AN ANALYSIS OF MEANINGS ATTACHED TO 'INVOLVEMENT' BY ANU STUDENTS AND TEACHING STAFF

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Within the field of action research, seeking methods whereby the students and teaching staff on a course can monitor and influence selectively the aspects of Involvement (as it is to be defined) which appear critical for that course, the object is to crystallise the meanings of this term in current academic discourse in order to make more effective and precise the debating of proposals for improvement; to discover individual and group effects from the interviews carried out in the conduct of the project itself; and to study as thoroughly as is feasible the problems of classifying post hoc the texts derived from interviews produced by an 'open question' method, conducted with either individuals or groups. It is hoped to gain information on two points which have held special interest for different members of the project team. These are: whether there is a catalytic effect from the active intervention of the researcher associated with a course group on the intermediate interview occasion when interim results are discussed with members of each group, including teachers of the course; and whether the learning style or epistemic assumptions of student in relation to those of teacher is a highly significant variable (Pask, G., 1972). Other methodological objectives are, first, to find how far 'epistemic differences' between academic subjects outweigh other factors influencing the 'category' attribution by informants (Schedule I), or their invocation of the associated factors (Connected Value Dimensions, Schedule II). See Table I below. The second methodological question to which some contribution is sought arises from the predictable reductionist/technicist challenge to the interpretive style: the commensurability of items in the material secured is on the face of it more suspect than are a respondent's checks on a test sheet or opinion questionnaire; the absence, with the open-question form of interview, of a valid basis for unit comparison, whether arithmetically or by any other analytic method. On the last point, a non-reductionist has two choices: to simply disown its assumptions; or to carry the matter, as if it were Medusa's head, with suitable respect and vigilance.

The wide variety of meanings for 'involvement' found in responses recorded in the previous Involvement Study (Miller, 1977) was cited in inviting participation in this one. They have sometimes been referred to as 'phase 1', and the present study as 'phase 2', to mark continuity in researchers' experience and as providing a working definition-set for the present study.

Initially the theoretical basis relied on a distinction between behaviour and feelings with a further 'self-direction' factor, presented by the project-proposal as follows:

Purposes

1. To find the degree of congruence between teachers' and students' perceptions and valuations of 'involvement', under a range of distinct meanings given to the term.

2. To see whether, in a particular class, a process of sharing with teachers and students (in discussion) the evidence gathered by the enquiry appears to contribute to significant changes in the work of the group.

Subsidiary outcomes

3. To confirm and refine the analysis of what is variously meant by 'involvement' with special reference to aspects which seem significant either to teachers or to students.

Use of results from Phase 1 of the Involvement Study

The original study revealed a range of ways in which individuals interpreted an invitation to talk about 'involvement' without a precise definition being stipulated. The present study derives a more distinct range of senses from these results, and also the indication of a broad distinction between actions (activities, behaviour tendencies) and feelings or interest. This is accepted, at least for heuristic purposes. There appears to be a further distinction being made between these aspects of involvement and the reasons for which they are valued and their absence deplored. Thus behavioural signs of involvement are contrasted with private experience/feelings of interest. There is also frequent use of expressions for what is not a meaning of 'involvement' but a reason for wanting it.

Participation was secured from nine subjects in various faculties, three with each researcher, who negotiated personally throughout. These were:

R in Arts	H in Arts	M in Arts
O in Economics	F in Science (field science)	E in Asian Studies
B in Science	S in 'service' Maths	G in Arts

Contrasting academic subjects are represented, covering the interests and epistemic styles of social science, historical, literature, language, mathematical, metatheoretical, and natural-scientific and environmental disciplines. Some lead typically to a professional/vocational future other than teaching or research, others are liberal arts or pure science. Students to the number of 10 - 12 in each, on average, and the teacher of the course, were interviewed early in the year. Interviews are on tape as well as on the abortive first-draft schedules. The analytic classification of items has seldom been moderated; some text has been transcribed, and significant parts audio'd repeatedly. The problems of analysis were thrashed out over several weeks, while theoretical sources and reference to other comparable studies continued to be under search. These are all normal research processes, but formed a constitutive feature in this enquiry, as regards the attainment of at least relative conformity of judgement - interpretation of text and attribution to items, 'terms of art' to be used. The final scheme of analysis comprises a set of four categories with sub-sets of typical operation for each (Schedule I), and eighteen 'connected value dimensions', with seven factors covering contextual provisions (Schedule II).

