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THEORY INTO PRACTICE IN A SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION COURSE

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BACKGROUND

A prime criticism of teacher education is that it fails to prepare students for what lies ahead — namely, their life as a teacher. Indeed, Fuller and Brown (1975) go so far as to comment that teacher training may be orthogonal to the teacher. The major reason for this, it seems, is that college programmes and university courses do not appear to be relevant to student needs. This situation, according to many, is partly the fault of lecturers who may be out of touch with the reality of school life, and what it means to be a teacher in the community context.

An opportunity existed to counter these criticisms with students in our part two Sociology of Education course, the bulk of whom were either third year teacher’s college students or fourth year students on leave to complete a degree. We believed that this group would find it both meaningful and relevant if we concentrated on information derived from our own research on beginning teachers and our recent experiences in schools and teachers’ organisations. Our aim was to relate this background information to the schools and communities the students would be entering as beginning teachers. Our belief for such a course was based not only on logical grounds, but also on the basis of empirical evidence that such courses can contribute to the successful transition of student to teacher (Wânnecke and Riddle, 1974).

The course, was, therefore, in some respects an experiment as a “work orientation” experience. However, as it was a foundation course for future Sociology of Education courses, a requirement also existed for an introduction to the key sociological theories and principles. The match was accordingly made — sociological theory and work orientation. This article is an account of the match and its subsequent marriage, which was occasionally strained, occasionally harmonious, but was never uninteresting!

THE BEGINNING

From the viewpoint of substantive content the course had several major features. (A brief outline of the course is given at the end of this paper). The first of these related to the notion of ‘reality shock’, which refers to the lack of congruence between a person’s expectations of a situation and the actuality of the same situation. We began with a basic premise that realities are socially constructed, and that these may have flaws. The fact that social reality is never a cohesive whole that provides an answer to everything — though most people believe it is — leaves many individuals with a sense of discomfort and despair. It was an explanation of the sociological facets of these feelings of discomfort and despair amongst beginning teachers that shaped the course in keeping with our basic criticism that teacher education fails to prepare students for what lies ahead in their lives as teachers.

In order to examine the problems faced by beginning teachers we used three sociological perspectives:

1. Structural-functionalism
2. Symbolic interactionism
3. Phenomenology

These were decided on because they covered both the macro and micro-sociological perspectives. In addition it enabled us to discuss explanations of beginning teachers’ behaviour deriving from both the normative, institutional framework and from the backgrounds individual beginning teachers brought to the situation as they grew into their jobs. We wished to emphasise the latter for the following reasons:

1. Too often only the institutionalised definition of the situation is taught as part of the teacher training programme, thus providing an overly psychological attitude in terms of such factors as ‘normalcy’ and ‘deviant’.
2. The institutionalised view fails to account for individual definitions of the situation and how people act, and react, in certain situations that are imposed upon them. We wished to emphasise that socialisation should always be viewed as a reciprocal process, in which the person being socialised has an input to make.
3. The institutionalised view tends to account for conflict as deviance, thus ignoring many other possibilities.

Accordingly, our approach allowed in-depth analyses of a wide variety of relevant substantive areas, such as socialisation, power role; and as well allowed critical appraisal by the students of case studies on beginning teachers, and of their own past and present experiences in schools. The course was flexible enough to allow for the accommodation of guest lecturers from a variety of sociological persuasions.

The significant, even dominant, concept covered in the course was ‘power’, which was seen as the central relationship in the life of the beginning teacher, whether the teacher be male or female, young or old, married or single. Moreover, power relationships were viewed as being all pervasive in the life of the beginning teacher, simply because the teacher works in a hierarchical, bureaucratised organisation — the school.
The analysis of power relationships affecting the beginning teacher led to a consideration of the view of power as expressed by Weber, Parsons, but most particularly by Steven Lukes (1974). Lukes' thought encompasses notions of role and socialisation. His belief is basic to all views of power — power is exercised when one party affects another party in a way contrary to the second's interest. He accepts with some reservation that previous researchers believed about power, but Lukes takes issue with them over their assumptions that overt or covert conflict must exist for the operation of power. He, rather, adds a new dimension to power theory by proposing that there are aspects of power that arise from our beliefs, from what we have already decided, and from what things we readily accept as 'normal'. He considered that the most important and insidious act of power prevents people from feeling aggrieved because their senses, ideas and choices have been conditioned in such ways that they accept as normal what they are doing — the 'part they are playing' — either because they are unable to perceive any possible variation, or because they think it is unchangeable and normal, or because they believe it to be ordained by some higher authority. Lukes concludes that:

To assume that the absence of grievance equals genuine consensus is simply to rule out the possibility of false or manipulated consensus by definitional fiat.

