

FOUR APPROACHES TO CURRICULUM DESIGN

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All educational courses that are recognised as qualifying students to practise in one of the professions have two major functions to perform. The first is that of initiation: the introduction of each individual student to standards of competence which, (it is assumed in advance) can be attained only through attendance on a qualifying course, whatever the length and quality of the student's previous unqualified experience. The second function is regulation; by which is meant the admission to full professional status only of those students who meet certain specified criteria of competence, and the exclusion of those who do not.

In the professions, (including social work), there are no sanctioned alternatives to entry into the student's chosen career, let alone advancement in it. The two functions referred to, therefore, confer on qualifying courses very substantial power to define both what constitutes "good" professional practice and the kind of person likely to make a "good" practitioner. It is appropriate in consequence that what the course does, or purports to do, should be publicly accountable - i.e. subject to scrutiny by representatives of the profession, but also capable of "giving an account" of itself to interested lay inquirers - most importantly to actual or potential consumers of the profession's services.

This account is most commonly to be found, whether in brief summary or in more developed form, in a document setting forth the course's curriculum; and there appears to be fairly general agreement about the elements which should go to make up such an account. There are various ways of categorising these elements, but a common and convenient schema would look something like this:

1. A statement of the ends which the course sets out to achieve;
2. An indication of the content of the course: both of the academic material to be studied, and of the practical experience to be acquired, by the student;
3. Some account of the organising principles on which the course is constructed;
4. Information about the teaching and learning methods which the course will employ;
5. Details of student selection and evaluation procedures.

A schema of this type will be almost boringly familiar to any social work tutor who has undertaken the task of preparing a course curriculum for submission to an accrediting authority, such as CCETSW. So familiar is it, indeed, that it is easy to forget what such an exercise takes for granted: not least, that there ought to be such entities as qualifying courses, located not where people work but in special "places of learning"; that it is appropriate to prescribe in some detail what students will be doing on a course well before they join it; that there exist some independent (and presumably objective) criteria by which course curricula can be judged.

These assumptions may well be justifiable, though they are relatively seldom argued. I do not intend to advance arguments myself either for or against these particular ones: I draw attention to them only to remind readers of how often important and controversial value issues are presented to the world, falsely, as if they were ethically neutral.

The point I want to develop, in this brief paper, is that there is a danger of course curricula themselves appearing to be "innocently" neutral in their presentation when, in fact, they cannot help embodying the ideology of their originators, whether or not these same originators are conscious of them. This is not to deny, of course, that there are plenty of technical comments and criticisms which can validly be made of curricula. It is to assert, rather, that curricula are never merely expositions of recommended techniques, never merely descriptions. The trouble is, that the conceptual schemata within which the curricula are presented can make them look deceptively "value-free", and that the values, in fact, too often remain embedded within the presenting framework, so that they are not made explicit and, therefore, open to challenge.

It may help us in our task of examining different ideological approaches to curriculum design if we recognise that the designers - who are usually college tutors, at least in the first instance - are likely to occupy value positions at some point along two different continua: the professional, (between the extremes of conservatism and radicalism), and the educational (between the extremes of dialogical learning and didactic learning). If we combine the two continua, or dimensions, by means of intersecting Cartesian axes, we can represent the value positions diagrammatically (Fig. 1).

