

The Teacher – A Forgotten Stakeholder?

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Abstract: There are a number of tensions and debates embedded in any consideration of the teacher, ICT and the future. In this complex climate, it is possible to argue that too little attention has been paid to the act of teaching. With widely available and different forms of information and knowledge, learners still need to learn how to learn and to think. Teachers are the essential part of ensuring this process of transformation. Their professional judgement and voice are essential in this process.

1. INTRODUCTION

The perspective from which I will discuss the role of the teacher in an ICT world is informed by literature on innovation and change, professional development, and ICT and teaching and learning, which I present at the end as a bibliography. An exploration of ICT as an innovation and its relationship to, and influence upon, change in education is not only current and at the heart of our interests, but is particularly complex as the nature of the technology itself is dynamic. Thus we are attempting to analyse and understand a fast moving innovation with attributes that shift in both complexity and ranking of significance. Understanding such a mobile innovation and its relationship to education, which itself is neither static nor fixed, needs models of change. For me, the linear models, often developed to understand the management of change, provide too simplistic a representation of such reality. This is in part because a further layer of complexity lies in the substantial societal changes within which this educational and technological relationship is developing. And these societal changes, part triggered by information and communication technologies, add to the shifting contexts in which we are operating.

My analysis of this literature and the papers and discussions published in this volume, is built around what I see as a cluster of debates and tensions embedded in the themes of this conference. A useful way of perceiving such tensions, often used in analysis in applied social sciences, is to explore their characteristics as if located at opposite ends of a pole. Such analysis, by focussing on the characterisation of difference, may subsequently sharpen our understanding of such debates and tensions, but also clarify the continuities that underlie them. I am convinced we should recognise some residual tensions in our field, and indeed take responsibility for some of the discourse that suggests enormous benefits for the use of ICT in education when research often reflects patchy and inconclusive effects. In this paper I will set out to use this device of identifying differences around each of the four themes of the conference: the roles of the teacher, the teaching environment, the teacher and society, and the teacher as professional.

I intend to explore each theme as if the four represent a series of nested boxes, or stacked Russian painted dolls. The inner box is the teacher as professional, the next their roles, then the environment and the final outer box, or the largest of the Russian dolls, is the teacher and society. These boxes provide a simple form of scaffolding for the basis of my analysis. But while they represent the overall structure of my intent, in order to build, or scaffold the stack, I am choosing to start with the second box.

2. THE ROLES OF THE TEACHER

In this climate of educational and societal change surrounding the introduction of ICT, the teacher often falls between two classifications – that of a conservative resister of change, and that of a pioneer and interpreter of change. Those who focus on teachers as a block to innovation will produce and impose prescriptions for change to include the externally devised new curriculum and in-service courses to promote an innovation. This approach is, in effect, designed to redress a deficit model of teachers. This can be illustrated by the number of times teachers are referred to as the object of the imperative – ‘teachers must’, ‘teachers should’. The problem with this model is that it can too easily ignore existing perceptions and experiences of teachers. At the opposite end of the pole is the belief that lasting innovations work if they are introduced or emerge ‘bottom up’, that is from within the corpus of practising teachers. They adopt and adapt the innovation to suit the needs of their learners and classrooms. The problem here is the innovation often remains trapped within individual or small group’s interpretations and use, and rarely develops into a consensus to influence the majority.

Educational innovation and change does occur, but Fullan (1991) has repeatedly reminded us of two factors – that teachers lie at the heart of change, and that planned major innovations are often less successful than those which succeed through what I am choosing to call a form of ‘consensus of practice’. That is, teachers and related groups, such as professional associations and advisers, find enough potential common ground and value in an innovation for it to be adapted, adopted and become a regular part of their pedagogy. Sarason (1990) suggests that the problem is not what to do, but what to think. He reminds us that no-one warmly seeks, let alone embraces, significant intellectual and personal change. Change is difficult – we must address the issue of power, and power relationships, to ensure the desired change is to be achieved. The value of many of the papers and discussions in this volume is that this is what they are addressing.

Much of the work on the role of teachers and the use of ICT appears to be caught in a pincer movement between a substantial and important discussion on theories of learning, and an equally important consideration of models of teachers’ knowledge. Our understanding of the psychology of learning includes our shifting understanding of how students construct and situate knowledge. There has been an interesting partnership between educational psychology and educational ICT – and this has spawned experimental research and many applications have been devised around models of learning. This work has been valuable, and not simply in association with the use of ICT, as all educationalists are continually trying to model and understand the processes of learning. Valuable though this is, there appears to me a relative absence of corresponding discussions about how teachers can or do assimilate research about learning and translate such approaches into their teaching.

Writing about teachers and ICT is increasingly focused on the nature of teachers’ knowledge, and thus how and where ICT ‘should’ be incorporated into it. There are useful models of the various component parts of teachers’ knowledge. These are now commonly agreed to have as a basis three interlocking sets, to include subject knowledge, the knowledge of schooling, and the translation of both these in combination to arrive at pedagogic knowledge. The latter refers to knowledge to suit curriculum and learning at different levels of complexity. Thus for example a geography teacher knows and understands geography and the nature of geographical thinking, understands schools and learning, and translates that into curriculum and teaching, that is their pedagogy, of for instance the significance of plate tectonics to seven and seventeen years olds. The addition of knowledge about ICT within a pedagogic frame is a welcome recognition that this is an integral and not separate part of the complex knowledge base of teachers. Because it is here that the enormous asset that ICT can be to pedagogy, and

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