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THE TEACHER IN THE CENTRE OF THE EDUCATIVE PROCESS

by

RUTH WONG

Friday 28 December 1973 at 11.00am

Perhaps in no other profession have the role and contribution of the practitioner been subject to more critical analysis and comment than in that of teaching. One author has commented that the 'role-set of the teacher is especially formidable because the role is diffuse and because everyone in contemporary society has ready opinions about what the teacher does or should do'¹ and points out that this role is vulnerable to outside influences because teachers 'cannot protect their role by jargon or by the use of dead language as doctors or lawyers do'².

Positions, many and varied, are taken also about the importance of the teacher's functions. There are those who would even suggest that technology can provide effective substitutes in the absence of qualified teachers. Ellson, for example, gave as his view that 'the quality of teaching produced by the technologies alone, that is used in the absence of professional teachers, frequently equals and sometimes exceeds the quality of teaching produced by professional teachers, including graduate teachers. The evidence is available in many reports of experimental evaluations of both the physical technologies – books, audio-visual equipment, broadcasting – and the psycho technologies – programmed learning and programmed teaching'³.

Another scholar remarked at a recent UNESCO Conference that the age of the 3M's is now upon us man, materials and machine. The teacher no longer holds to himself the responsibility of all instruction. He needs to be selective about his functions and use materials and machines for the teaching of skills and routine tasks in order that he may free himself for a more creative contribution to his profession.

Not only does the teacher receive advice on how he may best acquit himself, he finds his sphere of responsibility to be constantly enlarged. As a teacher, he can no longer rely on simple texts to tide him over a teaching career of some thirty-five years. Like members of other professions, his responsibility to his clients (his pupils) makes it imperative for him to keep up with rapid current of the main stream of

¹ Wilson B R: 'The teacher's role: a sociological analysis', Br. J Sociol., VIII (2) p. 112
² Ibid
³ Ellson D G: 'Educational Technology as an Alternative', paper presented at the INNOTECH Regional Practicum on Alternatives in Education, April '72, p.6.
knowledge for teaching and knowledge about the taught. Whatever the meaning of the staff-pupil ration he finds no support for any statistic which may be termed ideal, in respect of how many he should teach in a given group. Instead, he finds himself facing increasingly larger classes with whose members it also becomes increasingly difficult to establish a satisfactory teaching learning relationship. There are also the demands which are thrust upon him, because of the changes in the social structure and mores, attendant upon technological progress. The two-income family phenomenon calls away the wife for work, leaving more and more the raising of children to schools and similar formal institutions. The teacher has to be ever ready to assume the remediation of whatever ills are likely to break upon the social scene, be they to do with drugs, delinquency, rash driving or population control. The traditional institutions of home and religious agency have tended to recede from the scene of action, where the upbringing of children is concerned.

If we were to consider our topic today in purely psychological terms, then the teacher is certainly to be found in the very centre of a conflict in which he is often caught bewildered and uneasy. Should he seek those things which are rightly his career expectations, namely, improving his own knowledge and having the opportunity to do so, teaching his pupils in the best way he knows how, according to the principles of his art, supported by the science made available by technology, without frequently to look over his shoulder to see whether some other person were dogging his footsteps - whether the person be layman or non-practising expert - each trying to make him conform to particular opinions, not necessarily his own

On the other hand, it is human on the art of the teacher to seek approval from society. He would like to see his role appreciated. This search for role fulfilment, often determined by others, does not always lead him to the satisfaction of his career expectations. Wilson points out that (in this situation of conflict) there is inducement “to make right impressions on the significant people rather than significant impressions on the right people - the children”\(^4\).

This kind of conflict may be one of the reasons why there is so little committal to be found for teaching. Insecurity can cause doubts in the mind of the teacher about the worthwhileness of his vocational choice. To show how the call for dedication to teaching may turn out to be already ineffective under such circumstances, Grace\(^5\) borrows an illustration from Robert Bolt's play (A Man for all Seasons), where Sir Thomas More tries to persuade Richard Rich to become a teacher. It goes as follows:

More: Why not be a teacher? You’d be a fine teacher. Perhaps a great one.

Rich: And if I was, who would know it?

More: You, your pupils, your friends, God – not a bad audience that.
    Richard remained unconvinced.

The question may be asked whether teachers may not feel insecure and tend to draw fire from others around them because of their own inadequacy in the first place. This may be true, perhaps, but is not the reason also to be found in the social and educational system besides the teachers alone? Has it not been shown that in the name of shortage, teachers, quite unlike other professionals, can be 'crashed' into existence. Some are therefore stillborn. Others, unlike premature babes, do not have the benefit of the iron lung to help them become like healthier specimens of their kind. They are left to survive as best as they can without help and nurture. If they succumb to pressure, they are just deplored.

