Teaching about development: Some professional issues

David Goldsworthy

Briefing Paper No. 32
December 1993
Teaching about development: Some professional issues

David Goldsworthy, Politics, Monash University

This paper discusses the teaching of development studies in Western academic institutions, with illustrations and comments drawn from the Australian and British experience. It does not attempt to scrutinise any specific course or courses, nor to provide any systematic tabulation of course offerings. Rather it seeks to raise some general issues for consideration.

There are people in these two countries, and no doubt all Western countries, for whom the pertinent question is whether development studies should be taught at all. They include disciplinary traditionalists who regard any kind of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary teaching as intrinsically rather suspect; and academic critics who after their various fashions are sceptical of the theoretical credentials of development studies. There are also government and university officials motivated to a large extent by considerations of cost-effectiveness and 'relevance'. The 1980s, it should be remembered, was not only a 'lost decade' for development in much of the South - a time of recession, debt crisis, collapsing commodity markets, infrastructural decay, environmental deterioration, and many other crippling problems - but also a time of growing self-absorption in Western countries such as Australia and Britain as they struggled to reverse the declines in their own economic performance and living standards. The effects of this self-preoccupation included a lessening concern with poorer parts of the world ('compassion fatigue') and a sharpening of the emphasis on the need for academic work to be relevant to national interests.

In these circumstances, the development studies professions in both countries felt the need to take stock. In workshops and conferences they looked afresh at what they were doing and reformulated their rationales (see e.g. Faber 1987, Bown 1988, Goldsworthy 1988). Many of their deliberations necessarily dealt with the research aspect of development studies, and there were some useful discussions of the policy relevance of development research (e.g. Manning 1985). But there were also discussions of the teaching aspect, the focal concern of this paper; and a certain amount of what follows is extrapolated from these 1980s debates.

It needs perhaps to be noted that these exercises in self-analysis were conducted primarily among representatives of the social sciences, notably economics, sociology, anthropology, geography, demography, political science and history. Hence social science perspectives generally predominated. But not entirely; the proceedings of a development studies conference held in Australia in 1987, for example, included contributions from a nutritionist, a molecular biologist, an agricultural scientist, an environmental scientist, a civil engineer, a business entrepreneur, an aid administrator and an NGO official (Goldsworthy 1988).
certainly, will every other prospectus one is likely to come across. True interdisciplinarity is extraordinarily difficult to achieve, with efforts in this direction often getting no further than the staging post of multidisciplinarity. But the principle remains of central importance. If any defence of it against the disciplinary traditionalists is required, a model one can be found in Lalage Bown's presidential address to the British Development Studies Association. "Development studies are grounded in economics but would be extremely jejune if they did not enlist other disciplines as well; for the human participant in the development process is not 'the creature only of the market place' but has 'a past, a culture, social relationships and political opinions' - comprehension of which requires the interaction of disciplinary approaches, in both research and teaching" (Bown 1988, 632). Here it should be noted that the term 'culture' is a particularly complex one, embracing matters spiritual and ethical as well as behavioural and material; there is thus a case for including moral philosophy among the relevant disciplines.

Secondly, there is policy orientation. By their very nature development studies programmes, even when they are not being explicitly prescriptive, raise issues of prescription. As Mike Faber remarked in his earlier presidential address to the same association, "it is sometimes said that what is distinctive about development studies is that they are studies for development'. So they generally are. Of course, to say that this is a distinctive attribute is not to say that it is a unique one; in Faber's words, "I am not convinced that, in this resp.-ct, development studies are all that different from say medicine or even economics" (Faber 1987:533; emphasis in original).

And thirdly, there is the insistence that development studies can have useful things to say about the roles and the problems of Western countries as well as Southern. By 'roles' is meant the parts that Western countries play in the global development process; it continues to be necessary to stress to Western students the point that in order to understand the patterns of change in the South they must also study what their own countries are doing. And by 'problems' is meant the developmental issues that arise in Western countries themselves. In Britain the relevance of development studies to the home society has been recognised for some time. As long ago as 1977 the IDS published an issue of its Bulletin on the theme 'Britain: A case for development'. As Bown points out,

the predicament of the dependent areas of Britain . . . may not be as dramatic as the predicament of some other countries, but it is hard to see how one can devise any theoretical framework for the study of the development process (and factors inhibiting it) which is somehow limited by geographical location (Bown 1988:633).

As for Australia in this connection, there are some important points to be made. One is that the continuing poverty and deprivation of Aboriginal people means, in effect, that there is a Third World, even a Fourth World, inside Australia's own boundaries. Another is that Australia itself has many of the economic attributes of a 'South' country. To the extent that Australia's economic profile resembles that of many much poorer countries and Australia's fortunes appear tied up with theirs (for example in their shared dependence on the export of primary commodities), so aspects of development studies become powerfully applicable to Australia.

