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A Process Approach to the Teaching of Philosophy and Theory of Education

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The problems which are associated with the teaching of educational philosophy and theory are well known to those in the field. Issues relating to appropriateness, relevance, content, and course structure raise particular problems for those who teach in this area in the context of pre-service teacher education programmes. This article is an attempt to describe, in personal terms, an approach which evolved over a fifteen year period of teaching educational theory as a compulsory unit in an initial teacher education programme at the University of New England. In our experience it has solved many of the problems initially encountered when we began teaching this course and may therefore be of interest to others who have met similar problems.

The course is entitled Ed. SCS 211-1, Introduction to the Theory of Education, and has been a compulsory unit for Dip.Ed. students and also for Arts students taking education courses. The major development in the way the course has been taught may be described in terms of a general move away from an emphasis on content to one on process.

Traditionally courses in educational theory have had a clear focus on the transmission of content or information. Thus emphasis has been placed on lectures and follow-up tutorials to ensure that the theorists or issues covered are understood by the student. As is well known the value of this approach within an initial teacher education programme has been seriously questioned - particularly by the students who claim it lacks relevance to their immediate needs as beginning teachers.

The course being described here, while retaining a strong element of content, now pays equal attention to the processes involved in putting theory into practice. The aim has been both to engage the intrinsic interest of the students in the theories and ideas being discussed but also to meet their extrinsic needs as trainee teachers. Thus the course aims not only at informing the students but also at developing the ability of each one to think rationally about educational issues and to link these ideas to the practical concerns of the classroom. With this change in focus the most general aim is to provide an experience which links the issues and ideas raised by the various thinkers covered to the personal experiences of the student teacher and in so doing to foster meaningful and constructive thinking about education. The students are encouraged to see how what they think about education (the theory) affects

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how they act, and in so doing to develop their ability to base their classroom practice on informed, rational judgements.

The theories studied are presented not so much for their own sake but as a stimulus to the students to work out where they stand on the various crucial issues raised. The underlying idea is somewhat akin to Dewey's approach to knowledge, which is to see it as a set of possible data for solving problems that arise in one's experience.

Having presented the overall rationale of the course, we will now move on to describe it in more detail and attempt to show how the above aims are realized.

Ed. SCS 211-1 is a one semester course lasting for a period of about fourteen weeks. It is taken by both internal and external students at the University of New England with the enrolment peaking at about 600 in mid 70s and averaging between 300 and 400 over recent years. The internal and external students are generally split about 50% each way.

When the course was first introduced in 1971, the text book was Steven Cahn's, *The Philosophical Foundations of Education (1970)* which contained selections from fifteen educational thinkers. It was found that this book did not fully meet our purposes so we decided to write our own text: J Bowen and P R Hobson, *Theories of Education: Studies of Significant Innovation in Western Educational Thought (1974)**. In this, we reduced the number of thinkers represented to nine, giving more extensive selections as well as detailed commentaries on each. This has enabled the students to engage the thinkers in sufficient depth to come to a meaningful understanding of them in a one semester course and provided students with a philosophical and historical framework from which to approach them. The nine thinkers represented are arranged according to their position in the debate between traditional and progressive theories of education, and then further into (a) those who provided the classic formulations of these approaches: Plato and Aristotle on the one hand, and Rousseau and Dewey on the other; (b) recent variations and reactions to these two approaches in the writings of Makarenko, Skinner, Neill, Peters and Illich. The traditional-progressive distinction is used as a way of helping the students make initial sense of the various theories, not as a hard and fast dichotomy that admits of no exceptions or overlap. While a number of thinkers studied are great philosophers in their own right the emphasis has always been on their educational ideas and while philosophical considerations are certainly part of the course these are basically included to the extent that they are necessary to illuminate the student's understanding of the educational theory in question.

