

"SCHOOL AND SOCIETY: INNOVATION".

INNOVATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE
HUMANITIES CURRICULUM PROJECT.

A view of the project's evaluation officer.

Text of a radio broadcast in which Geoffrey Esland,
of the Faculty of Educational Studies of the Open
University, interviews Barry Macdonald, Director of
the Project's Evaluation Unit.

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GE. In this programme, we are going to examine the problems which can arise when a major curriculum innovation is introduced into a School. The particular innovation we shall be looking at is the Schools Council Humanities Project, the background details of which are provided in the radio notes.

The questions we shall be raising will be those one can ask about any innovation. For example, how is it introduced? How disruptive is it of existing institutional structures? What strategies are used to contain it and what are the factors which support or retard its implementations? To help us examine these questions, I talked recently to Barry Macdonald, who is Director of the Evaluation Unit of the Humanities Curriculum Project.

I first asked him in what ways the Humanities Project could be described as an innovation?

EM. It's empirically innovative, let's say that. I mean there are a number of people who've said, 'Well, there's nothing new in this. We've been doing this kind of thing for years', but the experience of actually doing the Project generally changes the mind of people who've said that. One can see that it's innovative because of the impact it has on the School, in that clearly it tends to produce an impact, a dissonance effect, both at an institutional level, at a teacher and at a pupil level. Almost all schools are more authoritarian than they know they are. Many teachers, who see themselves as working in a liberal and very open discussion tradition, after experiencing the Project style of discussion have said that they didn't realise to what degree previous discussion was a disguised form of instruction. Nearly all schools do proceed teaching-wise on an instructional base, and the structure of the learning situation is one in which the teacher has knowledge and expertise which he communicates to a recipient pupil. At the heart of the Project is the idea that the teacher has to expertise to communicate, and also that he's not responsible in a sense that he has been before for pupil learning. At the heart of the Project is the idea of switching the initiative for learning to the pupil. This is an extremely difficult shift to make, and this, in fact, is a major problem for most of the schools which undertake this, and that's a very difficult role for pupils who have learnt over 10 years of their experience to be dependent on a teacher, who know if they sit back the teacher will do something; if they do nothing the teacher will act, and this kind of dependence relationship with the teacher is something that teachers in this experiment have to try to break. Sometimes they break it by sitting through a 30-minute silence, which they must not break, because if they break it, then the pupil will relax and the teacher has pushed himself back into the

dominant position.

GE. The key requirement of the Humanities Project, then, is that the teacher has to relinquish his position of dominance in the classroom and to allow his pupils more responsibility for organising their own learning. The teacher's willingness to do this is partly dependent on his commitment to the Project, but more important perhaps, it requires an understanding of the philosophy behind it. Clearly then, the ways in which the Project is introduced into a school can be very important in determining how it is interpreted by the teacher. But how is the Project introduced, and how are the schools selected? I asked Barry Macdonald to describe the procedures which are employed.

BM. The Schools Council initially sent a circular round to all the Local Education Authorities, outlining the remit of the Project, its particular concerns and asking the authorities to nominate schools for participation in this Project. There's a tendency on the part of LEAs to nominate what might be called a 'showpiece' school, a school which they feel sure will reflect well upon them and will do well in the Project. There are dangers in this, I think, extreme dangers if the LEA does not fully understand the nature of the curriculum development that's taking place. In this case, the Humanities Project was conceived as a kind of creative curriculum development, working on experimental lines, testing hypotheses, a means by which teachers could conduct some research in their own conditions and try to come up with some answers to the problems of teaching in this area. On the other hand, many LEAs do not appreciate that, and where they select the school on the grounds that it will do well as a showpiece school, and they inform the headmaster that he's been nominated and the headmaster feels that he's been rewarded or singled out for this honour, and the headmaster then proceeds to select his teachers with a view to satisfying the expectations of the LEA; then teachers frequently be put in a position where it is virtually impossible for them to conduct the experiment or development in the way conceived by the project team, because they're pressurised by unrealistic expectations; the expectation being that this is a programme which must succeed in a conventional traditional way. And of course, where the particular problems which the teachers are exploring are acute, then these kind of expectations are, in fact, very, very difficult for teachers to put up with. You get false feedback in situations like that of a certain pretence at success - the reality is hidden from those who want to know what's going on. This can lead to something that Martin Shipman has called fictitious implementation of a project, where, as far as outsiders are concerned, the project has been implemented successfully, and so on,

