
THE TEACHER AS FUTURIST

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By RUTH N. HORRY

Today's teacher finds himself caught up in a maelstrom which threatens to engulf him and destroy his role in society. Fundamentally a traditionalist, he is being buffeted on all sides by the turbulent currents of change. Revolutionary changes which are occurring represent a mosaic of many forces—social, cultural, ethnic, academic, linguistic and technological.

For centuries, the teacher was a buffer between the status quo and disruptive influences. In this century, during the Fifties and Sixties, the teacher as the guardian and transmitter of knowledge and culture, made a futile effort to stem the tide of a growing restlessness and a burgeoning discontent. In more recent years, he became the interface between the past and the present, looking both ways. Today, he is forced to look toward the future, to live in the future, to shape the future, to imagine the unimaginable.

This is not to say that the past is to be forgotten. We have been formed and informed by the past. Our values and attitudes have been determined by the past. And it is the past

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which makes possible the present and the future. The task then is to utilize what we know through study and experience to orient ourselves and our students toward the future. We must bring into play our cognitive, conceptual, and intuitive faculties and use them in a non-traditional manner. In spite of everything, we are the bridge, the thread of continuity between the past and the future.

What assumptions can be made about the nature or duration of the future? Predictions run the gamut of possibilities—from the dire forecasts of the doomsday prophets to the fantasies (which are no longer fantasies) of science fiction. Included in the first category is the study sponsored by the Club of Rome, entitled *The Limits of Growth*. If the predictions of this study are valid, we need not be too concerned about the future because environmental stress and a succession of famines, epidemics, social crises, and wars will have caused global death within a hundred years. Others predict that technology will be able to diminish or reverse the stress which it has caused on the earth's ecosystem, and that properly utilized, technology will tend to make man more human.

Among the many technological predictions with which we are familiar are the following possibilities: the transmission of energy from the moon; linguistic communication with extraterrestrial beings; "cloning," that is, using an adult cell to reproduce a twin of the adult; the development of learning ability, chemically and electronically; the creation of "cyborgs," which is the fusion of man and machine as with the nuclear energy-sustained pace-maker; the building of cities beneath the sea; and the creation of humanoids, non-human human beings.

Ideas about the future have been set forth which transcend technological possibilities. An analogy may be made between the theories of a scientist-philosopher on the advent of life and its critical points of evolution and the future evolution of man. He says that whenever anything reaches a certain measurement, a certain limit, it changes its nature. The curve doubles back, the surface contracts to a point, the solid disintegrates, the liquid boils, the germ cell divides, and intuition suddenly bursts on the piled up facts.¹ This is the critical point, the creative

¹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. by Bernard Wall (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 78.

pause. There are those who believe that man is approaching one of these critical points, and that there will be a transformation of consciousness and of being.

The humanistic psychologists are beginning to interpose their ideas between the theories of the behaviorists and the Freudians. They are trying to define that which is most human in man. One psychoanalyst expressed the hope that the human being will be rediscovered; with that rediscovery there will be an accompanying emphasis on love, music, creativity, and other introspective experiences. Another speaks of "self-transcendence," a process originating in the heart and expanding outward to find meaning in life. In short, there seems to be an almost imperceptible turn on the part of scientists and sociologists toward the inner spirit of man; a need on their part to explore his humanism, his awareness of and respect for other human beings.

Perhaps we are approaching the critical point in this era of transition and revolution. Everything seems to be fragmented and dispersed in all directions. This dispersion, which may last for several generations, is the condition in which we find ourselves and in which today's youth will live well into the twenty-first century. Alvin Toffler, in his appraisal of our industrial society and the super-industrial society of the future, presents ample evidence of the fragmentation of our society into subcults, fads, and diverse life-styles. Because of a superabundance of everything in our culture, our dilemma, he says is one of over-choice.²

Can the teacher provide the kind of training necessary to cope with the situation which prevails now and which has been predicted for tomorrow's world? It would seem that we too must become futurists and make specific assumptions for the future of education on the basis of what is happening now. One assumption which is fairly certain is that assembly-line, lock-step education in which a student is prepared for specific slots in the world of work will eventually cease. Another assumption is that education will be more flexible, more diverse, short-termed, trans-disciplinary. Further, the community will become an adjunct of the education process by providing on-the-job, apprenticeship training. Proven competency rather than a degree

² *Future Shock* (New York. Bantam Books, 1971), p. 269.

will receive priority for employment. The traditional sixteen years of continuous formal education will be interrupted for other kinds of experience. Students in some colleges are presently being granted leaves-of-absence for specific periods of time, without having to drop out.