TABLE 1

SCHEDULE I: Activities/aspects of course perceived as crucial to the definition of 'involvement'

Accountable performance (contract)	0 (a)	Attendance at lectures.
	0 (b)	Attendance at tutorials, pracs, etc.
	1	Fulfilling required/recommended course activities (general)
	1	Fulfilling recommended course activities (specific):
		(a) lectures;
		(b) tutorials;
		(c) other pracs.
	2	Reading for course programme.
	3	Writing papers, projects; assessed papers.
	4	Exams and tests (pro factor vs con factor).
	5	Structure/course plan prepared/directed by teacher.
Interaction	6	Tutorials/pracs, interaction: (a) participant; (b) even silent.
	7	Informal interaction outside classes.
	8	Informal interaction outside classes (students).
Experiential	9	Enjoyment, admiration, for subject.
	10	Commitment/investment time effort; own reading.
	11	Self-direction in learning, other self-responsibility.
	12	Breadth of educational experience (including extra-curricular), interdisciplinary experience, including career experience.
	13	Strategies for coping; toward rival course-claims; workload; assessment distortion/dissimulation.
Decision-making	14	Committee-participation.
	15	Course-plan/development (choice in).
	16	Mode of assessment (choice in).

SCHEDULE II

Connected Value Dimensions

acquiring skill	1	labouring with difficulty
understanding	2	working by rote
responding to challenge	3	getting by
(ideas etc.) relevant, applicable	4	abstract, pointless
clear, clarity	5	obscure, hard to grasp
interesting (course)	6	boring
interesting (subject)	7	uncongenial
interesting (teacher/teacher-style)	8	tedious, irritating, not 'sympathetic'
deep learning	9	superficial
being IN the subject	10	obedient learner
satisfaction in mastery	11	resigned to struggle
aiming to become 'expert' (career or academic)	12	grinding through
confidence	13	anxiety
structured, liking structure	14	free-ranging
fascinated (love of subject)	15	utilitarian
teacher image: 'open'	16	socially distant
teacher feeds back on written work, etc.	17	critical, presents model of perfection
teacher elicits oral work	18	daunting in interactive setting
student's personal style: privatises, on own	19	outgoing, needs others
wider connectedness	20	specialism
persistence	21	rhythmic, uneven tempo
happiness, joy	22	anxiety, fear
maturity	23	youth
experience	24	inexperienced

Provision

(i) Class organisation.
(ii) Books - class library.
(iii) Class size (department size).
(iv) Technical resources: films, etc.
(v) Presence or attitude of other students (may be connected with timetable, etc.)
(vi) Conditions aggravating workload; advice to students, etc.
(vii) Suitable rooms for tutorials.

The research design required a feedback intervention with each group separately, communicating results from the analysis. The form of this intervention was not rigid. However, a third of the groups received no more than a report, as 'controls', while for the rest a positive interference to promote in emotional as well as conceptual terms the understanding by teacher and students of how their practice and aims had been progressing was in the research design. Conditions could not be found for the systematic use of this 'control', and any value from it on this occasion must be regarded as an uncovenanted windfall. It comes in useful for reconsidering the project design.

At the time of writing the project is entering the third and final phase, preparing to replicate the interviewing. There is a strong weight of argument in favour of questionnaire form for this, deriving its content from the text material now in hand. Other methods to be used at the third monitoring occasion are also being considered. Feedback sessions are not analytically recorded, for their function is catalytic. Tape or note records are kept, and some have been fully transcribed.

