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The Role of the Educator

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How often do we read about the importance of teachers in education? It must be every day, it seems. We are [told about](#) "strong empirical evidence that teachers are the most important school-based determinant of student achievement" [again](#) and [again](#).

The problem with the educational system, [it is argued](#), is that teachers need to be held accountable. We are [told](#) we must fire incompetent teachers. Not just in the United States, but in the UK and elsewhere, the [concern](#) is that bad teachers must go. Even here on [The Huffington Post](#), the emphasis is on defining teacher accountability rather than understanding what teachers in the 21st century are supposed to do.

The problem with focusing on the role of the teacher, from my perspective, is that it misses the point. Though there may still be thousands of people employed today with the job title of "teacher" or "educator", it is misleading to suggest that all, or even most, aspects of providing an education should, or could, be placed into the hands of these individuals.

Let me tell you how I know this. In recent years my colleagues and I have been involved in the emerging field of online learning through four sets of distinct activities: designing e-learning software, such as [gRSShopper](#) or [Synergic3](#); offering a series of online courses, such as [Connectivism](#), [Critical Literacies](#), or [Personal Learning Environments](#); theorizing around the ideas of [connective knowledge](#), [resource sharing](#) and [learning communities](#); and writing a [daily newsletter](#), posting [a blog](#), and offering [conference presentations](#).

Each of these has contributed in one way or another to an overall approach not only to learning online but to learning generally. It's not simply that I've adopted this approach; it's that I and my colleagues have observed this approach emerging in the community generally.

It's an approach that emphasizes open learning and learner autonomy. It's an approach that argues that course content is merely a tool employed to stimulate and support learning -- a [McGuffin](#), as I've called it in various presentations, "a plot element that catches the viewers attention or drives the plot of a work of fiction" -- rather than the object of learning itself. It's an approach that promotes a pedagogy of learning by engagement and activity within an authentic learning community -- a [community](#) of practitioners, where people practice the discipline, rather than merely just talk about it.

It's an approach that emphasizes exercises involving those [competencies](#) rather than deliberate acts of memorization or rote, an approach that seeks to grow knowledge in a manner analogous to building muscles, rather than to transfer or construct knowledge through some sort of cognitive process.

It's an approach that fosters a wider and often undefined set of competencies associated with a discipline, a recognition that knowing, say, physics, isn't just to know the set of facts and theories related to physics, but rather to embody a wider set of values, beliefs, ways of observing and even mannerisms associated with being a physicist (it is the caricature of this wider set of competencies that makes [The Big Bang Theory](#) so funny).

Concordant with this approach has been the oft-repeated consensus that the role of the educator will change significantly. Most practitioners in the field are familiar with the [admonishment](#) that an educator will no longer be a "sage on the stage". But that said, many others resist the characterization of an educator as merely a "guide by the side." We continue to expect educators to play an active role in learning, but it has become more difficult to characterize exactly what that role may be.

In my own work, I have stated that the role of the teacher is to ["model and demonstrate"](#). What I have tried to capture in this is the idea that students need prototypes on which to model their own work. Readers who have learned to program computers by copying and adapting code will know what I mean. But it's also, I suppose, why I see the footprints of [Raymond Chandler](#) all through William Gibson's writing. We begin by copying successful practice, and then begin to modify that practice to satisfy our own particular circumstances and needs.

In order for this to happen, the instructor must be more than just a presenter or lecturer. The instructor, in order to demonstrate practice, is required to take a more or less active role in the disciplinary or professional community itself, demonstrating by this activity successful tactics and techniques within that community, and modeling the approach, language and world view of a successful practitioner. This is something we see in medicine already, as students learn as interns working alongside doctors or nurse practitioners.

If we take this approach, though, it becomes quickly apparent that the role of the educator is expanding. In addition to being expert in the discipline of teaching and pedagogy, the educator is now expected to have up-to-date and relevant knowledge and experience in it. Even a teacher of basic disciplines such as science, history or mathematics must remain grounded, as no discipline has remained stable for very long, and all disciplines require a deeper insight in order to be taught effectively. What are the new [subatomic particles](#)? Is Gavin Menzies's [1421](#) plausible? How are [Fourier Transforms](#) used in art?