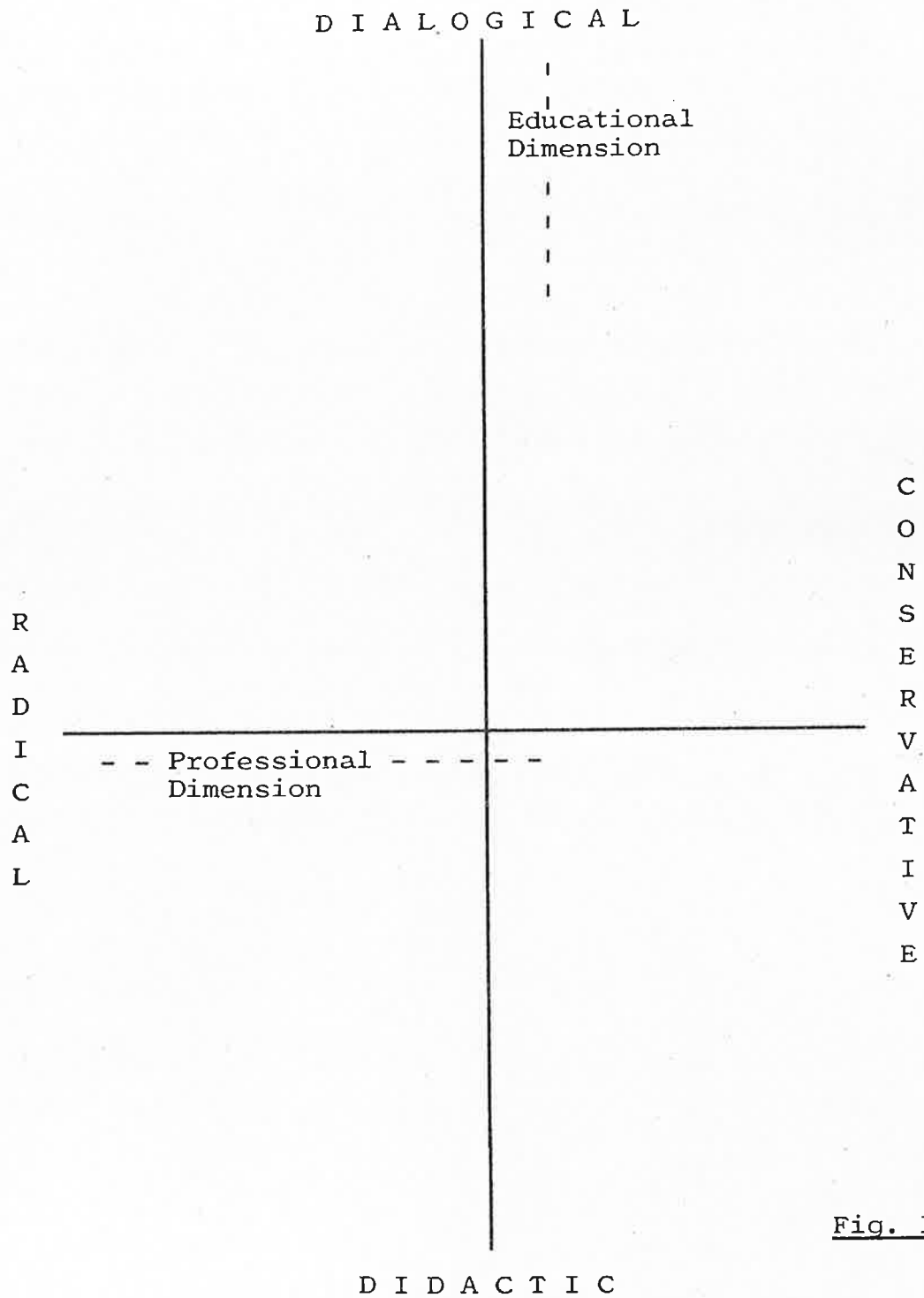


Fig. 1

SOCIAL WORK VALUES IN CURRICULUM DESIGN: THE  
"CONSERVATIVE-RADICAL" CONTINUUM

By "conservative" in this context, I mean a tendency, on the part of the curriculum designers, to emphasize social control as the primary aim of social work, and the more traditional forms of service-delivery, (e.g. one-to-one casework, counselling, therapy directed towards modifying individual behaviour to accord with legal/societal norms), as its primary interventive modes. By contrast, the term "radical" indicates the designers' preference for social change as the primary aim, the preferred modes of intervention being (for social work) relatively innovative, (e.g. the mobilisation of self-help or consciousness-raising groups, initiating or facilitating various types of collective action, therapy concerned to create or restore in individuals or groups the power of making independent choices - whether those choices support societal norms or defy them).

Social work activity is seldom as polarised as this in practice, whatever the professed values of practitioners and curriculum designers. There is a good deal of compromise and frequent occupancy of the "middle-ground". The point is that any position on the proposed continuum reflects a moral stance, not merely those at the extreme ends of it. Compromise and inconsistency are no more "neutral" than "undiluted" conservative or radical practice: what is important is the candour and clarity of course designers as to where they stand themselves on the continuum, however often they may shift their position.

EDUCATIONAL VALUES IN CURRICULUM DESIGN: THE  
"DIDACTIC-DIALOGICAL" CONTINUUM

The two opposite poles of this continuum may also be broadly differentiated according to aim and mode. Didactic teaching and learning tends to operate on a master-and-novice or expert-and-ignoramus model, having as its object the transmission of knowledge, skills and attitudes from those that possess them to those that do not. This transmission is held to be effected primarily by means of instruction - the imparting of which can take many forms, from reading assignments based on approved set texts, through oral expositions and explanations, to demonstrations of "good" practice and role-modelling. It is a fundamental moral principle, (more often taken for granted than made explicit), that the teacher should determine educational directions and control educational methods.