**What sort of programme should be offered?**

Answers to this question will vary according to temperament, ideology, interest, training and the client group one has in mind. In practice the curriculum will in any case be constrained by the kinds of teaching resources, specialisms and skills that are available. But it is possible to make a broad distinction between two types of programme: the generalised overview type, and the practical or vocational type.

The first of these is typically a social sciences programme whose aim is to impart a basic understanding of the causes of world poverty and the possibilities for remedial change. Details will vary, but at a general level, many would probably agree with the list spelled out by Cherry Gertzel:

- an historical perspective;
- an emphasis not simply on theory but on the interaction of theory and practice;
- recognition of the dynamic nature of development as a process of change;
- recognition of its political nature;
- concern to relate macro and micro levels of action, probably through a strong focus on case studies as the basis for teaching. Such case studies would be drawn from the research of involved staff, thus linking research and teaching.

There would be a component on development education that would address the problem of public awareness of development as an Australian as well as a Third World issue (Gertzel 1988:139; emphases in original). The envisaged benefits of this sort of broad gauge social science programme will be somewhat different for different clientele. For Western students, programmes typically aim to build understanding, and through that, empathy and concern. For development professionals (such as NGO officials) who enrol in such programmes - and to this
writer’s knowledge quite a few do - the aim is generally to impart background knowledge, a sense of theory, a view of the big picture: the wood, as distinct from the trees of their daily work. For students from developing countries, many of whom will no doubt be on leave from development-related government employment at home, it may be hoped that Western-based development studies courses will help to open up different perspectives on their countries’ problems, providing insights and stimulating lateral thinking. The interaction of home-based and overseas students will itself be important in the forging of contacts and longer term commitments to work in a field which requires international co-operation above all. Further, as Gertzel argues,

The presence of students from the Third World is all the more important given the limited knowledge and experience of the underdeveloped world that most Australian students start out with (This is not however an argument for full fee-paying private students from abroad but for an expansion of the Australian overseas assistance programme in education and training) (Gertzel 1988:138).

The second kind of programme is based on the premise that there should be a direct and utilitarian connection between the syllabus and employment in the field. In other words, it seeks to train students in specific developmental skills. Actually, even the most generalised social science course can (and demonstrably does) motivate some students to go on to development-related work, for example in a private sector or public sector aid agency or in development education and advocacy (see Denholm 1985). But the more obviously ‘applied’ training programmes, of course, have practical usefulness as their very rationale. The Select Guide to development studies courses in Britain emphasises courses ‘which have been specially established in Britain to help train the manpower of the newly independent nations’; for example courses in agricultural planning, community development, education policy, local government, project planning, public sector management, and social policy (Norris, 1988). In Australia a major provider of courses intended to ‘train manpower’ for development is the National Centre for Development Studies (NCDS) at the Australian National University, where the stress is:

quite concretely on influencing the practice of development professionals, rather than abstract theorising on the morality and rationale of the process, or indeed on its innate nature. In its education and training aspects, the NCDS caters to those who either are, or plan to be, involved in making development policy. . . . Its client group is not the educated middle class of the developed world but the professional classes of the developed and developing world

working in the development vineyard (in the interest, of course, of the general population) (Brogan 1988:130-131).

Specifically, the NCDS offers courses in economics, demography, environment, and development administration. In all these areas the stress is on inculcating professional skills.

Extending the theme of practical vocational utility, it is of course the case that many (perhaps most) Southern students in Western academies are pursuing courses not in the social, policy, and administrative sciences at all but in disciplines and faculties ‘on the other side of the campus’. Programmes in agricultural science, veterinary science, medicine, botany, forestry, public health, civil engineering, computer science and so on are widely offered in both Australian and British university systems and absorb a large number of both private and sponsored students from developing countries. Plainly these students’ programmes of studies are potentially relevant to their countries’ development in all manner of ways. But such students are seldom regarded, and seldom regard themselves, as engaged in development studies. The great majority of them are simply aiming to become qualified professionals, tout court.

Indeed, in Western academies there appears to be a rather general lack of interaction between the social science approaches and the applied science approaches to the problems of development, with only the former of these being normally included under the ‘development studies’ rubric. Interdisciplinarity, it seems, goes only so far. This is perhaps unfortunate. Obviously there are important differences in kind between the two types of approach, but in the overall picture both are of value in ways that might best be regarded as complimentary rather than antithetical. The more that scientists, engineers and technicians learn about larger social issues, and the more that generalist social scientists, planners and administrators learn about the hard detail of technical development work, the better. Manning argues that deliberate measures should be taken to bring the different student groups together, and in particular that “more needs to be done to link those [overseas] students who undertake [applied] postgraduate degrees . . . into disciplinary and development studies networks” (Manning 1985:3).