Moreover, even the concept of the learning environment and learner support have begun to expand. [Well before](#) the computer age, teachers and professors began to be expected to use copy machines, slide and overhead projectors and intercom systems. Today's school includes [Smartboards](#) and computer labs, the Internet and mobile phones, online encyclopedias and social network sites. While some educational systems respond by blocking these new technologies, for better or worse education is moving into the digital arena, and learning support involves understanding and applying at least some of these.

In my 1998 paper, [The Future of Online Learning](#), I proposed that the role of the educator itself would become unbundled. Thinking mostly of the concept of distance learning, I described a concept current at the time called "[the triad model](#)" where student and instructor were located at a distance from each other and where a third person, a coach or facilitator, was co-located with the student to act as a mentor and advocate. I had seen this model work well in northern Alberta, at places like the Sunshine Project in Slave Lake.

As each part of the teaching task becomes more complex, and as we as educators seek to reach more specialized populations in more difficult circumstances, the need to understand, and where necessary unbundle, the varied roles of the educator becomes more pressing. A narrow focus on the idea of the teacher as "the purveyor of an education" is unhelpful and misleading.

In a [recent article](#) in the *Telegraph*, for example, we are told that free online lectures will "destroy universities" unless they get their act together. "[The Khan Academy](#)," it notes, "offers over 1,600 undergraduate-level videos on maths, sciences and humanities, which have collectively been watched over 30 million times." These raise the question of why students should pay thousands merely to sit anonymously in a lecture theater. "Freely available online lectures and textbooks give universities the opportunity to reduce costs and increase quality, while focusing resources on what really matters: contact time between teachers and students."

If we look at the world of educational videos, however, we find that, far from disappearing from the radar screen, the academic lecture has become a new form of online content of some importance to educators. The [TED videos](#) highlight talks by experts in a variety of fields. Universities are using [lecture-capture](#) software to produce sets of videos covering entire courses. A visit to [FreeVideoLectures](#), for example, will lead the viewer to Berkeley professor John Jacob Campbell's [lectures](#) on the nature of mind or John Kihlstrom's [course](#) on Social Cognition. This is merely the tip of the iceberg; the rise of Internet learning has led to a proliferation of lectures, not an end to them.

And the presentation of learning online can become more complex, subtle and interesting. At the online [Global Education Conference](#) a few weeks ago, for example, I watched and listed as [Allison Deines](#) described [Roots and Shoots](#), an educational program offered by the Jane Goodall Institute. The purpose of Roots and Shoots is to encourage young people to learn authentic real-world skills through participation in a campaign related to environment or ecology.

Such programs, reported Deines, lead to more motivated students and better educational outcomes. They are more likely to report positive feelings about education and perform better on tests. They learn basic concepts, such as science, history and mathematics, by application in the course of these projects. And teachers are able to leverage their work to support more traditional academics.

There's no end to such projects online. Another lecture at the Global Education Conference talked about Polar Bears International, where a group of scientists based in Churchill, Manitoba, work and talk with students worldwide about wildlife in the Arctic. [Another](#) described the Sinebrychoff Art Museum [educational program](#) for seniors. [Another](#) described the [Fulbright Narratives](#) from Turkmenistan. [Another](#) the LitWorld [Girls Clubs](#). The list is almost endless; students could choose from almost any discipline, any topic, and even any pedagogy under the sun.

What's significant about these examples is not so much the new opportunities they offer students, though there is that. It's that all of them redefine the educator's role in some significant way. They create entirely new categories of educator, such as "online lecturer" or "scientist studying polar bears". Entire disciplines, far removed from traditional "instructional design", are being created and populated by people who direct online videos, design learning communities, program massive games like [Evoke](#). And they create new categories of roles and responsibilities for in-person educators. What is, after all, the role of a teacher helping Roots and Shoots activists? What skills does a teacher bring to the table when facilitating conversations with students in Turkmenistan?

A couple of weeks ago I went through [an exercise](#) with one of Alec Couros's graduate [education classes](#). I asked about the idea of multiple roles in education to Twitter readers and gathered a set of them. I then took this set and went through it with the class online; as I talked about the roles, the students defined them, added examples, and identified who would perform the tasks described. The result was a unique -- and colorful -- [slide show](#) exploring the evolving education profession.

It's worth actually taking the time to list some of these roles and to talk about them in detail:

The Learner -- as someone who models the act of learning, the educator helps students with this most fundamental of skills. This includes getting excited about something new, exploring it, trying it out and experimenting, engaging with it and engaging with others learning about it. Everyone learns, from novices to professionals, and while our approach to learning may change over the time as we become more skilled and more professional, we always have something to teach about learning.