Dialogical values in education, on the other hand, favour a view of teaching and learning that emphasizes the maximum feasible equality of teachers and learners. Those who teach from this perspective usually espouse a phenomenological, rather than positivist, epistemology, maintaining that knowledge is not fixed but fluid, and is (at least outside logic and mathematics) a function of different cultural, and indeed individual, world views. A consequence of such an epistemology is that no person, group or elite can be held to possess a monopoly of "knowledge". Conversely, no person or group is entirely deprived of "knowledge" either: the distinction between those with something to teach and those with a need to learn is always relative, not absolute, and quite often minimal. The aim of teaching now becomes the development of potential in the learner that was already there in embryonic form - even if what develops runs counter to the teacher's own ideology, or conception of what should count as knowledge. In the attainment of this aim, the

process is more one of mutual exploration of the world between teacher and learner than of instruction by the teacher alone - though elements of instruction may well be included at appropriate points. As part of the process, the learner is likely to be encouraged to take as much responsibility for his own learning as lies within his capacity. He will be free to choose, within broad limits, to concentrate on those learning modalities which appear to be most effective for him. The tendency of his teachers will be to stimulate him to become an active participant in a variety of educational events, rather than a passive recipient of their own presentations and viewpoints.

As we saw was the case with social work values on the conservative-radical continuum, it is also true of educational values that they are seldom as neatly differentiated as they appear to be in the above exposition. Educators are as liable as social work practitioners to arrive at moral compromises, (consciously or unconsciously), and to adopt eclectic procedures. The didactic and dialogical poles represent ideal types rather than phenomenal realities.

#### THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE SOCIAL WORK AND EDUCATIONAL DIMENSIONS

While I am unaware of any research that has been undertaken in this matter, my own observations over a number of years suggest that there is little, if any, tendency for the values held by curriculum designers within the social work continuum to relate in a systematic way to their educational values. Those who are social work "conservatives" seem as likely (when wearing their "teacher" hats) to profess "dialogical" principles as they are "didactic" ones; whereas some of the most ardent exponents of "radical" social work turn out to be quite uncompromisingly "didactic" in their educational practice.

THE FOUR APPROACHES AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

Given the independence from one another of the two value continua - that for social work and that for education - their combination in the suggested Cartesian matrix enables us to identify four major ideological positions that tend to underpin the curricula of qualifying social work courses. They are represented diagrammatically in Fig. 2 (Page 70).

By definition, ideological positions are not morally neutral, or value-free. It may nonetheless be helpful in reinforcing a truism which many of us are reluctant to accept, ("I utter objective truth, you propound ideologies, he tells fairy-stories"), if we remind ourselves of the incompatible moral imperatives (or "oughts") inseparable from the extreme poles of our two continua. Within the social work continuum, conservatives believe that social work effort ought to be directed towards the achievement of social consensus, radicals that it should seek to deepen and widen social conflict, lest otherwise the interests of the disinherited and dispossessed be denied. At either end of the educational divide, the didactic hold that the teacher ought, (however benevolent), to be authoritarian, (to uphold standards, and to prevent knowledge from being transmitted in distorted or diluted form), while dialogical educators maintain that the teacher and the learning process must be libertarian, (in recognition of the uncertainty and relativism both of empirical knowledge and of standards).