The intention is laudable, although it has to be said that in practice the gulf between the two cultures would appear to remain as difficult to bridge as ever.

Problem areas

All teaching programmes encounter problems. Of principal concern to this discussion are the kinds of problems that may arise from the very fact of having a development studies programme located in a Western country.
With reference firstly to the more generalised social science programmes, perhaps most important is the problem that teaching may reflect, consciously or otherwise, ethnocentrically Western premises according to which Western ideas and theories continue to function explicitly or implicitly as the 'right' ideas and theories. It is not just the crude notion of 'the West as development model' that is being referred to here (although that remains very much a live issue). The underlying point is rather more subtle than that. This is a field of research and teaching in which "persons from one part of the world study the problems of another part of the world and prescribe their solutions", and in which "we [the British] expose foreign students and practitioners in significant numbers to our ideas about development" (Bown 1988:634). In his well known article 'The irrelevance of development studies', Michael Edwards was mainly targeting those Western experts in rural development who do their fieldwork and impose their schemes without bothering to absorb the accumulated experiential wisdom of the people themselves (Edwards 1989). Might there not be an all too similar - if usually unwitting - attitude among social science teachers who, carrying all the baggage of their Western identity into the classroom with them, proceed to offer their courses so very far removed, in spatial, cultural and material terms - from the scene of the problem? And do so on the basis of texts virtually all of which will have been written by Western scholars?

Sensitivity to this risk of 'academic neo-colonialism' (Bown's phrase) seems especially pronounced in Britain, no doubt partly because of that country's history as a colonial power. And British scholars such as Bown have recognised that there is no easy answer. One can but advocate that teachers should wherever possible be people with experience in developing countries (and this is usually the case); that they should pursue their work with a proper sense of humility, never forgetting that their students are also 'fellow scholars' (Bown 1988:634) from whom they can learn a great deal; and that they should draw on literature and ideas generated within the developing countries to the greatest practicable extent. It would also be a very good thing if more people from developing countries could participate in development studies teaching in the West. Although the problem is indeed a sensitive one, it can in principle be moderated in these sorts of ways.

Related to this issue is the concern that periodically arises over whether the technical and vocational courses that are offered in the West - whether in areas such as applied social science and administrative science, or in areas such as 'hard' science and engineering - are always as practical as they claim to be. For practice in any field is itself culture-bound. Might not some at least of the students from developing countries merely become familiar with (for example) Western environmental problems, Western agricultural technologies, Western laboratory routines, or whatever, in ways that make them less capable of doing good applied work at home? For that matter, might not some of them opt to stay and put their newly acquired 'Western' skills to work in the West itself?

Again, this is an important problem to which there is no ready solution. Unintended and even counter-productive outcomes are always a possibility. But the fact that these things can happen does not invalidate the exercise in general. Specialised training for overseas students should certainly continue; the point is to keep on improving it, and to pattern it wherever possible on more appropriate templates. In order to achieve incremental movement towards this goal, the onus is very much on Western teachers to accumulate direct knowledge, experience and understanding of the real needs of developing countries both within and beyond their fields of expertise, and to gain a real appreciation of the difficulties faced by change agents within and beyond their fields. Once again, teachers must also be learners. And Australian teachers in particular should take every opportunity to draw upon their own country's semi-tropicality (a rare attribute in the 'developed' world) in this respect.

Finally, there is the issue of practicum or fieldwork - or rather, the apparent impossibility of doing any in a Western-based development studies programme. Within developing countries, the pursuit of development studies can of course involve a good deal of applied case study work, participant observation, and practical personal experience of development dilemmas. These can be built in as an integral part of the teaching programme. Not so in the West; and this lacuna can only intensify the ivory-tower nature of the courses on offer. Or so it might be argued.

This too is a real problem. But it can be overstated. Once again, it does not suffice to vitiate Western-based development studies programmes as such; they remain defensible on the various grounds already outlined. And in fact, the lack of opportunity for student involvement in the subject-matter is relative rather than absolute. Three comments may be offered here.

The first comment is that simulation games and exercises, imaginatively presented, can offer a genuinely engrossing and instructive substitute for experience. The 'Green Revolution' game is one that regularly generates high levels of awareness, comprehension and emotional involvement among development studies students in the West (as it possibly does among the international aid bureaucrats who have also been known to play it, indeed be required to play it).