What has confused the issue is the discrepancy which exists between the sort of person we would accept as a professional and the one we certify as a teacher. If we are concerned about what the particular characteristics of the professional should be, we would not certify as adequate those who do not embark upon their task with the prerequisite degree of academic preparation, and the set of attitudes considered desirable for teaching, or who are without mastery of certain specific skills. Because of careless compromise between expectation and fact, between the acceptable and the expedient, not all those who are certificated teachers are professionals. A 'qualified teacher' has come to be synonymous with a certificated person. Yet the same certificate may be given for courses of training whose standards may vary over a very large range. Even lengths of courses have varied and, at the end of it all, everyone is a teacher. This rather unspecific, diffuse approach to the preparation of teachers gives rise to such remarks as Ellson’s, which claim that technologies do better and sometimes outstrip the performance of professional teachers, including graduate teachers. Ellson uses the words 'professional' and 'qualified' (meaning 'certificated') interchangeably.

There is an attractive ring about this view especially when so many countries are still trying to catch up on the demand for teachers. There are others who have shared Ellson’s assertion, which may be looked at in two ways. First, if by it is meant that all qualified persons are identifiable as professional, then it carries with it a high degree of probability that technology will take over increasingly from man and do away with the
necessity for trained teachers as we know them. For technology, only technicians need to be trained. I quote:

“These technicians do not require 16 years of schooling. They are specialists who can be trained to perform a few tasks well after only eight, six or even fewer years of schooling. The pool of people with this amount of schooling is not 1 per cent; it is 10 per cent or more in most Asian countries, and the proportion is growing rapidly. The cost of training such technicians and the cost of paying them once they are trained are considerably less than corresponding costs for adequately trained professional teachers”.

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Obviously these technicians are not teachers. There is a strong suggestion here that technology and technician will take charge of the teaching-learning process. Teachers will no longer be at centre – not even at the periphery of the educative process. We shall not question Ellson at this point about the age at which technicians might be trained and whether they should be trained purely to manipulate. With the sophistication of modern technology, assembly-line type of technicians may be a hindrance rather than a help at tasks which are more than routine. But can his assertion become true? We know that there already exist intelligent machines which can be programmed to play chess, prove mathematical theorems, read handwriting, compose music or instruct others. Maybe the time will come when intelligent robots can even correct where humans fail. In the meantime, technology has made great inroads into the educative process and has been responsible for spectacular changes in educational media, where a whole new ‘knowledge industry’ has developed. It is possible – and we are promised that these possibilities will become almost limitless – for the avid learner to purchase learning packages, programmed learning materials, resort to dial-access retrieval systems or to computer-assisted instruction for help, take advantage of telelectures and telelessons and benefit from everything that is available in well-stocked libraries, where microfilm and microfiche make knowledge dispensing both swift and economical.

Despite all the claims about what technology can do, however, there are good reasons to show why machines will take a very long time before displacing teachers. Of these, the following are worth noting:

1. **Machines can be made to dispense knowledge. They are not yet in a position to solve problems spontaneously.** In other words, they cannot interact with pupils in unpredictable situations as human teachers can.

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6 Ellson D G: Ibid.
Oatley, in discussing artificial brains, has this to say: 'When it actually comes to writing computer programmes that learn, one perceives' that it is all too easy simply to store information or form new connections, and we see very clearly that in getting a computer to do that we have not shown anything very profound or satisfying about the nature of learning. In order to be able to talk about what learning consists of we have instead to be able to specify how relevant aspects of the world are represented, what significance is assigned to these various aspects, and how the knowledge is organised in such a way that we can, as it were, compute over it to solve problems'.

Unless and until artificial brains can develop qualities of consciousness, there is no likelihood that robots will take over from man.

2. **The cost factor associated with educational technological devices is still prohibitively high.** Ellson's comparison of costs has not taken into account such other costs as those of production and distribution. Schramm, an authority on educational communication has pointed out that of the three strategies employed in the use of radio and television, viz. in supplemental instruction, in core teaching and for informal education, only the last is likely to be money-saving.

It may be suggested that the products of the psycho-technologies may be used more cheaply in enrichment programmes and core instruction. Even here, packages that flexibly fit the curricula followed in schools in different countries are not easily available. Costs also have significance only in context. What may be cheap for one country may not be for another.

3. **Whether we rely on the physical or psycho-technologies, production of software is extremely slow** - that is, software of value to a given system with its particular needs and specific objectives. There was a time, not too long ago, when great claims were made for the teaching-machine. But many of the programmes prepared for these machines were qualitatively unsound, giving rise to the suggestion by one psychologist that machines were quantitatively producing more efficiently the inefficient end-products of the educational system.

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This also leads to the point that if the technologies were to make a really significant contribution to the educative process, a whole new group of specialists would need to be trained, namely, those who will be able to ensure that there will be a continuous flow of material available for the learner. They will need to be people who, not only have the knowledge themselves, but also have it in them to communicate knowledge and skills in such a way that their materials carry sufficient stimulus for the learner to be motivated.

In the formal system, as we know it, then, it is unlikely that teachers will lose touch with the educative process.