Results at this stage are: (a) critical discussion of the analysis of text, based on the practice and schedules, revised; (b) the technique for comparing groups, particularly as one source of evidence of the extent of 'shadow' from epistemic subject-linked factors. A careful use of the first draft categories and sub-items enabled Bernice Anderson to produce, with a descriptive formulation of some fourteen items mentioned and individual opinions classified by 'subject', a set of group profiles with differences of physiognomy discussed in the following section. Confidentiality, one of the rules for this style of research formulated by Rowbottom (1977), is hard to preserve if the significance of the profiles is to be brought out, but as far as possible we use an incognito nomenclature

(a) To summarise: the previous study provides data for collecting the predominant meanings given by

participants (including teaching staff) in response to a request to distinguish the one or more meanings conveyed by talk of 'involvement' in study, particularly in academic courses rather than extra-curricular activity. The theoretical base has been changed, and with it the method of analysis, which separates four categories and places much of the text in a set of polar conducive/negative dimensions. The former is the one mainly used at present. The latter proves a satisfactory solution of our analytic problem, but has not yet had a formal use in feedback to groups.

It was expected on the initial scheme that some topics would figure significantly in the reasons given by respondents for the meaning or meanings they gave, in particular: engaging in the activities of a course programme with thoroughness and seriousness; feelings, motives, purposes (an 'affective' dimension); and self-direction or a capacity for commitment and checking where the study is leading, as a personal undertaking. Of the last-mentioned aspect research in higher education has increasingly been reminded since the publication in 1968 of W. G. Perry's study of the growth of mature self-direction in Harvard students (Perry, 1968).

During the first stages of the study, the meanings elicited have been reformulated under the following heads, which are called 'categories', indicating that they need to be independent for the purpose of analysis and that within a specifiable theoretical framework they can eventually be established as theoretically independent. Commonsense attitudes and ordinary usage served to set up these categories and to gain a common basis of discourse with participants in the project. Independently of these were mentioned various reasons, including dimensions of attitude or personality, which cover all the helping or hindering features mentioned in the tapes or in the interviewers' notes. These were entitled either 'connected value dimensions' or 'influencing factors'.

The three interviewers were able to agree on the four categories with their associated set of 'sub-items', though more compromise was required on these latter. This revised schedule formed the basis of a feedback intervention with the nine groups in the study, each by the same interviewer as before. On the former occasion the focal question was "What do you mean by 'involvement', or what do you think people mean?". It allowed elaboration of the points made, and attribution of causes and effects, motives and influences. The feedback interview was conceived as a reportback, with the additional feature in a majority of the groups of lively discussion of opinion among the group members about the summary of results (including verbatim quotations). This process introduced the possibility of affecting the attitudes of the group itself, including in this concept of 'the group' the teacher(s) of the group for its present course. Thus there was a chance for the expression of new viewpoints, for comments on how the course had developed in the interval, and for identifying openly any differences of view between teachers and students, perhaps in some cases noting convergences. (It had not been taken as an assumption that a 'clearing of the air' within a group would necessarily promote consensus; what was expected was for it to create understanding of different interests, or reciprocity of exchange, which would itself prove liberating to the work of the group.) From some individuals there might come actual recognition of the dynamic of change in these relations, though this was not expected to emerge, if at all, until toward the end of the two-semester course (see Perry, 1968). With a proportion of the groups it was planned to restrict these intermediate interviews to a bare report of the analysis of the first-stage interviews, without inviting the sort of discussion of disparities in perception and conflict of value which was positively encouraged in the other groups. The schedules may be amenable to matrix treatment of the material provided by the end-of-year questionnaire, still to be completed.