This text is designed to provide the basic *content* of the course and is supplemented by various reference works which discuss the theorists and issues raised in more detail. The major reference work is T W Moore's *Educational Theory: An Introduction* (1974) which helps provide a model for approaching the theories covered in the text. Developing and elaborating Moore's account, we suggest that every educational theory can be analyzed in terms of the assumptions it makes about (1) the ultimate aim of education; (2) the role of education in society; (3) the nature of the person (i.e. human nature); (4) how learning takes place; (5) the nature of knowledge (including 'moral knowledge' or values). In terms of evaluating an educational theory we suggest the following six criteria: (1) internal consistency; (2) validity of assumptions (e.g. scientific, philosophical); (3) practicability; (4) moral acceptability; (5) degree of development (how fully worked out); (6) personal suitability (i.e. does the theory appeal to me personally?). Students who are coming to the study of educational theory for the first time find these useful signposts for getting to grips with a wide range of different theories dating back to 5th century B.C. Greece. It also enables them to fruitfully compare and contrast the theories on a number of standard criteria and to work out which ones appeal most to them.

Students are also encouraged to use these components and criteria when addressing educational issues raised in the seminars and in their assignments. Thus if they are discussing an issue such as the role of freedom and equality in education, choice of curriculum content, the place of moral education, they generally come to see how a person's views on any of these topics are directly affected by the assumptions (usually of a philosophical type) made in the five basic aspects of an educational theory mentioned above. This also helps bring out for them the clear link between one's theory and one's practice. The early lectures on the individual theorists are also organized in terms of the above headings to help get students thinking in a systematic and fruitful way about each one.

The way the course is taught has changed markedly over the years to reflect the switch from an emphasis on content to one on process. Originally the seminars were seen as a back-up to the lectures, to help the students understand better the content of the course as reflected in the lectures on the various theorists. These seminars generally turned out to be dominated by the tutor, who understandably had more knowledge to impart. Where students had to make a presentation this was usually in the form of a short paper on the theorist, read to the group which may have led to some discussion, mainly on matters of information. So the format of the seminar was not generally conducive to the generation of a broad-based lively discussion where students felt genuinely involved in what was going on and committed to its success. Of course there were seminars where some useful intellectual discussion did take place, particularly for those with an academic interest in the ideas of the various theorists, but overall we felt we were not really getting through to a large proportion of the students.

The main problem seemed to be that many students failed to see the relevance of the discussion in terms of their imminent entry into the teaching profession.

What was needed we decided was to look at the content from their perspective rather than that of the academic philosopher of education which is what we had tended to do. This led us eventually to totally restructure the teaching methods used in the course and the form of assessment employed. We decided to place major stress on the process of applying theory to practice, that is, of using the content in terms of how it can aid constructive decision-making and behaviour by the teacher or potential teacher. To achieve this we scrapped the idea of the seminar involving a further elaboration of the theorist's ideas and instead selected a topical issue arising out of or suggested by his writing. The discussion could begin with examining the relevance of the theorist's views for the topic but then go on to explore it in its own right. At the same time the lectures were now seen as having a twofold aim - one in supplying the basic content of the course (supplementing the textbook), and two, in preparing students to take part in the seminar discussion. To help achieve this second end the lecture programme was modified to highlight the relevance of the theorist's work for current educational issues, to pose questions for students to consider and raise in seminars, and generally to promote reflection rather than mere memorization of data.

The lecture and seminar programme was arranged so that the seminars dealing with an issue related to a particular writer always followed in the week after the lecture on that person,

To illustrate all of this we will now set out the various seminar topics arising out of the theorists covered, along with some of the issues suggested for consideration in each case.

Plato: How just do you think the present system of education in Australia is? (Is Plato's notion of justice the same as our modern western democratic notion? Does our education system approximate more to Plato's model or the ideal democratic model or neither?)

Aristotle: Debate: The Role of the School in Moral Education (What are the implications of Aristotle's views on morality and moral education for the school today? Is there an accepted body of moral values that the school should aim to teach?)

Rousseau: How far is it true that children learn best when left to discover things for themselves? (Is Emile really left to learn whatever he likes or does Rousseau in fact structure most of his learning experiences? Can a child basically teach itself all or most of what it needs to know?)

Dewey: To what extent can the scientific model as outlined by Dewey be used as the model for all meaningful teaching and learning? (Is this an appropriate method for all areas of the curriculum, e.g., moral and aesthetic development? Is it always desirable and possible to relate whatever is taught to the present interests of the pupil as Dewey suggests?)