but in actual fact, all the problems have been disguised. It can also lead to teachers not learning from the experience, because they are so keen to make it work that they will pressurise the pupils. They're unable to relax and communicate their anxiety to pupils. This of course, in turn, is counter-productive because the pupils resist this anxiety and the pressure, and the whole thing increasingly fails, because it's not even a good learning experience for the teacher. The thing he learns is not to get involved in that kind of thing again.

GE. What we have here, then, are the consequences which can result from the nature of the innovation and its implications not being fully understood by the participants in the Project. It also shows how the element of prestige which is often associated with innovation may militate against its implementation. Another factor here is that teachers themselves may be largely unaware of the extents to which the innovation challenges their existing assumptions.

BM. Many teachers, trying out the Project role, find that they themselves have been successfully socialised into the tradition of the school to a much greater extent than they had anticipated or realised. They have been socialised into a tradition of teacher dominance, custodial attitudes and had'n't really known it, because they'd seen themselves as liberals, as being rather agin that kind of tradition and standing outside it, and they find that, in fact, they have become unconsciously reliant on it, in the kind of satisfaction it gives and the opportunity it gives for control of pupils, which, in most schools, is largely a verbal control. There was a problem for many teachers in stepping outside the realms of their own speciality. It did'n't only apply to content, which was relatively new enough for virtually all the teachers involved, but also in terms of methods and style of teaching.

GE. Teachers involved in the Humanities Project, then, often find themselves operating outside the confines of their specialised knowledge, and this makes additional demands on their professional expertise. They may also find themselves involved in the Humanities Project while simultaneously adopting the more instructional role required in other areas of the curriculum. I suggested to Barry Macdonald that there might be some conflict which the teacher must somehow resolve.

BM. You're right about the conflict. There is a role conflict there, and sooner or later, the teacher does have to face the possible irreconcilability of adopting one teaching style, one position for Humanities and, say, a different or straightforward

instructional and authoritarian style in the rest of his teaching. Now some teachers do not see a conflict, in a sense, that's to say that this is perfectly proper-different teaching areas, and different views of the nature of knowledge in different parts of the curriculum, so that different procedures are appropriate. But most teachers would say that their experience in the Project leads them to modify the instructional role that they take in other areas of their teaching responsibility. I can recall one teacher saying that 'One thing the Project's done for me is that it's taught me to hold back in all my teaching.' Some teachers don't resolve it in a sense, they simply have this conflict and are still locked in it - as far as I know - well the last time I saw them, they just don't know how to resolve this, and in some of course, for some, the resolution of the conflict is not to deny an instructional role, but to deny the Project role.

GE. One of the important features of innovation is that it not only threatens to undermine the professional expertise of the teacher, but it also challenges the prevailing culture of the school. In particular it imposes new constraints on the pupil who has to adjust to a new status in the classroom. Teachers may underestimate the degree to which they have to overcome pupil resistance to a new mode of learning.