The enquiry is still incomplete, and the results already to hand are not finally analysed. But it is worth formulating a few claims that could prove quite significant. The method of the project is holistic: it is to do with the integral experience of individuals and with the integral process of working through a course by a group of students and teachers. (It does not aim at a few specific commonplaces of the study-skills literature being demonstrated again.) We find, though, that the way informal student-teacher meetings conduce to energy and effectiveness in the work of the course is far from simple. One group expects it, believes in it, and fulfils the intention. Another believes in having this in class (this means tutorials, pracs, etc., naturally enough, but lectures also in some cases), or on the margin of class time. Another believes in class discussion, frank and free, yet fails to achieve what all parties want (examples are drawn from two groups by Bernice Anderson; see section (b) below). In another instance a good degree of confidence and trust exists, though students still feel the need for unconstrained talk about their experience while the staff see no clear need of it. Departments, of course, change their style and atmosphere over time, but in these cases at this time one might want to say: of A, that it is in the nature of the work for theoretical, practical and personal aspects to be unusually well harmonised. There might be some hint for others - diffusion of a method that works, one might say - but equally the lucky group that has no problems may enjoy conditions peculiar to itself. In the second case, B, we might ask whether the project's own intervention could bring about a change, whether some catalyst is capable of enabling a group to do what they all want to do. Or it may be a systematic evaluation would be useful in improving the course details for next year. In case C, one might say that the course had been expected to go well and had been going well but not precisely in the ways the teachers had proposed. And it is noticeable that in this case, although there had been no clear vote recorded in our material for out-of-class informal student-teacher meetings, the conditions for feeling well-known to one another being provided anyhow, the present opportunity for thoroughly talking over the course was said by the group to be needed and was welcomed.

Here are examples where those in charge of a course need a way of deciding whether their course plan invokes the appropriate catalyst - whether an auditing person, or social occasions, or student evaluation of the course - if so, how and when. The function of an educational research and development unit might then be to advise on matching such decisions by the person in charge of a course to the aims of the course and the conditions for teaching it: class size, style of tutorial rooms, context for practicals, staff availability, etc.

The study did have as a major question whether the process of sorting out (articulating) the ambiguities and diverse value loadings of this term, with the focal and highly charged place in students' and teachers' lives that it plainly holds, would of itself have an effect on the work of a course, and an effect which would prove liberating to those involved. For many students there seems a line, recognisable if hard to put into words, between the sort of anxiety or tension that restricts or dampens their effort, their expression, or both, and in constrast the sense of challenge and excitement in working at the limits of their understanding.

It is plain that in common with much of the most recent work on teaching and learning in tertiary education, the approach of this study is holistic (Elton, 1979) in taking for study individuals in their perception of their experience; and groups in their responses to intervention on specific occasions. For Elton the characteristic of this approach, in contrast with that of a correlational study measuring changes

over time in operationally defined variables, is its attention to synchronic states of individuals, probed reflectively. Two further characteristics of the present study, however, perhaps in reaction against that consequence of any hermeneutic theoretical foundation that it is essentially conservative or 'accepting' towards what is discovered (in this case by the illuminative method) should be underlined: not only is the study setting out to watch the dynamic of teaching/learning groups over time, but it is itself designed to provide stimulus for change, and also to monitor any notable changes which occur.

The 'action research' aspect may well be small and its identification unsure. There are a few such effects which are conceivable at the midway stage: for example, if a negative pattern of relations in a group is accentuated by the intervention process; or when the intervention is recognised by a group as itself an instance of a feature which its members have already marked as useful but too infrequent; or when a united, satisfied group uses the intervention to confirm its self-image. (This will be illustrated from Group F in Discussion (b) below.)

The project is thus action-oriented in that it anticipates in its design the occurrence of changes in the groups as a result of the actions of the research team. These will vary with the personality and with the ideology or epistemology of the individuals. No attempt to control for this was made, as would be done in traditional ('positivist') research designs, beyond the very considerable efforts towards unanimity in the successive stages of adapting the plan to the actualities of the project as these emerged (in what Bliss and Ogborn (1977) call 'the slow process of developing the system of analysis itself, borrowing and adapting ideas from others and making up our own'). At a point a decision would be made to let each researcher follow the style of reportback interview that suited the previous history of the researcher with that group in the course of the project. This shows up in our records, both in colloquial terminology and in the degree of attention paid to certain topics - for example, 'attendance', or 'assessment', or 'informal staff-student interaction'. Quantitative measures of the importance of an item of study method, or a dimension of influence, must be handled very cautiously outside the same set of interviewer groups (three in each case). And it means that conclusions about the operation of subject-epistemologies upon the perceptions reported by students and teachers have to be speculative: starters for another project. (The point is a major question-mark for the project, canvassed already in discussion outside as well as inside the team.) Having tabled the question of its own beneficial catalytic effect, the project has now on record at least one unsolicited opinion 'Yes' and at least one unsolicited opinion 'No', and it has on record the detailed context of these answers in the teaching-learning environment in which they are embedded.

