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Published online: 10 Jul 2006.

To cite this article: David H. Hargreaves (1977) A phenomenological approach to classroom decision-making, Cambridge Journal of Education, 7:1, 12-20, DOI: 10.1080/0305764770070103

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0305764770070103

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A phenomenological approach to classroom decision-making

DAVID H. HARGREAVES

Common sense suggests that the decisions made by teachers in school are of different kinds or levels. At one extreme are the highly general decisions which affect the structure and culture of the school in profound ways. Many curricular decisions, such as whether or not to introduce an integrated social studies, and organisational decisions, such as whether to stream or to adopt mixed ability grouping, are of this kind. At the other extreme are the multitudinous and fleeting decisions which every teacher makes daily in his classroom, often without much conscious deliberation, such as whether to pose the question to John or Mary, whether to tell Tom to stop talking, whether to explain a problem to an individual pupil or to the whole class. My concern in this paper is with these ubiquitous, transient and mundane decisions that pervade the experience of every teacher.

The present analysis of such decisions is phenomenological, or more accurately one possible version of a phenomenological analysis. By this I mean simply that my focus is on the teacher's experience of such decision-making rather than on, say, the origins, sources, causes, consequences or effectiveness of the decisions, all of which are legitimate topics for a social scientific analysis. My assumption is that many of these routine decisions by teachers take the form of what Alfred Schutz calls 'cookery-book knowledge' or recipes which provide 'typical solutions for typical problems available for typical actors'. That is to say, the problems about which the teacher makes the decisions are recognised as familiar and regularly recurring ones, which arise in familiar circumstances in the classroom and relate to familiar persons, pupils. It is these qualities of similarity and regular occurrence, combined with relative ease and speed of disposal, which permit us to call these decisions 'routine' ones. Occasionally, of course, these decisions do not flow so readily, and become a cause for hesitation, reflection, postponement, and even anxiety, but this is not normally the case.

In thus demarcating somewhat artificially one class of decisions (see Sutcliffe and Whitfield (1976) for an elaborate typology of decisions), we must recognise that most of these decisions have not always been routine for teachers, but have become so through experience. For the student or inexperienced teacher they are a frequent source of deliberation and puzzlement. This often leads to a cumulative
anxiety, since the immediacy and constantly shifting nature of classroom events demand that most classroom decisions are made 'on the spot' in response to those events; only a few decisions can be postponed for systematic consideration at a later stage. In the experienced teacher, then, the knowledge on which the teacher bases the decision is essentially tacit and need not be processed in a very conscious way. Were it otherwise, the decision could never be made quickly and easily. The teacher's experience is one in which the decision is made as it were 'instinctively' or 'automatically', so freeing the teacher's conscious mind to cope with other matters.

One consequence of this is that it is rather pointless to ask the teacher, after a routine decision has been made, what were the contents of his mind at the time of the decision. For in a very real sense there is little that he can report of substance except that 'It seemed the right thing to do in the circumstances' or 'I did it almost without thinking'. We cannot expect the teacher to provide what is of the essence of such decision-making, namely its subconscious components. What we can do is to ask the teacher for a commentary upon the decision after the event, for instance by reporting back to him what he did or by showing him a film of his actions. This commentary would consist of a rationalisation of his conduct in two senses. In the first sense the commentary can consist of a justification of the decision in which the teacher seeks to render it as socially acceptable to the person who asks for the commentary, whether it be a researcher, a student, or an inspector. In so doing the teacher may adjust his account to what he sees as the values, expectations and interests of him who asks for the commentary. This may tell us relatively little about what lies behind the decision. In the second sense the commentary can consist of the teacher's methods of rendering his decision as a rational action, that is, his means of understanding his action as having purposes or intentions (goals) which are to be realised through particular understandings of events (knowledge) and through particular actions (means).

Although in practical methodology these two kinds of rationalisation are not easily distinguishable, my assumption is that the latter form constitutes a legitimate source of uncovering the common sense knowledge which becomes tacit in the decision-making itself. The use of commentary is one method, however flawed, by which the tacit can be made into a matter about which one can speak. My own experience in the use of such commentary by teachers suggests that they do not always find this very easy to do; that much depends upon the questions one asks; and that any single commentary tells me only about some of the elements involved.