BM. There is a tendency for teachers to engage in this kind of experiment with false expectations of how pupils will respond. I mean, this was fairly clear at the trial stage of the Project, when many of the teachers were extremely surprised by the degree of alienation that the pupils showed for virtually any kind of curriculum that they might be given, were surprised by the degree of dependence that the pupil had on the teacher taking the initiative. They were surprised by the degree of cynicism among the pupils when the teacher said, 'Feel free', and what one has to get through to teachers is some idea of norms of development, so that teachers, if they go back into classrooms, will expect a high degree of non-participation on the part of pupils, will expect those who speak to be inarticulate, to fumble, to expect some kind of superficial and frivolous behaviour, to expect hostility on the part of certain pupils, and be able to see that it's going to be a very hard and long job to work through this, and to also see that, in fact, in some situations, the Project is not operable unless other things are changed in the school; unless the previous experience of the pupils was changed, unless perhaps the teaching in other areas is changed, because the Project can be evaluative of what the pupil has done in History and in Geography and in English, and in other subjects because it does expose the pupil, it exposes his attitudes. When you restrain the teacher and make him listen and see and look at

pupils, it exposes their attitudes, it exposes their level of information, their skills, their lack of skills, and frequently what it does expose in this Project is their trained incapacity to perform in the required way.

GE. We have seen then, that the implementation of innovation poses considerable problems for both teachers and pupils. It's therefore not surprising that there is, in some schools, a temptation to contain the innovation and to minimise its effect. In this case, for example, it is perfectly possible that Humanities may be regarded as a marginal area or low status area of the curriculum. It may, for example, be introduced as a non-examinational subject. I asked Barry Macdonald what evidence of this kind of containment he had found among schools which had adopted the Project.

BM. Containment is fairly common. There are, of course, a great number of schools where the Project virtually is seen as something for the leavers, as a soft sell, as a kind of relaxation, and teachers will introduce it by saying: 'Well, now, I'm not a teacher any more, you know; I'm just here to sit and listen to your opinions', and that's it. It isn't a serious intellectual pedagogic exercise. This is perfectly true, and of course it's particularly true where the school itself has contained the Project by confining it to low status pupils, you know, the pupils who are not involved in the 'real' business of the school, which is examination success. And where that happens, of course, it isn't seriously implemented.

GE. "Here, then, is one way in which innovation is contained by becoming defined as a low status activity or as a soft option. Those of you who are teachers can probably think of, or may even have direct experience of, other ways in which innovation such as this can be contained. I finally asked Barry Macdonald whether, in view of the complexities of the innovation process, it's really appropriate to think about innovation in terms of failure."

BM. Well, one of the things I think one has to do is to move away from the idea that project success can simply be looked at in terms of short-term pupil learning. Projects of this kind have an impact on the system, they've an impact on institutions, they've an impact on teachers and on pupils, and depending on what point of view you have, you could regard it as success or failure, because different groups who have an interest in a project have different perspectives. LEAs may well be interested in the impact of the project on the evolution of a school over a period of 10 or 20 years. Head teachers may well be interested in the development of staff - teachers more interested in the impact on pupils. And even within that, people will vary in what they

might consider to be success or failure. The project could succeed in, say, getting a school to evaluate the whole of its curriculum, because the project can serve that function, and to re-examine its whole style, its relationship with pupils and, at the same time, it could succeed or fail at a teacher level. It's successful enough to get teachers to re-examine and reconceptualise their own role, their own responsibility and their conduct of a school and the development of curriculum. If it does that, then many people would regard it as successful. And many people would regard it as a failure if, in fact, all it did for the teacher was to reinforce the views he had before he entered the experiment and it's not, in fact, a useful learning experience for him.

GE.

Barry Macdonald, Director of the Evaluation Unit of the Schools Council of the Humanities Curriculum Project. To sum up then: in this programme we have examined some of the problems which can arise when a major curriculum innovation is introduced into a school. We have seen how important it is for the people implementing the innovation that the principles underpinning it are understood and their implications recognised. We have also seen how teachers and pupils involved in this kind of innovation have to establish a new and different relationship and that this may threaten the established assumptions about teaching and learning.

Finally, we have seen how the process by which an innovation becomes established as a part of schools' everyday life should not be thought of in simple terms of success or failure, but in terms of the many consequences which it has for the participants.

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