The Collector -- educators have always been collectors, from the days when they would bring stacks of old magazines into class to the modern era as they share links, resources, new faces and new names. They find materials related to their own interests, keep in tune with student interests. They are the maven, the librarian, the journalist or the archivist.

The Curator -- as opposed to the collector, who goes out and finds, the curator is one who organizes and makes sense of that which has been found. The curator is like a caretaker and a preserver, but also a creator of meaning, guardian of knowledge, or an expert at knowing. A curator is a connoisseur, one who brings quality to the fore, one who sequences and presents. A curator may be a presenter, an instructional designer, or an artist.

The Alchemist -- historically, of course, the alchemist was one who transmuted lead into gold; today's alchemist mixes the ordinary and mundane into something new and unexpected. The alchemist practices the 'mix' of remix, the "mash" of mash-up, the "collage" of [bricolage](#). The alchemist sees patterns and symmetries in distinct materials and brings them together to bring that out. The person who created [Obama Girl](#) and the artists who created the "[I Gotta Feeling](#)" lip-dub were alchemists.

The Programmer -- the programmer builds sequences into machines, manipulates symbols to produce meaning, calculates, orders, assembles, and manages. A good part of the programmer's task involves working directly on computers, as is the case for those writing software, designing communities or social networks, or setting up wikis. Another part of the task is conceptual,

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nonetheless plays an important role in providing information, supporting belief and motivating action. The salesperson, like all educators, is the champion of a cause or an idea. It's the principal selling to the staff, the teacher promoting a set of values to the student, the scientist informing the entrepreneur, the expert counseling the politician.

The Convener -- this is the person who brings people together. Every good office has one; it's the person who wanders from desk to desk signing people up for softball or suds. A convener is a network builder, a community organizer, or as one course participant wrote, a huge part of life in rural Saskatchewan. Conveners are leaders, coaches, and administrators; they are collaboration builders, coalition builders, enablers or sometimes even just pied pipers.

The Coordinator -- this person organizes the people who have been brought together, organizing groups or things together for the common good. A coordinator is an eminently practical person, organizing schedules, setting expectations, managing logistics, following up and solving problems. The people who are expert at coordination know who they are; they are the ones that wind up coordinating everything for people: weddings, parties, fishing expeditions, field trips. A coordinator is a connector and an integrator, but most of all, a systems person.

The Designer -- in online learning we tend to think specifically of the instructional designer, but in fact we see the hand of the designer on everything from wall maps to book pages to desks and chairs to classroom paint. The purpose of the designer is to create spaces for learning, whether they are in person, on paper or online. They attend to flow, perspectives, light, tone and shading. The designer may be the industrial architect creating a new school or the software architect creating a new simulation.

The Coach -- this multifaceted role involves everything from creating synergy and chemistry in a group to providing the game plan for learning to raising the bar and encouraging players to higher performance. Though the coach is on the side of the learner, in the learner's corner urging them on and giving advice, the coach also serves a larger or higher objective, working to achieve team or organizational goals.

The Agitator -- this is the person who creates the itch a person's education will eventually scratch. The role of the agitator is to create the seed of doubt, the sense of wonder, the feeling of urgency, the cry of outrage. The agitator is sometimes the devil's advocate, sometimes the revolutionary, sometimes the disruptive agent, and sometimes just somebody who is thinking outside the box. We are all agitators, but scientists, skeptics, journalists and activists have elevated it into a discipline of its own.

The Facilitator -- such a person makes the learning space comfortable. Their role is to cove the process or the conversation forward, but within a broad range of parameters that will stress clarity, order, inclusiveness, and good judgment. The facilitator keeps things on track and within reason, gently nudging things forward, but without typically imposing his or her opinions or agenda onto the outcome. Moderators, arbitrators and mediators are all types of facilitator; so is the chair of a debate or the leader of a classroom discussion.

Tech Support -- sometimes tech support people seem like magicians, other times they seem to be power brokers, but their influence on educational processes and outcomes is unquestioned, and they are today an indispensable part of the organization. A tech support person may work with programs and hardware, but his or her primary role is to understand what people need, to solve problems, and make things possible. Sometimes tech support needs to be in the room with you, sometimes they'll be in the corporate office, and sometimes they'll be half way around the world.