I have reported some of my work on decision-making by teachers with reference to deviance/discipline aspects of pupil conduct elsewhere (Hargreaves, Hester and Mellor, 1975). Here I want to draw out the more general implications of that analysis for a model which
can be applied to a much greater variety of routine classroom decisions. At its simplest, the decision can be divided analytically into two elements. The first is the 'problem' about which the decision has to be made. This problem is the state of affairs which calls for some action from the teacher (though the action may consist of taking no overt action), and where more than one possible reaction is available (for choice between alternatives is of the essence of decision-making). The second element is the selection and execution of the preferred response to the initiating problem. These two elements are closely tied to one another. The events that constitute the problem requiring the decision can be divided into three:

*The act* — *what* is being done by the relevant person(s), usually the pupils but sometimes also the teacher himself, and *how* is it being done?

*The actor(s) — who* is doing the act and *why* are they doing it?

*The situations — where* and *when* are the actors doing what act?

The definition of the problem (and its solution, as we shall see later) rests upon the teacher's understanding of the act-actor-situation matrix. The apparent simplicity of this matrix masks the extremely complex interpretive work undertaken by the teacher, for almost certainly no two teachers would even define the same event in precisely the same way. Certainly they would often come to similar definitions of the event, but there would never be an exact equivalence between teachers; and there would be greater divergences between teachers over whether the event constituted a 'problem' over which a decision should be made. But my interest is less in the differences in the interpretational work of teachers, important a topic as that is, and more in common structures in their common sense knowledge. For teachers share a wide range of definitions of acts as certain kinds of act which they feel they can recognise without difficulty—working hard, looking bored, fidgetting, talking out of turn, being cheeky, concentrating, and so on. Such acts can be recognised (interpreted) 'at a glance', and this recognition rests on a highly skilled capacity to code quickly.

Yet the act is interlocked with the actor. The meaning of the act depends in part upon the actor who is performing the act. Act and actor are like figure and ground in Gestalt psychology: each can be understood only in relation to the other for each is part of the other and the whole is more than a simple addition of two elements. Just as teachers typify acts as certain kinds of act, they also typify pupils as certain kinds of persons, with particular qualities and attributes, with a particular psychological make-up and a particular history and biography. The act which the pupil commits can be understood by the teacher only by locating that act within his typification of the pupil as a person. Telling support for this is provided for the fact that we
draw on our knowledge of a person in order to formulate his motives for an act, and once certain motives are imputed, the meaning of the act is transformed by this attachment of motives to it. The meaning of a pupil's breaking of a test-tube in a science lesson is conditional upon whether the teacher believes it was done by accident, through carelessness or as a deliberate act of destructiveness, and the ascription of such motives depends, *inter alia*, on what the teacher knows of the person who broke it.

Both act and actor are further interpreted in the light of the situation in which they are embedded. The meaning of 'running' as an act changes according to whether the pupil is running in the playground or in a busy corridor—and the meaning of the latter changes if the teacher believes the running is motivated by a desire to inform the authorities that a serious accident has just taken place. Similarly, talkativeness as a pupil attribute is understood differently when it occurs in a classroom examination as opposed to in a meeting of the school debating society. My illustrations are intentionally simple but they do betray the enormous complexity of the linkages in the act-actor-situation configuration by which events are interpreted as 'normal' or 'correct' or as a 'problem' which requires a decision.