Given these actualities and possibilities, the educational institution has no choice but to re-define its role, create different goals, and re-structure its offerings.

The present proliferation of alternative systems of learning is a prefiguration of future directions. Michael Rossman describes one of the alternative systems as a diverse, mobile, evolving network of nodes such as free clinics, underground papers and radio stations, crisis centers, liberation groups, yoga, "growth" centers, tutorials, Jesus-people groups, and other so-called fads. These, he says, are learning groups held together for periods of short duration by the mutuality and commitment of those involved. Such factors are lacking in our traditional schools. Their efforts are toward new community, social action, and meaning in life. Rossman believes that this kind of diversified activity has form even as chaos has form. He views the university of the future as becoming a sub-net of the alternative system if it begins "to absorb, reflect, and reinforce the goals of the learning nodes."³

Although education may not follow the course predicted by Rossman and others, we know that changes will be made because society is changing. In the future, for the sheer delivery of facts, electronic retrieval systems will probably replace the teacher. What then will be the role of the instructor? He must be the coordinator. He must utilize facts as a basis for investigation and evaluation. He must be the human and humane element in the student's depersonalized encounter with the machine. He must try to counteract the feeling defined by Logan Wilson as "a social malaise characterized by lack of identity, isolation, powerlessness and a sense of meaninglessness."⁴ The teacher must become the center of an "inquiry environment" in

³ Michael Rossman, "How We Learn Today in America," *Saturday Review* (August 19, 1972), 27-33.

⁴ *Shaping American Higher Education* (Washington, D. C.: American Council on Education, 1972), p. 144.

which the student learns how to learn by engaging in such knowledge-producing activities as questioning, defining, observing, classifying, generalizing, analyzing, and verifying information.⁵ In the inquiry environment, the student learns how to ask the kinds of questions necessary to develop criteria for judging the quality, the precision, and the relevance of ideas. The teacher utilizes the developing learning skills to form those skills needed in making choices and establishing values in life situations. Personal fulfillment is superseded necessarily by the effort to survive. The teacher and student together must formulate a strategy for survival. This involves flexibility, adaptability, the ability to cope, and perceptivity.

Learning how to learn, learning how to cope, learning how to adapt, learning how to evaluate, learning how to make choices, learning how to survive, all depend on one's ability to communicate.

One of the principal concerns of The College Language Association is how to strengthen the linguistic skills of our students. Success in any discipline, or way of knowing a subject, demands such competence. Language gives the individual his thinking tools. He learns how to educate himself, to expand his consciousness and his cognition of the world around him. He learns to create and express his perception of reality. He learns to verbalize his feelings and emotions. Language skills can lead to self-discovery as is evident in some of the works of young black poets. Communication further serves to clarify human relationships. One learns how to distinguish between what is said and what is really meant. Given the high mobility of people and the rapid situational changes, one becomes able to adapt and thus to survive. Human interaction is facilitated. Language is a liberating force; it breaks the shell of personal isolation and puts one in touch with his world.

In summary then, we as teachers must become futurists. We must examine the predictions set forth by sociologists, scientists, and philosophers. We must determine their implications for education. We must make assumptions about the kinds of training students need, and how this training can become largely self-

⁵ Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Delacorte, 1969), pp. 25-38.

directed. If the current revolution is moving toward the critical point, and the new synthesis may lead to a new consciousness and to greater humanization, then we can but join the revolution. We can learn about its components; we can become a central focus for its diversity and create an environment for individual growth. Finally, we can stimulate interpersonal and intergroup communication since this is the force which will eventually humanize us all.

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