The Moderator -- in addition to the facilitation role, alluded to above, there is a separate skill entirely under the heading of moderation. Where facilitation is about encouragement and growth, moderation is about governing and pruning. The moderator of a forum is concerned about decorum, good behavior and rules. He or she will tell people to "shush" while the movie is playing, trim the trolls from the discussion thread, and gently suggest in a [back-channel](#) that the experienced pro ought to go more easily on the novice.

The Critic -- every person needs to be questioned; it is part of the learning process. Values, truths, and institutions need to be questioned as well. The critic is the person who asks for evidence, verifies the facts, assesses the reasoning, and offers opinions. But as [Roger Ebert](#) so eloquently demonstrates, the critic is also an aide to understanding, one who will extract the threads of a tangled presentation and make them clear. As logic texts everywhere proclaim, criticism consists first of exposition and only then of examination.

The Lecturer -- unlike the critic, who will focus on a specific work or author, the lecturer has the responsibility or organizing larger bodies of work or thought into a comprehensible whole, employing the skills of rhetoric and exposition to make the complex clear for the listener or reader. Today's lecturer includes not only the teacher or professor who stands at the head of the classroom but also speakers and conferences and seminars, priests and public officials, on-air performers and speakers, documentary personalities and television presenters. Where would we be without people like [David Suzuki](#), [Carl Sagan](#) or [Kenneth Clark](#)?

The Demonstrator -- some things are better shown than described and this is where someone who demonstrates comes in. Demonstration has always been a part of education, whether a carpenter demonstrating proper mitering to an apprentice or a chemist demonstrating proper lab technique to a class. Traditionally demonstration has been done in person, but today people who demonstrate can use actual equipment, simulations, or video to tell their stories. Many of the educational videos online are demonstrations rather than lectures, following in the model established by television personalities such as [Bob Vila](#), [Michael Holmes](#) or [Debbie Travis](#).

The Mentor -- when we look for models and examples to follow, we look not simply for practices and techniques, but often more generally toward the sort of person we want to be. Such a person, if they correspond, converse and work with you personally, may become a mentor. The role of mentor is itself multi-faceted, ranging from sharp critic to enthusiastic coach, but outweighing these is the personal dimension, the presence of the entire personality rather than some domain or discipline. Not everyone can be a mentor, not every mentor can take on too many prodigies, and of all the roles described here, that of the mentor is most likely to be honorary or voluntary.

The Connector -- this is the person who draws associations and makes inferences. The connector is the person who links or [bridges](#) distinct communities with one another, allowing ideas to flow from art to engineering, from database design to flower arranging. The connector sees things in common between disparate entities and draws that line between them, creating links and collaborations between otherwise isolated communities and disciplines. The connector sees emergent phenomena,

The Theorizer -- the object of theory is to explain, and so the theorizer is one who tries to describe how or why something is the case. The theorizer often works through abstraction and generalization, which leads to critics saying he or she is not very practical, but without the theorizer we would have no recourse to very useful unseen phenomena such as mass, gravity or information. The theorizer is also the person who leads us to develop world views, find the underlying cause or meaning of things, or create order out of what appears to be chaos. If nothing else, the theorizer helps us remember things by giving us a single structure under which to assimilate numerous details. Priests are by necessity theorizers, but so also are scientists (this is what they have in common), and also weather forecasters, economists and sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists.

The Sharer -- we have looked at some specific forms of sharing, such as lecturing or criticizing, but there is a more generic role in education consisting of the sharing of material from one person to another on a wider and much more systematic basis. The sharer might be the person making e-portfolios available, the person managing the class mailing list, or the person passing along links and reflections from outside. But ultimately, what the sharer offers most are cultures, concepts and ideas. While most anyone can share we tend to think of creative types -- artists, songwriters and storytellers -- as sharers,

The Evaluator -- for all the emphasis it receives in the media, the role of evaluation is but one facet, and a relatively minor one, in the educational system. While most learners and educators recognize the need to measure themselves against a standard -- or against each other -- this activity is more like looking at the signpost rather than pedaling the bicycle. The evaluator in a digital world is more than a marker of tests and assigner of grades; modern technology makes it possible to assess not merely declarative knowledge or compositional ability, but instinct and reactions, sociability, habits and attitudes. [Evaluation](#), moreover, occurs across domains, applied by a variety of agents, whether they be examining boards, peer networks, credit and contribution agencies, or reputation services.