In disciplinary matters in classrooms one of the most common problems arises when a teacher defines a pupil act as being a relatively minor breach of the rules and as being slightly disrupting, as when a pupil is talking when he is not supposed to be. The decision posed by this problem for the teacher is whether to take no overt action or whether to intervene immediately, the latter choice clearly involving the further issue of selecting an appropriate form of intervention. The evidence suggests that the decision taken by the teacher rests in part upon his capacity to predict, based upon his common sense knowledge, whether (a) the act will simply 'peter out' of its own accord in a few moments, or (b) the act will tend to persist if left untreated, so that the pupil will go on talking rather than working for the rest of the lesson, or (c) the act will escalate, either by becoming 'shouting' rather than 'talking' or by spreading to other pupils who are not currently talking. If the teacher opts for prediction (a) and decides to ignore the act but in fact (c) occurs, then the teacher has clearly failed to 'nip it in the bud' which is a central element in disciplinary skills. If on the other hand the teacher predicts (c) and decides to intervene when, without that intervention (a) would have ensued, then the intervention was unnecessary and itself disruptive. The teacher's capacity to make the correct prediction, and so to make the right decision, rests upon a clear understanding of the kind of talk that is taking place, the identity of person who has initiated the talk and the identity of the person who is listening, and the situation in which that talk is occurring, including all the preceding events of the lesson, and even of previous lessons.
Let us suppose that the teacher decides to intervene against the pupil who is talking. There is an enormous range of possible treatments for this minor act of deviance. The teacher may merely look rather hard at the offending pupil or he may without speaking prowl around in close proximity to him. At the other extreme the teacher may make the pupil come to sit at the front or even send him out of the room. How does the teacher choose from this vast range of alternative treatments? Again the teacher's typification of the pupil and his understanding of the situation play a significant role in the making of this decision. For part of his knowledge of a pupil consists in the capacity to predict how the pupil is likely to respond to different treatments ('I only need to look at Kathleen' versus 'Once Kevin starts talking he won't stop until I bring him to the front') in different situations ('Martin always takes a few minutes to settle down after P.E.' versus 'When we're doing geometry Margaret will do anything rather than work').

These two features—the teacher's capacity to predict the future course of pupil acts and his capacity to predict pupil reactions to treatment—are but two elements in that enormous complex whole which we call the teacher's common sense knowledge of life in classrooms. But these skills are by no means the whole of the story; they are embedded and affected by the teacher's values, within which I include not only the teacher's ideology and pedagogical style, but also his more diffuse social values. Thus in my study of decision-making in relation to disciplinary events I sought to show that teachers feel constrained not only by the need to keep the lesson flowing with minimal disruption but also by a set of moral considerations of social justice, such as making the punishment fit the crime and making an equitable distribution of his time between different pupils. Teachers may share common skills but nevertheless reach different decisions because they take into account, or assign different weights to, certain social values. Decisions are made partly on the basis of social skills and partly on the basis of certain value commitments: both are encapsulated and rapidly processed in every routine classroom decision. The distinction between skills and values is, once again, an analytical one. Though the teacher may temper his decision in the light of his own moral considerations, part of his skill in predicting the pupil's response to his act consists in knowing what values of morality and justice the pupil will draw upon to evaluate the teacher's act.

My own work has concentrated upon decisions made by teachers with reference to infractions of the teacher's disciplinary code, but I believe that the same general approach can be taken to decision-making in any and every aspect of classroom life, and by pupils as well as teachers. One would expect a focus upon, say, curricular decisions in the classroom, covering such matters as the pacing and sequencing and use of different pedagogical structures within a single
lesson, to expose rather different facets of the teacher's common sense knowledge, and so different skills and values. We would then have to relate the different aspects together since we have no good a priori reason for expecting a lack of continuity and coherence between 'disciplinary' and 'curricular' areas of decision-making—they are merely convenient keys to unlocking different doors into the room of the teacher's common sense knowledge. An interactionist approach, in the tradition of Mead, Burke and Blumer, or a more phenomenological approach, in the tradition of Schutz, Garfinkel and Cicourel, permit a variety of models and analyses, but all would share, I believe, a fundamental concern with the act-actor situation matrix at the heart of human action, and all would see decision-making as an artful, skilled accomplishment in which values have a place.