Secondly, there is some possibility of relevant field experience within the Western country: perhaps in an aid agency, perhaps in a deprived region or community. As already stressed, Australia and Britain have their own pockets (so-called) of under-development, and many of
the ideas and approaches intrinsic to development studies will be just as applicable there as in other countries. And of course, students engaged in applied studies in fields such as veterinary science will be confronted with locally based practical work throughout their courses.

And thirdly, for research students in development studies - as distinct from coursework students - opportunities for fieldwork in developing countries are not so rare as all that. Even with its progressive re-orientation towards Europe, Britain retains an extensive network of associations with the tropical Commonwealth; while Australia is geographically close to numerous developing countries, large and small, in South East Asia and the South Pacific. In general, universities are able to provide facilities and resources for field trips for students who genuinely need them in the course of their research. Ealey reports, for example, on three team research projects carried out in developing countries by candidates in an Australian Masters in Environmental Science programme in the early 1980s. The projects dealt respectively with agricultural problems in Samut Songkhararn Province in Thailand, with agricultural development in Sabah, Malaysia, and with the socio-economic impact on local communities of a new highway in Papua New Guinea. In terms of content these could certainly be seen as development studies projects, and it is of interest that the teams in the first two projects included nationals both of Australia and of the countries being studied (Ealey 1988). This kind of collaboration surely serves the best purposes of development studies.

Opportunities, then, exist. The issue is how to go on increasing them. This is basically a question of funding. Apart from the university sources already being drawn upon, the obvious potential sources of increased funding in both Australia and Britain are national and international development agencies and the business community. It is likely of course that development agencies and business concerns would be resistant to providing money except for projects and programmes that fairly directly served their interests. The question is nevertheless worth thinking about. Business funding in particular has been little tapped as yet by those who run development studies programmes, in Australia at least. Given the Australian government's strong push towards forging links of all kinds with Asia, it is arguable that the opportunity and incentive for making connections between development studies expertise and the business community are now in place. And this would not just be a matter of business sponsoring applied research, whether by teachers or students; it would also be a matter of teachers devising new programmes and offering detailed briefings in order to equip private sector employees with knowledge and understanding of the development process and of the particular developing countries with which they plan to do business. How far the development studies profession might prove willing and able to add the business community to its existing client groups is an intriguing question for the decade ahead.

Conclusion

No doubt development studies programmes in Western countries will often be somewhat more academic, somewhat less 'hands-on', than their counterparts in the developing countries. No doubt too there will sometimes be problems of appropriateness. But there are ways of meeting such problems, as outlined. Among their advantages, Western-based programmes are usually relatively well resourced and have strong library support, in both print and electronic forms. Even more importantly, a great many of them are taught by people who - almost by definition - have a personal sense of involvement in the fortunes of developing countries. Such programmes have a role to play in the evolution of global community.

Footnotes

1. For the record, in the academic years 1989-91 in Britain, development studies programmes embracing at least twenty disciplines (the major social sciences together with subjects such as administration, planning, and project monitoring and evaluation) were offered by at least these fifteen universities: Bath, Birmingham, Bradford, Cambridge, East Anglia, Glasgow, Hull, London, Loughborough, Manchester, Oxford, Reading, Sussex, Swansea and York (Norris 1988). In Australia, development studies programmes which cumulatively cover a fairly similar range have been or are being offered by at least the following: Australian National University, Deakin, Flinders, La Trobe, Monash, Murdoch, and Victoria University of Technology. Information on these offerings has been much more systematically collated in Britain than in Australia (see e.g. Norris, 1988).

2. Development theory has been attacked as wrong-headed and fallacious from both the right (e.g. Lal 1983) and left (e.g. Leys 1992). Some other writers see the problem chiefly as one of 'theoretical impasse': both modernisation and dependency approaches have come to a dead end and new approaches need to be found, perhaps in the discourse of post-modernism (see e.g. Manzo 1991, and Pieterse 1991). But reports of the death of development theory have surely been much exaggerated. Precisely because it is an essentially contested concept, 'development' continues to generate a vigorous theoretical literature. Moreover, an increasing number of contributions is coming from the developing countries (see e.g. Karunan 1993, and for a pioneering overview, Wiarda 1983).

3. From that era comes also Ira Sharkansky's provocatively titled work The United States: A Study of a developing country.

4. For a much more detailed exposition of a social science syllabus and the thinking behind it see Eldridge
5. At Chulalongkom University, for example, three of the ten development-oriented courses listed in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology's curriculum come under the heading of 'practicum in social development'.

References


Karunan, V. 1993, 'Development thinking and gaps between Euro-centric approaches and Asian realities', seminar paper, Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkom University, Bangkok.


