Chapter XI

Ms. Chips and Her Battle Against the Cyborgs: Embedding ICT in Professional Praxis

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Abstract

This chapter is written for practising teachers, and examines the institutional and individual factors that inhibit the implementation of information and communication technology (ICT) as a tool for teaching and learning. The affordances of ICT are identified, together with their contribution to attainment, creativity, and learning. The author argues that many of the obstacles to meaningful uses of ICT are embedded in the assumptions inherent in many institutional frameworks that are predicated on an outmoded industrial model that drives many school timetables, which process learners through the school machine. Individual change is easier to effect than institutional: the author provides some suggestions to liberate creative teachers from constraints of the system.

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Preamble

In the book, Goodbye, Mr. Chips, by James Hilton, a shy, British teacher (Mr. Chipping, hence “Chips”) devotes his life to teaching, after the death of his beautiful American wife. The film (1939) of the book features Robert Donat as Mr. Chips, who looks back on his long career and the people in it. And there you have it: the quintessential image of the devoted teacher, interacting with pupils and students, enabling them to excel and achieve their goals. The reality, of course, is often slightly different. Teachers are caught between the Scylla of an increasingly prescriptive curriculum, and the Charybdis of public accountability; schools are expected to pick up the shortfall of parenting and social responsibility, abandoned as parents rush out to work increasingly long hours to service mortgage and consumer debt.

And yet … and yet. The teacher still sees herself as someone who can shape and nurture a young life, foster a love of learning and a sense of self-worth that will help create a rounded individual: someone for whom education is more about kindling fires than filling empty vessels.

And then the door opens, large boxes are brought in, their contents fill the rooms, and the pupils spend all their time staring at the screens — or not, because the computers are not as good as the ones they have at home, are not as much fun, cannot be customized — but the ecology of the classroom has changed, and Ms. Chips has begun her relentless battle against the Cyborgs.

Teaching, the Existential Reality

The singer, Sting, once reflected on his previous career as a teacher, and commented that there was not too much difference between teaching and singing in a band: it was a question of standing in front of a crowd of screaming teenagers and trying to keep them entertained. That may well be unfair to one or more of the stakeholders in that relationship. Some teenagers have the ability to entertain themselves. Many of those I taught seemed to find endless hours of pleasure in staring through the window. From time to time, they would hear their name, realise that they were being asked a question and, offer up an attempt at an answer. They had to be there. I had to be there. We tried hard to be polite to one another and do what we all had to do.

What did we have to do? Simple. I had to teach. They had to learn. That was how the system worked. Then they would be tested to see how well they had learned. Ah yes: simple.
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