THE FOUR APPROACHES TO CURRICULUM DESIGN  
CLASSIFIED BY IDEOLOGICAL POSITION

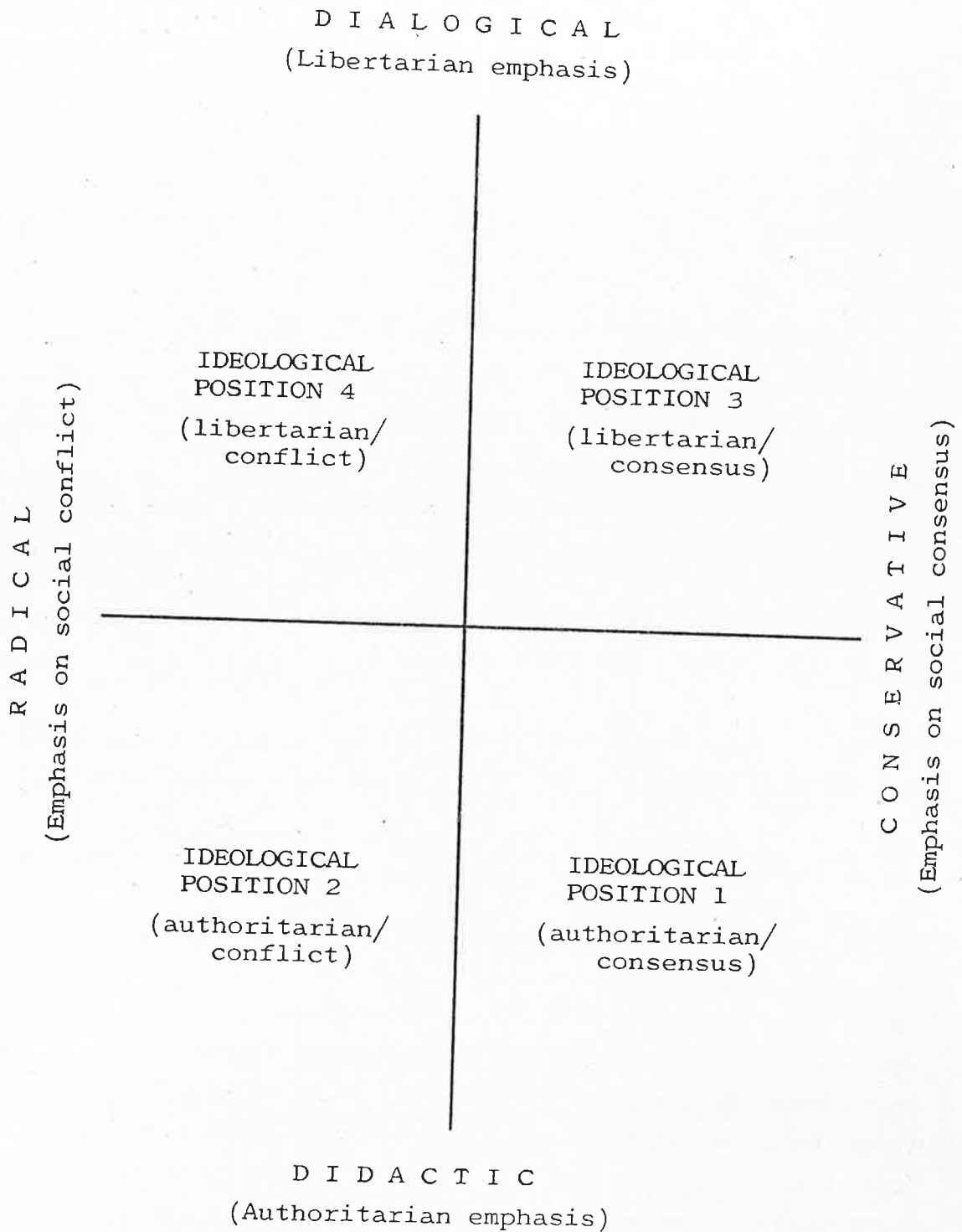


Fig. 2

The four ideological positions may now be set forth as:

	<u>EDUCATIONAL DIMENSION</u>		<u>SOCIAL WORK DIMENSION</u>
1.	Authoritarian	-	Consensus
2.	Authoritarian	-	Conflict
3.	Libertarian	-	Consensus
4.	Libertarian	-	Conflict

I wish now to describe briefly how each of the major elements in curriculum design is likely to differ with respect to the four ideological positions delineated above and in the diagram:

#### 1. THE AUTHORITARIAN/CONSENSUS APPROACH

##### Ends to be achieved

Curricula designed in accordance with this approach will lay considerable stress on the clarity with which objectives are set out; once agreed, it is assumed they are unalterable. Specific learning objectives for individual students are often carefully distinguished from the more general objectives of the course, (these last are usually called aims, and will frequently incorporate ideological elements, explicit or concealed). Decisions about what objectives will be pursued tend to be firmly in the hands of University or College tutorial staff. Others - even fieldwork teachers - are rarely consulted.

### Content of curriculum

Academically, there tends to be a fair degree of respect for subjects, or disciplines, as traditionally demarcated. Subjects within the behavioural sciences will be taught "neat", and collectively they will be regarded as constituting the indisputable "knowledge-base" for social work. The majority of them will be compulsory for all students.

Theoretical studies in social work are likely to be fairly sharply separated from the acquisition of skills. Typically, the former are taught in college as a sequence in social work methods, with some emphasis on social control ideology, while the latter are the predominant (if not exclusive) concern of the practice teacher - who may be expected to comment, in reports, on the student's ability to integrate theory and practice, without necessarily receiving encouragement to contribute to that integration from the standpoint of theory. Students are rather unlikely to be given much choice in their practice placements, and play comparatively little part in the assessment of their own professional and educational needs.