The positive example is one where the history of this lecture/tutorial group is particularly interesting, though the familiarity of the interviewer to members as a course 'auditor' must be taken into account. The positive response occurred during an intervention session, citing it as just the sort of informal 'feedback' on a course that these students would like more of. In the 'No' example, a session where one member criticised the involvement project as 'useless' is interesting for several reasons: (1) for speculative precision we do need some clearcut negative cases; (2) although this feedback session was properly arranged and announced, it was announced as 'reporting results', not as 'discussion', the group having been selected for passive, not active, intervention at the 'middle' stage; (3) the critic cited as evidence the smallness of attendance at the session; (4) the critic was also a tutor on a maths-type course and had seemed to favour an 'efficient instruction in skills' type of pedagogy; this had not been shared by all the group, some of whom are recorded as having expressed very positive attitudes, at the time, to his/

her original interview; (5) the record from first interviews for this course, both students and teacher, emphasises the lively atmosphere in lectures and also the informal consultations on the spot and in the corridors, both of which made the absence of tutorials on this course entirely acceptable. (There are other obvious explanations in terms of context which will be checked in the end-of-course questionnaire.)

Another 'interference' could come about if the team member who visits a department in the course of this project is asked to act as a consultant to a teacher through being already known in that role. It was agreed in advance that the interviewers would not try to attract such requests, but if they arose would not usually feel bound to decline but would keep account of what they did in relation to the project. It is possible that over the course of working with students and department staff on a project like this, therefore, the research people directly affect the dynamic of change in more ways than one.

In relation to the sort of result that can be expected from such a study, a useful example for comparison is the Bliss and Ogborn project already mentioned. That study, following the lead of Herzberg, Flanagan, and others, based its analysis of students' experiences on their narratives of 'critical incidents' in their own study experience since entering their tertiary education. The aim, as the authors would say, is 'to decide what to do'. The evidence they offer of student experience is 'just one of the many things to be taken into account in making intelligent decisions ... There is here a reality of how students see things. For the teacher, the realities may be very different, but it is just where the two realities diverge that understanding is most needed. Each reader will have to discover such places for himself'. The focus matches a crucial feature in our own design; but the outcome as it is stated in this passage seems not altogether realistic. It is indeed realistic in noting, as has been observed, aspects of student experience usually unremarked in the research literature (and with unusually sensitive precision, one might add, and frequently with allusion to very recent theoretical work, notably in branches of psychology); less realistic in assuming that university teachers generally will make their pilgrims' progress through the published research on 'learning and teaching in tertiary education'. If what we get are insights into a process, is it as rules for application that these will be turned to use? The answers to this question which have just been quoted amount, it seems, to 'not more than partially'. Most of the outcomes will not belong to such a technicist/positivist research paradigm. And supposing the divergence between teacher and students is one factor, determining the conditions for coming to terms with it in particular subjects or strands in a degree programme may well mean producing a number of models for catalysing change which teachers must then learn to recognise. The variations between subjects in their need for informal social meeting, or the use of the 'lecture' as an effective study-device, are examples. Again, if W. G. Perry's Harvard study is right about the development of study ideals, values and disciplines over the period of tertiary enrolment, that factor too must be included. The use of a catalyst - consultant, evaluator, or self-evaluation system - for a course has to be tailored to its purpose, not only for economy but because of the inevitable rejection of any that is not recognisably in tune with the character of the course itself. This is as far as we shall go towards taking into account, in the course of this project, the claims that the differences reflect subject-epistemologies (R. E. Owen) or matched teacher-student cognitive styles (G. Pask); nevertheless, in designing repeats of the original interviews any signs of such connection will be noted. One member of the team is particularly interested in the second phenomenon; the first represents a general criticism we have encountered, that in this, as in so many studies, the findings are commonplace - well-known enough for practical purposes. The dilemma implicit in it is sharply underlined by Bliss and Ogborn.

