrust of the public rhetoric is towards a utilitarian view of disciplinary relevance. This is very controversial and will be difficult to defend, particularly against those who would argue that the relationship between academic disciplines and practical action is at best indirect. At some points in course statements, however, it is conceded that the teaching of the disciplines is justified "in their own right." Are these two views of justification compatible? More to the point, can the two views be held simultaneously by the same person, i.e. by tutors on the course and if they are, how are they to teach, given that the two views would seem to call for different approaches? Are students being called upon to learn a discipline

both systematically, i.e. in its own terms, and randomly, in response to classroom problems which cannot possibly be designed in terms which are equally appropriate to the systematic development of three separate disciplines?

Are the recommended reading lists for the course intended to function as a traditional ballast, a form of insurance against the risk of fragmentation run by the taught course? If so their optional status is open to criticism; if not, then one looks in vain at the recommendations for evidence of an epistemological shift.

These comments are not meant to be taken as criticisms, but as indicators of potential sources of dissonance and difference in the ways that the participants may conceptualise and experience the course.

2. The course will make heavy demands upon tutors and students alike. The effect of the innovation will be to deskill them, so that they will experience, at least initially, feelings of incompetence. To survive, the innovation needs to be sustained long enough for the participants to acquire the skills appropriate to it. The course leader has both an important internal role here, creating the climate within which the tutors can help each other, as well as students, to acquire these skills, and an important boundary function, protecting the course against premature exposure to potentially hostile audiences. If this latter function is not effectively carried out, the pressure on staff particularly to revert to old skills and habits may become acute. They will not be able to demonstrate a better product than the old product or the products of other courses. The conventional notion of 'comparison' is misconceived. Innovations create standards, against which their imitators, or their own successive forms, may be compared. It is crucial to the evolution of new forms of teaching/learning that their distinctive attributes be identified early enough to guide both course improvement and course assessment.

3. Education Studies is likely to be at odds with the culture and intellectual values of the institution as a whole. It is a type of institutional insurrection, calling for para-military strategies of leadership and management. Such innovations will not succeed on

on their merits alone. The citadel of established practice seldom falls to the polite knock of a good idea. It may fall to a wooden horse, a pre-emptive strike or a cunning alliance. Conceived thus, it becomes clear that course evaluation will function in part as a political resource, and thus the question of who controls the evaluation assumes some significance. At the moment, the answer is not clear, though some declarations of interest have been lodged - Peter Jones, who will carry out most of the formal work, John Pearce, who is the subject leader and prime innovator, Mr. Kane, the head of the Education Department, who has overall responsibility for the new degree. The Staff Development Unit of the Polytechnic has also shown interest, an interest which potentially threatens intra-departmental control, and somewhere on the periphery there is Robin Alexander from Didsbury College, though it is impossible for me at this time, in view of the pending amalgamation of the Polytechnic with Didsbury, to even speculate on the implications of his potential involvement. At the beginning of an evaluation exercise of the kind contemplated for Education Studies, there is a case for blurring the lines of control; attempts to clarify them can undermine the collaborative framework of the innovation and the notion of a community of men of goodwill with a shared commitment to truth seeking. But it is the problematic nature of truth, and its intricate relationship to both values and valuables, that makes it necessary to be as clear as possible, before the data starts rolling in, about how rights and responsibilities are to be allocated. The history of programme evaluation is a history of conflicts in this area, although little of it gets into print.

Evaluation is a dangerous game; it can get out of hand. In my view, an evaluation of Education Studies at this stage in its development should be modest, comprehensive, and under the control of those most vulnerable to it, whom I would identify as the course tutors. The Jones/Pearce plan seems to be shaping up in such terms, though I would like to see the tutors shift from a reactive to a creative role, John Pearce adopt a more explicit mediating role between the tutors and Peter Jones, and the whole group develop a more formal and shared consciousness of the dynamics of institutional change. I hope the last comment doesn't sound impertinent. My impression is of an exceptionally able group of people. They are the arsenal of the evaluation. What is learned from the evaluation exercise depends

largely upon their capacity to mobilise, marshall and codify their own observations of their own experience.

Barry MacDonald,
Centre for Applied
Research in Education,
University of East Anglia,
Norwich
November 1976.