Makarenko: Should the needs of the group come before the needs of the individual in education? (Compare the relative value of group vs individual approaches to learning. Does the idea of the collective in education have something of value to offer for western education systems?)

Skinner: Can and should the methods of behaviourism be the main method of bringing about learning in schools and should they be used to produce a new type of society? (Could Skinner's new planned society be brought about by educationally justifiable means? Does the survival of mass society necessitate the sacrifice of traditional liberal values?)

Neill: Debate: Should maximum pupil freedom (as for example in Summerhill) be the goal of all schools? (Is there a valid and consistent concept of freedom underlying Neill's thought? Does maximum pupil freedom assist or hinder the moral development of children?)

Peters: How far should education be seen as developing pupil's knowledge and understanding for its own sake and how far should it be seen as preparing them for their role in society? (Is Peters' concept of education an elitist one and if so, is it appropriate in current society? What is the place of liberal education in today's schools?)

Illich: To what degree is the school necessary for education to take place? (To what extent do school curricula support or reinforce the existing power structures of society? Can the present function of the school be adequately performed by Illich's learning webs?)

The concluding seminars (following the above) provide a revision of the course by reviewing the nine theorists in terms of the five components of any educational theory and evaluating them in terms of the six criteria, described earlier.

Along with the change in the topics for the seminars we have altered their format to better reflect the new emphasis on process. The students themselves are given major responsibility for the running of the sessions rather than, as before, the tutor. Instead of reading a paper under the supervision of the tutor each student takes a turn at directing the progress of the seminar as a teaching experience in its own right. The student chairs that session, presents his or her position on this issue, directs and answers questions, and seeks to maintain group interest and involvement. The tutor becomes one of the group who takes part in the discussion and activities along with the others. He or she may play

the role of resource person where necessary and appropriate but generally only steps in to direct discussion, etc., where the student is clearly unable to cope (which is very rare). However, the tutor plays an important role **before** the seminar takes place, in that he or she meets with the students taking the next session and discusses with them how they are going to approach it, offering advice and help based on past experience of activities that have worked well.

Because the emphasis is now on the process of putting theory into practice and achieving active student involvement, the students are encouraged to use activities such as buzz groups, role-playing, debates, guided questioning, questionnaires, joint examination of contentious issus that arise in the classroom, etc., where it is felt these would assist in bringing out the significance and personal relevance of the particular topic. Students are also encouraged to actually try out themselves in their presentation, some of the teaching methods suggested by the theorist under discussion (e.g. Socratic dialogue, discovery learning, problem-solving activity, group vs individual learning, behaviourist techniques, consciousness raising and so on). It is also suggested that where relevant, students make use of teaching aids such as blackboard, overhead projector, audio or video tapes, diagrams, charts, etc., to enhance the impact of their presentation and to provide them with practice in the use of such facilities. In order to further highlight the practical relevance of the seminar discussion, the students are asked to consider the implications of the ideas examined for their particular teaching subjects and also to relate the discussion to experiences gained in practice teaching. Fundamentally then the seminar becomes a process rather than content oriented experience and as well as bringing out the practical relevance of the theories discussed in the course, the students come to look upon it as an opportunity to try out in a congenial and informal setting some of the teaching principles and activities they are learning about in the Dip.Ed. as a whole. It thus also serves to aid students in their transition from the role of learner to that of teacher.

The seminar work accounts for 30% of the assessment of the course made up of each student's specific presentation plus their general contribution throughout the semester. Each student is required to keep a seminar workbook or folder made up of preparation notes, any notes taken during the seminar and a brief write-up of what they see as the significant outcomes of the meeting. The importance of proper preparation for each seminar by **all** students is stressed as necessary if the seminars are to achieve their aims. For this purpose, a detailed list of references for each topic is included in the course booklet.

The students have reacted very positively to the new seminar format and have shown a surprising degree of commitment to making their own presentation a success in all senses. They are keen to discuss their ideas on how they will organize the session with the tutor beforehand and in fact, many of the best and most successful activities used in the seminars have been suggested by the students themselves. To give a fuller insight into the actual workings of the

seminars under the new system, we will now list some of the activities that have worked particularly well. (In each case the topic of the seminar will be mentioned first following by the name of the relevant theorist in brackets.)