The Bureaucrat -- though we enjoy chiding the bureaucrat's dour demeanor it remains nonetheless true that someone must be the collector and keeper of records. The bureaucrat provides the statistics so much needed by the coordinator, manages the finances and resources, tracks the services needed by facilitators and tech support, organizes accountability procedures and maintains systemic coherence. Today the bureaucrat is represented as a manager or 'boss', but as the domain of education becomes much more complex the importance of this aspect of the role will decrease as the statistical and accounting functions increases.

That's 23 roles -- and no doubt a relatively reflective reader could begin to identify additional roles. Moreover, any of these roles may itself be decomposed into a more fine-grained set of roles. It should be evident that the role of the educator, even if relatively narrowly conceived, is actually a set of very different, yet equally important, tasks.

That's one reason why it is frustrating when people identify the role of the teacher as the central factor influencing the success or failure of a student's education. Leaving aside any influence of external factors, such a statement begs us to question what aspect of the educator's role it is that is so vitally important. And while the likely answer may be that they all are, or that it depends on the individual student, it seems clear that continuing to treat them as a single role, to be performed by a single person, increasingly defies the reality that is today's educational system.

Through the years as my colleagues and I have worked on increasingly advanced forms of online learning, one thing I have been observing is that educators have been gravitating toward one or another of these 23 roles. Some of them, presumably the more extroverted, have taken on the role of lecturer or demonstrator. Others, who were perhaps more technically inclined, have become programmers or bureaucrats. Still others, those perhaps work best with presence or human contact, prefer to function as coaches or mentors. Not everybody can perform every role; not everybody wants to perform every role.

Another thing I have observed is that not every student wants or needs the services of every role. Some people want (or need) criticism much more than coaching, while with others it's the reverse. For myself, I neither want nor need a mentor, even though this made the process of obtaining a graduate degree that much more difficult (it's almost as though it's set up to ensure that no PhD will graduate unless they have a mentor). Some people need the reassurance of a convener or coordinator, while others are happy bouncing ideas back and forth with a critic. It may be argued, and it may even be the case, that there's no such thing as learning styles, but empirically, it's just observationally true what what students want and need is as varied as a forest.

And what I find as I offer more and more types and instances of learning, both online and in person, is that we can achieve much more efficient, effective and rewarding learning by organizing the educational system according to the sorts of educational services people might want and need, rather than by predefined collections of students assigned, almost randomly, to individual teachers. Rather than asking one person to perform every role, some of them very badly, for a given group of students, it makes more sense to ensure that these services are available where needed and to allocate them according to the needs of the students, the nature of the learning environment, and the type of learning being undertaken.

Historically, it has been impractical to break up the roles of the teacher. You need a certain scale even to have a separate person assigned as a librarian or an audio-visual coordinator. You need a much greater scale, not to mention much better coordination, to have separate people assigned as lecturers, coaches, theorizers and evaluators. Yet relatively few of these roles need to be performed in person, and most of them scale pretty well. This means that with improved information and communications technologies we can begin to rethink how we've organized labor in education.

This is in fact what is happening online, at least, outside the circles of formal education. People are finding coaching where they need it, community where they want it, and lectures and demonstrations for those days when they have the time.

And maybe, when we think of education as organized this way, perhaps we can talk more intelligently, and with rather more rationality, about the role of teaching with regard to learning outcomes. Instead of focusing on teaching as an undifferentiated whole, perhaps we can look at the specific needs of students, identifying where the provision of more appropriately focused services would offer the needed support, rather than blaming some individual for not maximally mapping their activities to the varied and changing needs of some dozens of students.

I don't want to presuppose a re-engineering of the educational system. I don't want to say, if we provided this collection service and that lecture site and those mentor exchanges, that we would improve our educational system. It's not a recipe. But I do want to say that we need to begin thinking and talking about the system this way, gradually adding these components, probably externally to the existing educational system. Eventually, learning will be transformed in this way; the needs of students and the

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[The Role of Educator in a PLE World](#)

November 17, 2010. EC&I 831: Social Media & Open Education, Online, via Elluminate

[The Role of the Educator in the Digital World](#)

November 30, 2010. TasEDay, Hobart, Tasmania, via Skype and join.me

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