

Colloquium

Is educational technology delivering the goods?

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'The challenge that educational technologists face in harnessing the power of this combination [of hypertext software with compact disc technology] is awesome' (Megarry, 1988, 182). Consider another quotation: in the first issue of the recently merged Association for Educational Communications and Technology journal, Charles M Reigeluth writes that 'educational technology seems to be suffering from an identity crisis. We are ignored by many, including the new educational technologists. Why is this happening? . . . Where are we in the field now, and where should we be going?' (Reigeluth, 1989).

Until recently, I worked in the Council for Educational Technology for the UK (which was merged in April 1988 into the National Council for Educational Technology). That body aimed to provide a central focus for educational technology development in the UK—although, importantly for what follows, *not* of professional activity. The rapidly increasing power of the new media is continually challenging our ability to design learning materials which can appropriately apply all of that power, whilst at the same time those who call themselves educational technologists seem to have lost their way—if not their nerve. That is why I want to start a discussion, through these pages, of the following questions:

- Who, today, can be called an educational technologist? And what does that description imply about their training and professional self-image?
- How can we ensure that the practices of educational technology can continue to 'improve the process of human learning'?

To start the discussion, let me make my own position clear. Reigeluth refers to 'the new educational technologists', whom he defines as those who don't belong to ed tech organisations, nor go to ed tech conferences, nor draw upon 'our considerable, well-validated knowledge base' and yet are involved in creating learning materials—people from other disciplines who are taking an interest in educational technology. (Presumably they don't read *BJET* either!) How much, I ask, does this really matter? If you are a professional, whose status in your particular world depends upon acceptance of your special knowledge and skills, you will feel threatened by interlopers. But if your main concern is with the improvement of the process of learning, then does it matter who is doing it?

In the earlier embodiment of NCET in the late 1960s, when NCET drew much of its original inspiration from the curriculum development expertise of the Nuffield Foundation and the University of Sussex, we often talked of the future 'fading away' of educational technology—every teacher his or her own educational technologist. What

concerns me about Reigeluth's comment is that the new people are not drawing on the knowledge base which lies within 'professional ed tech'. That is both wasteful and dangerous, and is the cause of some of the appalling 'wheel re-invention' one sees in some of the new learning materials. The problem, surely, is that the knowledge base has all too often been presented in esoteric ways and in an ed tech professional circle, in order to maintain its academic respectability. The attitude might be acceptable if there were a big enough band of academically respectable educational technologists to meet all the rapidly changing educational and training needs. But there aren't—certainly not in the UK. Surely it is important to the improvement of the learning process that other people, who do not consider themselves educational technologists, use the ideas and methods we have developed—especially those related to the ways in which people learn and the ways that knowledge can be put to use through the new and powerful computer-based technologies.

As educational technologists, we have not succeeded in getting our ideas and techniques used widely enough to cope with the growing demand for properly designed learning materials. The reasons why not vary from country to country and probably from institution to institution; but the fact remains that we have all failed.

So what should we do? First, let us stop standing on our dignity and welcome aboard anyone who wants to design learning materials. Let us help to train them—even if they don't realise that they need training. After all, if you are expert at a DIY job and your neighbours are trying to do a similar job, you show them what to do, lend them the tools, and let them get on with it: why not do the same with educational technology? Second, let us recognise that we are supposed to be technologists, not scientists: our task is to get the job done, to deliver the goods. Let someone else worry about the purity of the concepts, and we can learn from their critical evaluation of our outputs. Third, let there always be those in our field whose own training is right up to date; I fear that much of the post-graduate course content in the UK is still firmly based on the ideas of the 1970s and early 1980s. Educational technologists must be right at the forefront of the development of the new media, finding out when they are appropriate, and working with other education and training professionals in order to ensure that we can meet design challenges such as those which Megarry identified.

If we don't sort ourselves out, educational technologists will fail to deliver just at the time when advanced educational technologies have the power really to change the way people learn. And that prospect is too wasteful to contemplate.

References

- MEGARRY, J, 'Hypertext and compact discs: the challenge of multi-media learning', *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 19, 3, 172–183, 1988
- REIGELUTH, CM, 'Educational technology at the crossroads: new mindsets and new directions', *Educational Technology Research and Development* 37, 1, 67–80, 1989

Reflections on an illustration which I couldn't understand

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There's no point in naming the article which prompted these reflections, although you can probably guess its identity if you care to. The fact that I tackled it immediately after reading the simply-written Colloquium pieces on writing and editing (*BJET* 20, 3, 213–217) didn't help. But I kept looking at this illustration which seemed to be at the heart of the author's argument, and kept asking myself 'what does this mean?'. After re-reading the article several times, I had discovered little about the author's message. Nevertheless, I thought (and still think) that his subject is an important one.

The perplexing figure was nicely symmetrical, but despite repeated study I failed to extract any meaning from it. Am I alone, or did other readers—or even referees—share my puzzlement? Did the referees question its inclusion, or did they hesitate to reveal that they didn't understand it either? Did the editor? 'A picture can be worth a thousand words' is a principle that I often advocate, but it fails if the illustration is designed to impress, rather than to inform.

Readers of this journal are interested in the pursuit of quality in all communications, especially those concerned with teaching and learning. Authors, referees and editors must strive to transmit clear, useful messages to as wide a cross-section of our profession as possible. It is surely self-defeating if a diagram which purports to represent teaching and learning processes is itself unhelpful in communicating?

What are the factors which make a diagram helpful to *BJET* readers? When is an extra thousand words *better* than an illustration? Was my reaction to this figure idiosyncratic, or do other readers share my reservations about the choice of illustrations used in this journal?

Editor's note

Reactions to these comments, to the illustration which provoked it, and to the general issue of what makes a diagram helpful or otherwise would be warmly welcomed, whether intended for publication in the next Colloquium or for my private guidance—Editor.