(b) The 'epistemological alignments' warning is a serious one; our provisional answer is that its attestation in the earlier work has related to (school) teachers rather than to students; there are common-sense reasons for expecting some distinction, and one which is significant for our purpose. The results so far, especially noted in the Adams and Anderson groups, show non-trival commonalities as well as subject specificities, which we provisionally attribute to subject methods of teaching and institutional provision rather than to 'subject epistemology', as reported by Bernice Anderson.

A range of activities and influencing factors appear in relation to each category. Taking the Interaction Category, we now include some contextual and personal background for a subject-group comparison derived from the schedules of the three participating groups. The Anderson review runs:

'Interaction Category. Participation in class discussion received the greatest emphasis in courses where class discussions (e.g. tutorials) are an important part of the course organisation. 'Students should read enough to enable them to make contributions in tutorials', according to a teacher in the Arts Faculty. A student in the same faculty contributed 'involvement is feedback - not just sitting being fed facts but participating in discussion'. But satisfying class discussions are not always achieved. Some students expressed dissatisfaction: 'tutorial discussions become disappointing if the class is too quiet or preparation or attendance fall off', said one; and another, 'it is difficult to get participation in large groups'. A student in a science subject suggested that 'tutorials would be a good idea as they provide an opportunity for better involvement'. In this student's opinion, 'attendance should be compulsory'. Many students admitted that they were too shy to ask 'dumb questions' in class, but added that the tutor could encourage more discussion and provide an atmosphere which would give them more confidence.

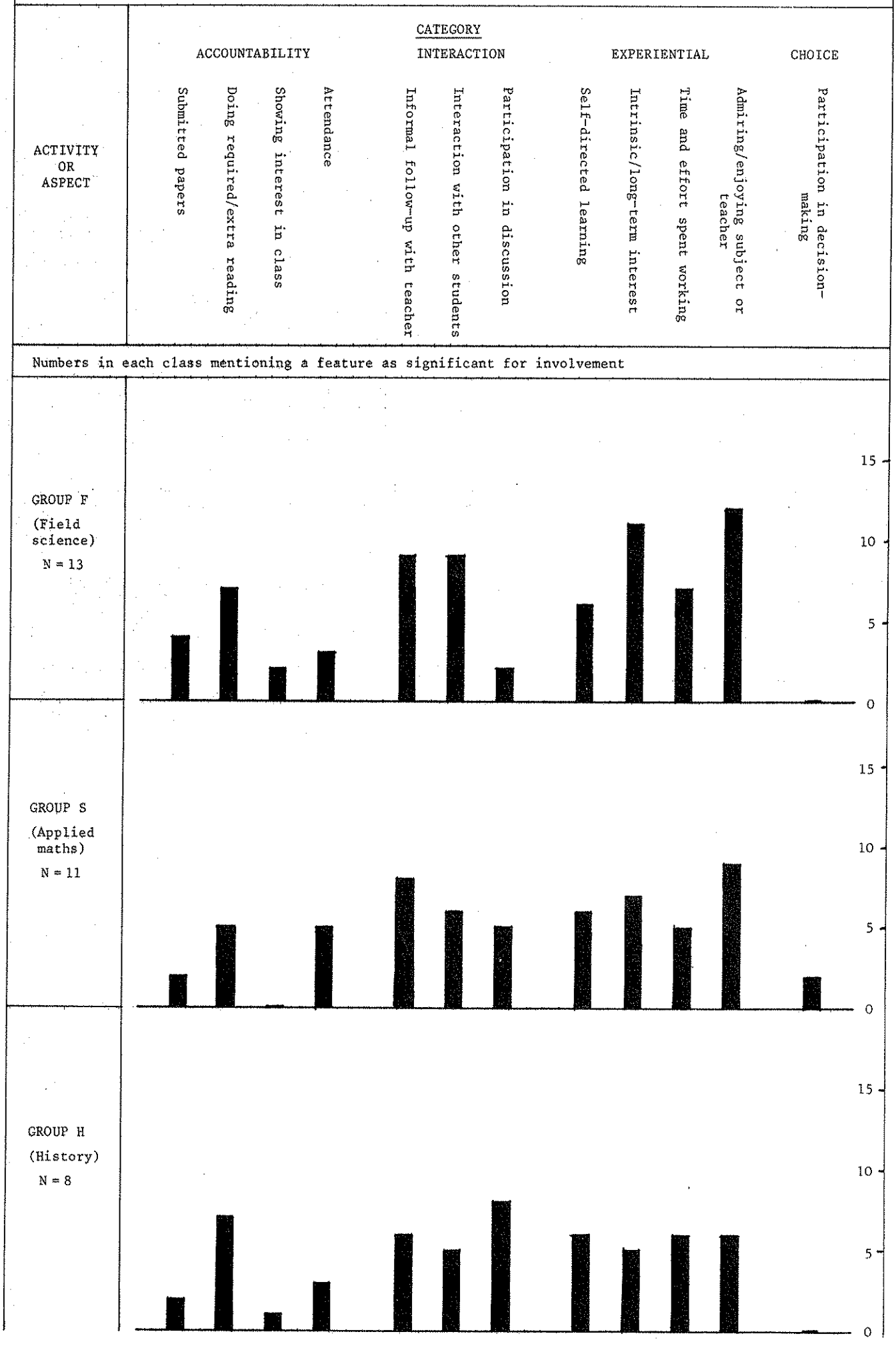
The picture gained from these interviews is that good class discussion can be facilitated by a number of factors - informal, small classes, good direction by the tutor, incentive to attend and to prepare (but not pressure to speak linked with grading for assessment), and maturity and confidence on the part of the students. Pressure of work in other subjects often leads to lack of preparation, low attendance, and the resultant collapse of the discussion.