From this point of view decision-making is not to be regarded as a separate unity, artificially fractured from the rest of action. Rather it is one way of looking at, or finding a point of analytical access to, action itself. At present we know surprisingly little about the skills of teaching, especially where the skills are essentially social in character. And most of the work on values is dislocated from the practice of teaching, mainly because the methods of obtaining and assessing values, such as tests, questionnaires and interviews, are themselves divorced from practical action. Sharp and Green (1975) have recently examined the disjunction between the values that 'progressive' teachers profess (to researchers or to their colleagues) and their classroom practice. As social scientists we ought to expect this to be the case, for the disjunction between values and action, theory and practice, words and deeds, is a well-known and widespread phenomenon (Deutscher, 1965). The reason may be relatively transparent. When teachers are asked to display their values (to researchers, parents, colleagues, etc.) they doubtless feel constrained by that situation to express their ideals and to assert a strong degree of coherence, consistency and integration among those values. Practice will not be a simple reflection of those values because practice arises in a very different situation which has a quite different structure and set of constraints.

I have argued that practice can be analysed in terms of the teacher's understanding and definition of the situation (the act-actor-situation matrix) and his understanding of the skills he possesses to cope with the situation as it has become defined. Values do not disappear at this point; rather the values are related to emergent nature of the situation and the teacher's skills for handling it. The 'abstract' values (as expressed in tests, questionnaires and interviews) become 'contexted' values. It is this contextualisation of values which is a highly complex phenomenon, partly because contextualisation often involves a selective application of values and partly because in application values frequently conflict with one another. For instance, the realisation of one value might be seen by the
teacher, in the light of his skills, necessarily to involve undermining another value. In other words, when values are contextualised they are often experienced as dilemmas, as my own work and that of Berlak et al (1975) suggests. What from one point of view can be described as 'inconsistency' is from this point of view a natural, rational and inevitable feature of action.

Values are embedded in teachers' classroom practices; but because there is no single correspondence between 'abstract' values and everyday practice, it is a research task to analyse precisely how values are, often tacitly, embedded in action. Here is the significance of classroom decision-making, for it is in decision-making that all these features find their point of articulation. The schematic model is shown overleaf.

My claim is that through an examination of the common sense knowledge, skills and values of teachers we can provide a basic model of teaching, and an important method of achieving this is through the collation and analysis of teacher commentaries. Such an analysis would yield important practical as well as theoretical insights, because if we can speak about what in the experienced teacher is subconscious and taken for granted, then there exists the possibility that we can teach this knowledge to the novice teacher and speed up the process of skill acquisition which in its natural development occurs slowly and painfully. The weakest point in teacher education—the move away from the concept of teacher training is significant—is still the provision of the student teacher with classroom skills by which he can make quick and effective decisions. We give good preparation in curricular matters, but many skills are left to the student to pick up, naturally, we hope, on teaching practice. It is the perennial complaint of student teachers that there is too great a gap in their training between theory and practice; and as long as we can give no reasonable account of how values are embedded in practice, it will continue to be a valid criticism.

An equally important task is the facilitation of change in the experienced teacher. It is relatively easy to change the values to which an experienced teacher will claim a verbal allegiance. Perhaps the disjunction between espoused values and classroom practice, as examined in the work of Sharp and Green and others, indicates the readiness of teachers to change their values as well as their difficulties in transforming their action in line with their values. For as long as the relation between skills and values remains at a tacit level, must we not expect values to change in relatively superficial ways? If we could explicate the interrelationship between values and skills, as betrayed in decision-making, then perhaps we could provide the experienced teacher with the tools to uncover and to reconstruct his own common sense knowledge, skills and values and thus to change more thoroughly and with self-awareness. It is a high hope for a
A SCHEMATIC MODEL OF DECISION-MAKING

STEP 1  The definition of the "problem"

STEP 2  Prediction of future course of problem

STEP 3  Prediction of effects of possible treatments/reactions to the "problem"

STEP 4  Selection of treatment/reaction and decision to implement

STEP 5  Check on effects of implementation

NOTE: Skill consists in the rapid decision-making by which each step in the decision-making chain 1-5 is systematically related to the act-actor-situation matrix, the repertoire of treatments, and the contexted values.
research programme; but there are relatively few alternatives open to those who decide to make a career out of helping new and inexperienced teachers to be better in the exercise of their profession.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