For the seminar on justice in education (Plato), students role-play differnt social groups in our society (e.g. inner-city children, aborigines, women, intellectually gifted and so on), and consider whether they are fairly treated under the current educational system and also how they would fare in a system run along Platonic lines. (This leads on to a consideration of how far our system is really different to that in Plato's *Republic.*) Another approach is for each student to write down what justice means for him or her, break into groups of two or three to compare ideas and then have a total seminar discussion to try to reach an agreed definition. Starting the seminar programme with these sorts of activities also serves to quickly break the ice and establish a relaxed non-threatening group atmosphere.

In the seminar on group vs individual approaches to learning (Makarenko), the students are given different types of problems to work on - such as solving a puzzle, working out some historical fact, writing a poem. In each case, six of the students work on the problem together as a group, while the others work on it as individuals. They then compare their experiences and try to work out which sorts of learning activities are best suited to group and which to individual work. Alternatively they may be given a problem such as putting together different shapes to make a square where success can only be achieved by a large degree of group cooperation and sharing of ideas, and then considering the ramifications of that experience for classroom teaching and learning.

The seminar on freedom (Neill), which takes a debate format, could involve the students staging two different types of lesson on the same topic, as a practical illustration of the position they are supporting. For instance the topic could be how to use clay in making pottery - one lesson would be based on free expression and maximum pupil involvement, the other on a traditional model of instruction and exposition by the teacher. The former may just present the class with some clay and let them experiment with it themselves, answering questions if students feel prompted to ask them. The latter would present a tightly organized mini-lesson on the different ways clay can be used with detailed explanation and demonstration.

Students may then divide up into two groups depending on which side of the debate they support (or a third undecided group) and then raise criticisms for the other side to try to answer. They may go on as a group to consider and compare the sorts of freedom they desired as school pupils and what sorts of freedom they are prepared to allow their own pupils when they go out teaching.

In the seminar on the nature of education (Peters), the student in charge may present the class with a list of teaching and learning activities and ask them

to consider which of these they would classify as 'education' and why or why not. They may go on to get people in the group to consider whether they see the value of their own subject primarily in terms of its intrinsic or extrinsic virtues. There is also plenty of media material available as a resource for this topic with the current debate about the role of secondary education (especially in the final two years of schooling).

Finally, in the seminar on the role of the school (Illich), one popular activity has been to consider the seminar group itself as an Illich learning network and to see what skills each person can pass on to others and alternatively would like to learn from others in the group. This can then lead on to a discussion of the efficacy of Illich's proposed alternatives to the institution of the school.

The above are just a selection of the types of activities that have made the seminars a real learning experience for both students and tutors, and have changed them from something that students tolerate to something they actually look forward to. There are of course, many other useful activities and also a lot of the approaches mentioned here can be adapted for use with other topics. Any method which encourages group participation and brings out the practical relevance of the topic for the students' own teaching career, is likely to be of value. One further way of helping realize these objectives is to give all students at the start of the course a short 'educational opinions' questionnaire which asks them to write down very briefly how they feel now about a number of controversial and topical educational issues and then come back to this at the end of the course and consider if and how their opinions may have changed as a result of doing the course. This serves to 'whet their appetite' for what is to come, and to provide a concrete indication of how a course such as this, can have practical effects on how they think (and consequently act) about educational questions. Questionnaires are also sometimes useful adjuncts in particlar seminars to get students thinking about where they stand on the topic under discussion, e.g. the value of discovery learning, how child-centred education should be, etc. Finally, at the end of each seminar, students are encouraged to ask themselves the question - what are the implications of this discussion for me as a future teacher, and to record the results in their seminar folder.

Turning briefly to the assessment methods used in the course, these have also been changed to better reflect the emphasis on process. The end of course examination was dropped on the grounds that this tended to encourage more a mastery of content, although it is possible to argue that there could be a place for an exam in a course such as this depending on how it was structured and how the questions were framed. The present assessment (apart from the seminar work of 30%) is to have two essays, a minor one worth 30% and a major one worth 40%, in each case the topic to be chosen from a choice of about five or six questions.

