

Luck and the lonely teacher

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My family, I guess, was education averse. That's not to say they weren't bright and capable. But just they came from a generation where learning was seen as something you did at school. Afterwards? Well, that was for the Great and the Good, rather than working-class people like us. I was the first teacher in my family (that I know of), and something of a shock to the familial system. I was also a late developer. Very late, by my own standards. I was almost thirty by the time I started to get over the business of cultural pressure, class tradition and personal self-doubt to make my first steps into the wild world of post-compulsory education.

When I first formally learned about teaching (back in 1984-86) I was very lucky. I wasn't inflicted with a formulaic version of what teaching and learning was. Instead, the people I met were sufficiently liberal (or lazy?) to allow me a degree of investigative freedom. And because I was motivated to achieve by a sort of *Educating Rita* need to break free from history, I ended up amalgamating a lot of competing elements into my vision of what teaching was. Hence, I have (ever since) felt that the gates to 'knowing' were open to me. All I had to do was push . . . and I was in . . .

I learned a lot of what may seem, by contemporary standards, very unorthodox material.

This included communication theory (Shannon, Berlo, Mortensen, Sapir and Whorf), political contextualisation (Camus, then Sartre and de Beauvoir), social-constructivism (Lave and Wenger), and of course Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's take on mind, language and externality proved revolutionary. It never occurred to me that I was doing anything unusual to pursue these diverse interests. They were stimulating, productive concerns. That was enough for me.

I also discovered a community of people within which it was possible to congenially talk and work. I didn't know I was doing anything unusual. No one ever told me otherwise. When I sat in the Institute for Learning's offices in London one wet winter's day, rambling on about reading Kahneman's *Thinking Fast and Slow* to the national Chairperson, I didn't think I was doing anything unusual. I still don't.

I was lucky. Very lucky. Though I didn't know it at the time.

All that *eudaimonia* (flourishing) happened because I wasn't being observed and controlled from outside.

Today's corporate educational systems consider themselves paragons of virtue. They have mission statements (slogans-of-destiny!), brave aims, standards that can be enumerated, sophisticated policy frameworks, and professional standards that they police with a vigour that Orwell would have recognised. Their moral status is documented, and therefore inviolable. Their desire to serve their customers (the 'learners' . . . *parola corrotta!*) is cast in bonds of paper and HTML. So these assets must both be true, and evidentially presentable when Ofsted turn up for a friendly visit.

But you don't have to seek very far to see where the problems arise. In 1941, psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm said:

There is only one possible, productive solution for the relationship of individualized man with the world: his active solidarity with all men and his spontaneous activity, love and work, which unite him again with the world, not by primary ties but as a free and independent individual . . . However, if the economic, social and political conditions . . . do not offer a basis for the

realization of individuality in the sense just mentioned, while at the same time people have lost those ties which gave them security, this lag makes freedom an unbearable burden. It then becomes identical with doubt, with a kind of life which lacks meaning and direction. Powerful tendencies arise to escape from this kind of freedom into submission or some kind of relationship to man and the world which promises relief from uncertainty, even if it deprives the individual of his freedom.

(Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 1941)

Fromm highlights the matter of the distancing of power from the business of productive life. A distancing based on pragmatic competitive efficiency which predicates its very existence on a culture of producing better 'product' for the consumer. At the most competitive price, of course. That it does this in spite of its policies, and not because of them, is the irony missed on most management boardrooms. Being 'distant' enables supposed objectivity. But it also creates a lack of identity with the people who seek to flourish at the ground-zero of work. The greater the distance, the less the empathy. The less the empathy, the greater the capacity to restrict eudaimonic growth for the greater good of productivity. When 'communities-of-practice' are established (imposed) they also lack the capacity for freedom of innovative thought. Such 'communities' are no more than a bunch of folk located in the same place, all wearing the same mental straight-jackets they've been asked to put on as the price of a job.

Educational institutions have become central to the business of an 'escape from freedom', wherein 'meaning and direction' are created *for* the employee and student, rather than made *by* them.

I began my professional teaching life at a time when it was possible to collaborate with others and to innovate without having to justify oneself to other mortals who had unwarranted power. That, to me, was true professionalism. Fortunate as I was: I found myself with an open goal, and the ball at my feet.

That's not how it is today, much to my eternal shame and sorrow.

The chances are, if I step out of line (even by writing this article) I am somehow being 'unprofessional'. Which is a generic term that means very little in the light of Fromm's alienated world. But nevertheless is a useful label to place upon the deviant.

But I won't continually moan about change. This isn't the writing of an Old Girl wearing rose-tinted spectacles. Moaning at the keyboard effects very little. Actual changes comes from the return to a culture of 'solidarity with all men and his spontaneous activity, love and work, which unite him again with the world'. Fromm is right. And for that to come about, a little defiance needs to be cultivated.

But what I will say is that small tragedies come out of such experiences. Being lucky then makes for alienation now. Worse still: the feeling that one is struggling against a torrent of deliberate stupidity. That the passion for knowing has been so comprehensively co-opted by exploitative bureaucracies that it no longer holds any truly liberative power.

We can put this right. But the first step is to say that it exists.

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