### Organising Principles

The curriculum tends to be organised on relatively straightforward sequential or linear assumptions, with material presented, (for example), in a seemingly rational progression from simple to complex, from past to present, from part to whole. Similar considerations affect the organisation of practice placements, (e.g. progression from what are conceived by the teacher to be "easy" to "difficult" cases; from placements where the student is primarily an observer to those in which he takes on substantial responsibility of his own).

### Teaching and Learning Methods

The emphasis on transmission, (of knowledge, skills and attitudes) from teacher to learner, leads to the rarely-questioned assumption that learning will necessarily result from teaching. Hence, in this approach, teachers tend to be concerned most with perfecting their techniques of transmission - through lectures, guided discussion, reading recommendations, demonstrations (both in academic studies and in practice), and interpretive comment in supervision sessions and tutorials. Student questioning - even when tough and challenging - may well be welcomed; student initiatives to secure greater responsibility for their learning are more likely to be met with resistance or scepticism. Teaching is conceived (by the curriculum designers) as relatively active, learning as relatively passive.

### Selection and Evaluation

Selection is rigorous, with much emphasis placed on information derived from individual interviews, (with highly specific purposes), and serious weight often given to tests of intelligence and personality. Evaluation is frequently based on formal examination of academic work, together with assessments of practical placements to the compilation of which students contribute only occasionally, if at all.

## 2. THE AUTHORITARIAN/CONFLICT APPROACH

### Ends to be achieved

Since the objectives of the curriculum, broadly speaking, are to produce agents of social change, they are likely to be at substantial odds with those of employers and accrediting agencies. Curriculum designers may well seek to ensure that their objectives remain latent rather than manifest - particularly through "watering down" the social change ideology in the more general ones, (the "aims"). Objectives are not thought to be alterable or negotiable.

### Content of curriculum

The idea of a fixed and traditional "knowledge-base" is likely to be rejected on the grounds that it reflects the interest of a dominant capitalist class. The "purity" of academic disciplines may well be respected, but theory-conflict, both within and across subjects, will be emphasized, with strong pressures on students to see the resolution of those conflicts, (or the elimination of contradictions held to be inherent in capitalist society), only in revolutionary social change. Fieldwork placements are as likely to be located, (by tutor fiat, rather than student choice), in "conservative" as in "radical" settings; but students will be encouraged to be more sharply critical of the former.

### Organising Principles

These will also be linear and sequential, with a tendency to emphasize dialectical progression, in the historical development of both social policy and the behavioural sciences. There is likely to be more attention than in the previous approach to periodic recapitulation, as a means of stressing those learning-points felt by tutors

to be of cardinal importance.

#### Teaching and Learning Methods

An abundant list of approved "left-wing" texts will be recommended, reinforced by lectures with a similar slant. There will probably be at least a gesture in the direction of experiential learning techniques, (such as role-play and simulations), but these will be very much under the control of tutorial staff. The major teaching aim will be that of raising the students' consciousness; and a student's challenge to the ideology presented may be taken as evidence that his consciousness has not yet been "successfully" raised.

#### Selection and Evaluation

Personality and intelligence tests are likely to play a much less prominent part in student selection than in the previous approach. A preference is likely for continuous assessment as the principal means of evaluation, with tutors probably allowing relatively little scope for self-assessment by students.

### 3. THE LIBERTARIAN/CONSENSUS APPROACH

#### Ends to be achieved

Statements of objectives will in general reflect a social control ideology, but they may well be arrived at only after some negotiation with employers and fieldwork teachers, if not with students. On the whole they will be seen as modifiable (if appropriate) even within the currency of one course, rather than as permanent and sacrosanct.

### Content of curriculum

There will be some questioning of the appropriateness of the boundaries round academic disciplines, and a disposition to breach them in the presentation of academic material. The concept of a social-scientific "body of knowledge" for social work will tend to be accepted; but there may well be a division of the curriculum into "core" and "elective" studies, only the first of which are compulsory. Theoretical study and skills teaching in social work will often be diffused across college-agency boundaries, with practitioners regarded as co-teachers of equal (or almost equal) status with college tutors.

### Organising Principles

Less emphasis will be placed on linear and sequential organisation according to the logic of academic subjects, more on "spiral" or "cyclical" opportunities for students to cover similar material more than once from different standpoints, (thus acknowledging the importance of attending to the ways in which students learn). It is likely that some topics will be presented as cross-disciplinary themes rather than as neat academic subjects.