(Lukes, 1974: 24)

It was by giving students such alternative views of making sense out of the situation likely to confront beginning teachers that we were able to encourage the asking of basic questions — critical sociological questions concerning the nature of the teacher training programme and the whole notion of professional socialisation into teaching. By doing this we hoped to achieve our aims, both theoretically and practically, while remaining true to a basic sociological function. As Tom Burns has written:

The purpose of sociology is to achieve an understanding of social behaviour and social institutions which is different from that current among the people through whose conduct the institutions exist; an understanding which is not merely different but new and better. The practice of sociology is criticism. It exists to criticise claims about the value of achievement and to question assumptions about the meaning of conduct.


Worth adding at this point was an intention to let the sociological theories flow from the case studies and descriptive material which we proposed to use. We wished to avoid the 'jargon' approach in which the perspectives of symbolic interactionism, structural functionalism and phenomenology are explained. Rather, we hoped that, as a result of their analyses of examples, and as a consequence of their reading of a range of research, students' understanding would develop without expository-style teaching.

Another point worth noting is that we repeatedly used the phrase: 'You will be called on to analyse critically and to challenge a variety of ideas.' This reflected our determination to make this an iconoclastic course which left the students with a healthy air of scepticism about the written word. We also helped to sharpen their initial skills through a variety of oral and written exercises. The unwillingness of some students to operate at this level of analysis is documented below.

The assessment of the students also differed from other courses. While we followed a traditional assignment-feedback structure in part, we also required as a major piece of work a course handbook which contained all the material gathered in the duration of the course. This handbook was designed to be a working document of use to the students in their future careers as school teachers.

The Honeymoon

The course opened smoothly with a series of background lectures and tutorials on the concept of "reality shock" and on demographic features of the New Zealand teaching force. This section of the work was well received with very positive feedback from the students. The appeal of the course at this stage may be gauged by the fact that the small group of practising teachers on the course, when offered an alternative rather more traditional course, all opted to stay in the mainstream programme. At this point the course teachers were rather complacently congratulating themselves on the success of their experiment. However, as in all marriages (except dull ones) the first problem was soon to arrive.

The First Argument

Two events triggered the first argument: the initial assignment — a critical review of a chapter in the set text (Hansen and Herrington, 1976) — and the first formal theoretical lecture. The assignment was the more telling event. Seventy per cent of the class failed this assignment because they did not appreciate the distinction between a critical review and a summary statement. They claimed that the course teachers had given insufficient information about the nature of critiques in advance of the exercise. The lines of demarcation thus began to appear very clearly and were well summarised in the discussion between the course coordinator and the elected course student representative, during which the latter pointed out that the content of the lectures and tutorials were well received, but that the "theory" was too difficult to understand. Moreover, he claimed, some students (not him though) thought the standards were too high. The scene was thus set for continuing friction between "helpful hints" for orientation into teaching, and "theoretical principles" of sociology. For some students this friction was too much to bear and by the tenth week of the course, 12 of the 101 original enrolees had withdrawn.
Working out the Relationship

As the second unit progressed the students settled in and began to work on the relationships between the two marriage partners. Case studies on the beginning teacher in the school created surprise and much discussion for their practical. Slowly but surely, the better students began to perceive the basic differences between symbolic interactionism and structural functionalism. The second assignment, which focused on interpreting a case study, came and went with scarcely a ripple; remarkably the standard was incredibly higher with 80 percent achieving a pass grade. A unit on teachers’ organisations was also well received, and a guest from the School of Management provided an important link with a lecture on formal organisations. He also proved that structural functionalism is alive and well in some quarters! As we moved into the relationship of the teacher and the law and the teacher in the community further evidence of the growing maturity of the students appeared, with yet another improved set of assignments and growing sophistication in the tutorial analyses. During this phase, the feedback on the lecture-tutorial programme continued to be very positive — as the course representative put it — "... this course should be compulsory for all teachers and college students.” Furthermore, some students remarked that this course, above all others, had made them think deeply about what it meant to be a teacher, and some even said that it had brought into focus certain dilemmas they had experienced in their classroom practice.