The second way to look at Ellson’s assertion is to consider the logical implications of the progress of educational technology. Certainly, if machines or the psycho-technologies can equal and outdo human effort then there will be no place for non-professionals and for teachers who cannot teach, whether certificated or not. Those teachers who remain will find that much of the work in knowledge dispensing can be assigned to machines. Their methods will therefore have to change. Classroom organisation will have to change. There will be periods during the course of the day where the pupil will learn on his own: at other times, he will work in groups with his peers. During such times, the teacher is not idle though he is not physically in front of his class nor at centre. He will soon find out that keeping tag of the progress of each individual pupil is a time-consuming task. For if learning packages are available and individuals can learn certain things on their own, then individualisation of instruction necessarily follows and the teacher must be prepared to take each child to the next stage for which he is ready. He will become increasingly aware that he cannot do this entirely on his own, but he will need information from other teachers. A new relationship has to be developed with other teachers whereby those concerned with a given group of pupils have to work in a team.

The techniques of education are thus influenced by the possibilities allowed through advances made in educational technology. They are also open to improvement because educators cannot ignore the vast volume of knowledge contributed by the psycho-social studies in recent years about pupil behaviour, about principles of learning and teaching. The organisational methods used to individualise learning, for example, make an open-ended, impressive list and include assigned independent study, investigations by project groups during out-of-school time, forums planned by pupils, human-relations workshops where pupils simulate certain roles, discussion groups for underachievers, non-graded work groups, the student-pair techniques, travel study, work-study, community seminars, student participation in advisory councils and the “consilium” (a method whereby time is set aside for pupils to pursue educational topics of personal interest in seminar, in joint projects or individually). Who
draws up the time-table? The computer, we are told. However complex the organisation may be it has already been proved efficient at this kind of exercise.

The list given above refers to change only in one aspect of the educative process. There have been many and rapid changes in the curriculum, some profound, others hardly meaningful. By the very impact of these changes, the role of the teacher assumes a many-facet look as it changes from the tell-assign-recite-test pattern to that which combines 'the various tasks of the technician, diagnostician, decision-maker, co-operator, strategist, manager, facilitator, guide, educator, friend and fellow learner of the pupil. He has to be all things to all 'pupils' to help them succeed in learning. But can he be a recognisable whole of all these parts or will the sum of all these parts fall short of each?

Many of the tasks have become increasingly complex. For example, where the teacher used to prepare an array of simple factual test questions, he has now to understand fully the purpose and implication of testing as a part of evaluation, be certain that what he does is valid and that the results will help him to establish reliably the point of failure or success, and so on. More than ever before, the teacher is at centre, not so much physically in front of a class, but essentially as someone very important to the learning process. Because many educators are of the view that the teacher cannot be generalist over such a wide spectrum of tasks, as expected to-day, and also be a specialist to be taken to strange and new depths, there has been a great deal of innovation in the area of differentiated roles for the teacher. Glatthorn\(^9\) predicted the advent of learning disabilities specialists, affective education specialists and even student ombudsmen. There is a whole array of new terms and names arising out of investigations into new roles for teachers - facilitators, remediators, instructional technology specialists, educational information consultant, directing teacher, team coordinator, resource centre specialist, to name a few - What will schools become if all these persons have to be found in every one of them? I have no answer.

In the meantime, the complaints come in as fast as innovations are introduced. Recently, someone passed an article from the Daily Mail (6/12/73) on the Big School Gamble. It showed how much the mood of uncertainty and lack of direction prevail. I quote:

"New ways of teaching, being tried out by thousands of schools were described yesterday as a gamble with children's futures."

In this same article, Dr Yates of the NFER\textsuperscript{10} was reported as stressing the importance of finding out the effects of new methods on teachers as well as on children. There were signs that many of the new methods were giving teachers more work and worry and the danger lay in the teachers being so overwhelmed that they might not recognise really worthwhile reform when it came.

There is therefore no fool proof model for innovation. The point rests really in the need to appreciate the new situation. No teacher can really know how to put a new technique to use without knowledge at the same time of why it is desirable, how and when and to what end its purpose, and for whom it should be beneficial. Also, simply adding new knowledge to the curriculum of the training institution or even revising it extensively will not ensure that a course of training, based on an innovative approach, will consequently bring about teaching behaviour, which will in any significant degree differ from that of others trained under the traditional curriculum. Research has not been conclusive on this point. This is partly due to the fact that it is difficult to devise suitable and discriminating instruments for measuring behaviour and attitudinal change and to arrange for all the desirable controls (necessary in rigorous research) to be exercised.

These considerations, however, do not cancel out the need for improvement. One thing is certain: fundamental educational reform will not come until teachers, working at grassroots level, are involved meaningfully. Teachers are unlikely to change their ways of doing things just because imperious theoreticians from the ivory tower or zealous reformers at some administrative centre tell them to do so.

In the classroom or in the lecture hall, between reformer and teacher, between the teacher and the taught, there is that quality of sensitive concern which needs to be present. Unless this is understood, changes in the educative process and the part which teachers can play will continue to remain subjects of armchair discourse.

\textsuperscript{10} National Federation for Educational Research in England and Wales.