There will almost certainly be attempts - shared jointly between college tutors and fieldwork teachers - to ensure a fair degree of integration, for students, between theory and practice.

### Teaching and Learning Methods

A focus on the needs of the learner will tend to stimulate teachers to find innovative ways of presenting material, and encourage limited initiatives in this direction by students themselves. "Experiential" learning events may constitute

a fairly high proportion of the total teaching time, and there will be relatively little reliance on lectures and standard-type discussions. There may be some student choice of placements, and it is likely that placement reports will be openly and thoroughly debated between fieldwork teacher and student.

#### Selection and Evaluation

Generous time is likely to be allocated to student selection, with students encouraged to meet previous students and discover as much as possible about the course before arrival. Evaluation may include some formal examination, but will tend to favour continuous assessment.

#### 4. THE LIBERTARIAN/CONFLICT APPROACH

##### Ends to be achieved

Within this approach, course objectives will themselves be considered as problematic, and are as likely to be opened up for discussion and modification by students as by fieldwork or other colleagues of the curriculum designers. Whenever possible, disagreements will tend to be resolved through compromises between interested parties, rather than by unilateral tutorial staff decisions. Objectives, once agreed, remain open to change. It is entirely possible that different (and irreconcilable) professional objectives will be pursued by different groups of students.

##### Content of curriculum

This will often be developed (and altered) as the course proceeds, after consultation between tutorial staff, fieldwork



teachers and students. Scant respect for the boundaries of academic disciplines will be displayed. There will probably (on the academic side) be an eclectic and opportunist mix of subject and theme teaching. As many topics as possible will be (overtly) optional, though there may be heavy informal pressure to attend all or most teaching events.

Theory-conflict (in social work and the behavioural sciences) will be acknowledged - indeed highlighted - but relatively little pressure will be placed on students to resolve them in one ideological direction rather than another. As far as social work practice is concerned, there will be a concern to keep theory and skill development as closely-related as possible. They are likely to be pursued together in college and on placement: as far as possible, social work study and practice will be a collaborative enterprise between tutor, fieldwork teacher and student.

### Organising Principles

The organisation of student learning experiences within a systematic pattern may not be a prominent feature of this approach. For teacher, student and onlooker, the learning process is likely to feel like a spontaneous but haphazard muddle - creative at its best, frustratingly fragmented at its worst. Structurally, the curriculum may resemble a skeletal framework, with particular syllabuses, subject areas and themes strung along it on an incremental basis. At times there will be a degree of planned coherence between the incremental segments,; at others it will be absent. Much responsibility is placed on the student himself for the integration of his learning - not only within the academic sequences but across college and placement experiences. He is likely to be given a good deal of choice in his placements.

### Teaching and Learning Methods

There will be substantial emphasis on methods that require the active participation of the learner - especially on those that engage him at an affective level. Intellectually demanding assignments may be seen as a relatively less urgent priority than the development of emotional authenticity. The students - both as a group and as individuals - will be expected to initiate and take responsibility for a number of educational events; there will tend to be less distance between teachers and learners than in the other approaches.

### Selection and Evaluation

The ideal would be for all applicants to be admitted to the course - "dropping out" as appropriate during its currency. In practice, selection procedures tend to be informal and multi-faceted, with former students participating in the process, and their views as highly regarded by course staff as those of their colleagues. Evaluation - both of academic work and practice - follows a continuous assessment pattern, with a strong emphasis on student self-assessment, (sometimes also peer-assessment by fellow students), and a readiness on the part of college and field staff to debate issues of dissent between themselves and the students on whom they have made assessments.

### CONCLUDING COMMENT

As will be seen - and acknowledging that all four ideological positions (or approaches) are ideal types rather than representations of reality - different values give rise to vastly different kinds of curricula.

I do not attempt to pass moral judgements on them: it seems clear to me that each of them will suit some students better than others, and that each is better adapted than the others to developing the specific thrust of social work practice that it favours. The existence of all four ideologies, (and variants of them), could greatly enrich the social work education (and, ultimately, the social work) scene; but only if those exponents of them whose job it is to design curricula declare their moral stance quite openly and explicitly to the world. Students and employers would then know where they stood and what to expect. Controversy would doubtless be rife, and often uncomfortable - but that would be considerably healthier than a vain belief that the ideal, value-free curriculum is somewhere to be found behind the imperfect, ideology-ridden ones we currently have.