The love-hate relationship between the course programme and the assignment schedule continued to be an hiatus throughout this phase. It culminated with a fierce discussion in the penultimate tutorials on the course handbook. A split appeared — the majority viewed the handbook as a potentially important working document for them next year, while a small, but important minority believed the handbook would merely “busy work” and a form of “checking up” on student’s work (which it was — and a very valuable one too!).

The course rounded off with a futurology section and the concluding test. In this test students were asked to analyse case studies from a variety of perspectives, as well as to write a traditional essay. Their growing potential was revealed once again, with the former being particularly well done. In the final meeting a course evaluation sheet was filled in and a free ranging discussion between teaching team and the course members ensued. We turn now to an analysis of this evaluation, as the problems mentioned thus far are revealed even more clearly.

Evaluation of the Course

A simplified diagram showing the continuous interaction between presentation, content and evaluation for the course is shown below.

Basically, there were two components in the evaluation of the course, an ongoing one and an end of year evaluation.

**FIGURE 1:** The relationship between evaluation, course content and presentation.

On-going Evaluation

This occurred throughout the duration of the course and it usually involved informally eliciting student reaction to course content and presentation. On many occasions the feedback received from students was discussed in regular team meetings, and in some instances was instrumental in changing course content and presentation, (e.g. a de-emphasis on case studies in the lectures occurred at one point). At other times, however, changes were not instituted as a result of student feedback because the team had a particular learning objective in mind.

End of Year Evaluation

This involved three phases: (a) students completing a course evaluation schedule; (b) a follow-up discussion concerning issues raised in the schedule and general comments about the course; and (c) team discussion of the evaluation in the light of the course objectives and our own experiences with the course during the year.
(a) Course Evaluation Schedule

The results of this formal evaluation seem to support the view expressed earlier in this paper that students thought the course content was worthwhile. Eighty percent of the students rated the content as either 4 or 5 on a five-point scale. Similarly, 82 percent confirmed that the course was "relevant", while 60 percent stated that the objectives and the course content were in concurrence. However, assignments did not fare so well - 74 percent of the students said assignments required more work than in other courses. Seventy-two percent also said that the course workload was too large. Despite these comments, 58 percent of the students said the assignments were helpful in achieving the course objectives, whereas only 14 percent indicated that assignments were inappropriate in this regard. The course handbook exercise was found to be useful by 44 percent of the group, but 36 percent did express the opposite view. Overall, the course was rated fairly highly in comparison with other courses students had completed. On a ten-point scale, 68 percent of the students rated the course 7 or above, 23 percent 5 or 6, and nine percent below 5.

Follow-up Discussion

This was held with the group of students following the completion of the evaluation schedule. It was tape recorded and later transcribed. During the one hour discussion, twenty separate issues were raised by the students. Some of these were:

- Stress associated with assignments
- Relevancy of the handbook
- Course readings
- Policy of assignment extensions
- Comparison of workload with other courses
- Relationship between theory and practice on the course

Of the twenty issues raised by the students, 14 were related to administrative aspects (e.g. weighting on assignments, timetabling of lectures and tutorials etc.) while the remainder of the comments were on content orientated issues. In relation to the latter, the discussion clearly discerned the discrepancy that students felt existed between course content and assessment procedures. This also confirmed what they had indicated in their evaluation schedule.

It is the content area to which attention will be given here since the issues of administration are those inherent in developing any new course which attempts a conjugation of practice and principle.

One student voiced confusion at being confronted by such a union:

You (lecturing team) don't really seem to have decided whether this is a pure theory course or a practical course for first-year teachers. A more definite boundary needs to be drawn.

Similarly, another student felt that the course should be one or the other:

"...the tutorials and lectures were really useful but the sociological theories and terms were very difficult...I still can't see the latter's relevance."

Obviously, for these two students at least, the lecturers' determination to develop "principles", rather than recipe books has not been appreciated or understood. Yet for others, marriage has involved consummation:

This was an interesting course - valid for us as near teachers. It gave an understanding of school structure. The principles of power, authority, role and socialisation will allow me to analyse schools. The part on N.Z.E.I. was positive and worthwhile. I wish it could be part of the whole College course as some of my friends missed out on it. I enjoyed the course - it's one of the few which have made me think.