The first essay is oriented more towards content than the second on the grounds that students need some time in the course before they can be expected to present a clearly argued point of view of their own. Also it helps to be able to grasp what the various historically and philosophically significant innovators in educational thought have said so they have some idea of the standard positions that can be taken on educational issues and from which they can go on and develop their own (either by modification of some existing position or the development of their own distinctive view). Experience has shown that it is unrealistic to expect of students in an introductory course such as this, (which may be taken from second year on at university) to come with already developed and thought-out views of their own. They need to be provided with some initial content and structuring of ideas to get them thinking usefully for themselves, the important point always being that this content and structure is not there as a finished product to be acquired but as a starting point for their own theorizing.

Thus, even with the minor assignment, students are expected to analyze, interpret, compare and evaluate the ideas of the various theorists on critical issues in education. By the time of the major assignment due at the end of the course, students are expected to develop a point of view of their own on one of these issues drawing where relevant, on the ideas of the various theorists to support their own argument (either by way of showing agreement or disagreement with their theories). They are also given the opportunity to answer a question in which they outline and defend their own theory of education. As the course is structured to directly encourage them to be able to do just this, the question is always a popular one.

By the end of the course then, by means of an approach stressing the process of putting theory into practice, students have been given the basis from which to develop a personal, rationally based perspective on their future role as a teacher.

Conclusion

We would like to conclude this article by reiterating that what is presented here is a descriptive account of what we personally have found a worthwhile and very enjoyable teaching experience. We have not provided statistical data to verify our reactions but the detailed description of the way the course has been taught should be sufficient to enable readers to make their own judgement on the merits of such an approach. The important factor for us has been the difference in student reaction before and after the switch to a process-oriented approach. One indicator of this has been the way attendance at lectures (which are not compulsory and do not lead to a final examination) has increased markedly after the change. Students do seem to feel more involved in the course now and even though many begin with rather indifferent or negative attitudes to educational theory, by the time they leave the course, the great majority

seem to feel quite positive about it. It is gratifying (and compared to our previous experiences, quite unusual) to hear students say at teacher education meetings and elsewhere, that they have found this course practically relevant and one that has affected them more personally than various other courses they have taken.

One experience in teaching this course also suggests to us some broader implications that a process-oriented approach can have for teacher education in general. It would seem that giving students more responsibility in how a course is organised and taught and focussing directly on the process of putting theory into practice, markedly increases their commitment to it. It also increases staff enjoyment and makes it a real learning experience for them as well. It is a clear example of where Paulo Freire's dialogical model of teaching and his concept of 'praxis' really does seem to work. We therefore feel it worth conveying our experiences to all those involved in teacher education in the hope that others may find some useful suggestions for their own teaching in what we present here.

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KNOWLEDGE, THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

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Language and Education

We know that children's differences in language ability, more than any other observable factor, affect their potential for success in schooling. It is only in the last two or three decades that educationists in general have felt it necessary to state a fact that earlier educationists regarded as too commonplace to warrant stating: that language is the central achievement necessary for success in schooling. It is clear that achievement in schools is highly dependent on the child's ability to 'display' knowledge. This display almost always takes the form of spoken or written language. Child language will often be the first contact teachers have on which opinions of student potential can be based, while in the closing stages of schooling language contact through formal or informal assessments is often the only link between students and those assessors who finally declare a child's educational fate. Nor is it an artificial or improper matter that language on display is the central achievement for school success. A school curriculum is a selection of knowledge from the culture: all those things in the culture (or from other cultures) considered worth passing on through schooling. Since all forms of knowledge are 'filtered' through language, the chief item of knowledge in any culture is its language. The chief object of the school is to encourage the complete mastery of the language of the culture, since without this mastery children are denied power and influence over their own affairs and an opportunity for success in education.

Yet there is far more to the link between language and education than even these important concerns. Education is concerned with the activities of 'thinking', 'knowing' and 'learning'. We have strong indications from studies in cognitive psychology and from studies in epistemology of the way language and thought, language and knowledge, language and the roots of the intellect, are connected. I shall refer to the views of a number of well-known and complementary authorities in presenting the case for this point about the centrality to be given to language in education through its priority in the activities of thinking, knowing and learning.

Language and Thought

Bruner, the cognitive psychologist, bases his views on the place of language in education upon empirical evidence, much of which he has been instrumental