Another important form of interaction is private or personal discussion and follow-up with teacher. In one course which was structured around field trips, excursions and camps, in a department with a strong tradition of social activities, the course structure emphasised the student-teacher relationship and provided opportunities for the lecturers to get to know the students as individuals. The students' enthusiasm for the subject and admiration for the teachers were very evident from the interviews. 'Involvement means talking to the lecturer and learning what he is trying to say', said one student, and another: 'this is an involvement type of course'.

Not all classes achieved this kind of interaction successfully. One student in a science course suggested: 'the lecturer should be approachable for suggesting extra work. He could stay behind at the end of the lecture'. Part-timers are particularly critical: 'I can never get to see the tutor on a one-to-one basis', said one. 'Ten minutes alone with the tutor once a week is all I ask'. Yet lecturers also feel dissatisfied with the degree of interaction. One lecturer who agreed that a sign of a student's involvement is informal contact with the lecturer or tutor said, 'I am worried about those students who never come to discuss their work'. And many students who desired more face-to-face contact were reluctant to initiate it.

TABLE 2

PROFILES OF THREE SUBJECT GROUPS — INTERVIEWER CONSTANT



Interaction with other students is another factor which leads to a feeling of greater involvement. Students in a department where social contacts are frequent and the course encourages group work described it as 'a good atmosphere for learning'. Students who mix with other students on campus with the intention of discussing their work or solving problems together find that this adds interest and incentive to study. Students in a statistics class in particular described involvement as 'getting together with other students on the work'. Said one student: 'you need group participation in this kind of subject'. Part-timers feel particularly disadvantaged because they have little chance of talking to other students: they compared universities in respect of opportunities for this and other cultural experiences they offer.

A provisional comparison of small group profiles suggests that the subject-alignment of the categories and sub-items is not uniform, sufficiently to make it worth special attention in the third-stage analysis (Table 2)'.

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