For some, consummation may come later:

I still don't feel I've understood it all. Perhaps its meaningfulness will come to me in 2-3 years time.

Team Evaluation

From a teaching viewpoint, student's evaluation of the course showed that they received adequate feedback, felt the course was taught at their level; and, (we are pleased to acknowledge) gave the course teachers a good report on their availability for advice, encouragement of tutorial discussion, and lecturing techniques.

As teachers we were both encouraged and interested by these outcomes. We were encouraged because the bulk of the students appeared both to have enjoyed the course and to have reached a satisfactory academic standard. We were interested because the minority view was that we had wasted their time. The task and achievement were not too hard for the philosophers was only too apparent here.

On a more fundamental level, the course also proved to be an interesting sociological experience for the team. As the course progressed, we began to realise some of the ironies which existed between what we taught on the course and what we ourselves practised and experienced. For instance, in focusing on Luke's notion of power we became much more conscious of the dimensions of power which were in operation in our own department and university. On another occasion, we encountered a further paradox in introducing students to the sociological perspectives of the conflict and systems theorists, we had coloured our presentation - due in part to our own biases - in favour of the conflict theorists' viewpoints. However, we were adhering, in most instances, to a system's model in conducting our course. This paradox was made more stark to us when conflict did arise in the course. We initially scorned the conflict and saw it as unfavourable, rather than seeing the positive aspects associated with it.
Conclusion
The first conclusion we would like to make is that our belief that theory and orientation courses can be married remains intact. Moreover, our belief that the course must be underpinned by very solid theories has not been changed by our experiences with this course. Indeed, if we learned one lesson above others it was the need to give the students principles which, in turn, gave the students access to a range of strategies. In other words we believe now as we did in the beginning that concentration on what Jerome Bruner referred to as 'non-specific transfer' would have the greatest payoff. Otherwise the students would be left with a set of recipes none of which may be applicable directly to the situations they encounter as beginning teachers.

A second conclusion derived from our experience is that in future we should expect (and indeed cherish) a conflict of ideas about the course. Constant interaction between the ideas of students and teaching staff will lead to the development of a course better suited to the former. In future we will use conflict as an avenue of change.

Third, we would note that while students had their own "reality shocks" about the course, we also experienced some shock about the level of expertise and attitudes brought to the course by some students — particularly the third year teachers college group. This shock was the result of a lack of knowledge on our part — we simply did not obtain enough information about our clientele. It is perhaps worthwhile to remind ourselves that in initiating a new course we, the teachers, were just as much in the novice category as the students.

Fourth, given the remarkable improvement in "standards", we would like to raise the question of the extent we lowered our expectations of the students' written efforts, and the extent this lowering of expectations was reflected in our marking. We believe that students' repertoires for minimising the chance of failure include socialising the teaching staff to their particular level of effort. Students on this course told us individually and collectively that our standards were too high. Being aware of the possibility of reciprocal socialisation, we reinforced each other at team meetings and almost desperately averred to "maintain the same standards and operate the same criteria". There is no question that the students improved, but whether the improvement was a true reflection of a change from a 70 per cent fail rate to a 70 per cent pass rate is a point worth discussing.

Fifth, one of the problems we encountered was the lack of adequate written materials. The set book — Hansen and Herrington (1976) — received a very low rating from the students. Encouraged by our efforts, we have commenced work on a text designed specifically for this type of course. Hopefully it will see the light of day in 1987 and will be a more satisfactory source for our purposes and for others trying similar courses.

Finally, despite the many problems, we enjoyed our experiences. The comments of three students alone were enough to bolster our morale:

"I think the team need to be commended on the way the course was handled."

(Full-time student)

"The tutors really made this course the most helpful experience of all my time at 'varsity'."

(Practising teacher)

"This course was really a challenge — it scared the life out of me but made me think of appropriate strategies for next year."

"Making me think was almost a new experience — unlike other courses. This course should be compulsory for all teachers college students."

(3rd year Teachers College Student)

And, after several pages of hard-hitting but constructive criticism one student remarked "Keep this course going, it does have a point!"

REFERENCES