Square Pegs and Round Holes - A Closer Look at Interaction Analysis and Performance Objectives in Teacher Training

By G. P. Mosback

In recent years, the Interaction Analysis approach to teacher training as propounded by R.F. Bales in 1950 (*Interaction Process Analysis: A Method for the Study of Small Groups*, Reading, Mass: Addison Wesley, 1950.) and since, very extensively elaborated by Ned. A. Flanders, has been gaining increasing ground in colleges of Education and on courses in Applied Linguistics. Flanders (1970) quotes 18 programmes in 12 major U.S. Education Departments up to 1969, and since the publication of his *Analysing Teaching Behaviour*, more have mushroomed in Britian and the U.S. However, it is the contention of this paper that the hope offered by Flanders is largely illusory and that the increasingly complex accretions to Interaction Analysis 'theory' amount to little more than an excercise in academic empire-building of scant practical value. Much more interesting possibilities are offered, it is felt, by the Performance Objectives approach of Valette and Disick, Florence A. Steiner and others.

Whatever subsidiary benefits or experimental interest can be derived from classroom Interaction Analysis as systematised by Ned. A. Flanders (1970), the underlying asumption must be that teaching behaviour can be changed by its app-application. Flanders himself states: (1970, p. 31)

> In service and preservice teacher education helps teachers to act differently as a result of their participation. Not only is a change in behaviour sought but often the learning activities are supposed to increase the use of specified behaviour patterns which presumably improve the quality of classroom instruction. Interaction Analysis can be helpful in several phases of such a programme.

If the possibility of a change in teacher behaviour were not the underlying assumption, it is difficult to see how this branch of enquiry could have any general application or interest. Yet Flanders is exteremely tentative about the possibility of such a change. In the above extract, teacher education 'helps' teachers to act differently, and 'often' the learning activities are 'supposed' to increase the use of. specified behaviour patterns, which 'presumably' improve classroom instruction Interaction Analysis 'can be' helpful in such a programme.

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To do him justice, Flanders nowhere explicitly makes any more substantia claim and perhaps it is worth quoting in this connection, the dedication of thel book, which is to,

> ... those thoughtful social scientists whose accomplishments will make what is written here obsolete ... by helping teachers reduce inconsistencies between intentions and actions.

This is perhaps a somewhat naive attempt to disarm criticism of a serions weakness in the whole edifice.

Interaction Analysis is presented, after this very tentative start, as a formal structure almost approaching an academic discipline of itself, with extensive technical vocabulary and theoretical apparatus. The introduction (1970, p.v.) refers to Flanders' book as '... a progress report,' though it has every appearance of a potential standard education textbook.

Basically, Flanders' hope is that classroom interaction, as organised and influenced by the teacher, can be analysed in sufficient detail to provide an almost continuous, second-by-second 'profile' of each teacher's class management technique.

Such an analysis of a wide sample of teachers would produce certain profiles which made for 'successful' teaching and others which did not. Teacher A produced an 'effective' profile, while teacher X did not. The assumption now is that teacher X can be shown where he is in 'error' and change his teaching habits to make him more like teacher A. Two important questions arise here.

Firstly, how far can 'success' in teaching be accurately measured in all its aspects from teacher to teacher and from group to group. An individual teacher may have great success with one group or type of student yet fail completely to build a successful rapport with another, even parallel group or type.

Secondly, how far is it possible to change teaching habits insofar as they deeply reflect individual personality. Many teachers attain great reputation and respect, not to say success as regards examinations, through a rigid authoritarianism which makes no allowances and gives no quarter when it comes to quality of work. Others gain equal reputation perhaps for gentleness, understanding and patience and a deep personal interest in their students. It is unlikely that the lifelong martinet could convincingly scatter a few words of sweetness and light through his lesson at suggested intervals as that the gentler man could force himself to frown and be severe every so often should a theoretically more 'successful' profile demand it.

This is to state the difficulty in very crude terms, of course, but a few moments introspection reveals that there are very few even surface features of an established teacher's technique that do not spring from the whole personality. To take the question of drill-type sessions for example, a teacher can be easily made to see that one should not work through the class either down the register list or one by one

along the rows - a certain random element keeps the class on its toes. Having said this though, the individual teacher's own sensitivity is the only guide as to which pupils need more practice, which need it, but are shy and would be antagonised if 'picked on' too often, which clever pupil needs occasionally, but not too often, to be given a chance to blurt out strainght away the answer he is bursting to show he knows. There can be no rules for this kind of thing; the teacher either has a nature that learns to respond by experience or he has not. If he has not, his pupils may come to respect his knowledge and discipline in any case.

With regard to the 'successful' teaching profile, though, Flanders, while paying apparent deference to the possibility that teacher-centred techniques may be useful in certain circumstances (1970, p.308 et passim) seems defintely to regard as more successful a teacher who allows the greatest practicable amount of class time to pupil initiative.

> The main thrust of these theoretical formulations is to understand how a teacher can promote more pupil independence and self direction in the classroom (p. 309)

Elswhere (Sperry, 1972, p.196) Flanders talks of the 'rule of two-thirds'.

> About two thirds of the time spent in a classroom, someone is talking. The chances are two out of three that this someone is the teacher ... The fact that teachers are taking too active a part for effective learning is shown by comparing superior with less effective classrooms ... in studies of *seventh grade social studies* and *eighth grade mathematics* (emphasis added) it was found that teachers in superior classrooms spoke only slightly less, say 50-60 precent of time, but the more directive aspects of their verbal influence went down to 40-50 percent. These teachers were much more flexible in the quality of their influence, sometimes very direct, but on more occasions very indirect.

So the 'good' teacher may talk for 60% of the class time as opposed to the 'ordinary' less effective teacher who talks 66.6 %of the class time, say a difference of 3 minutes in a 35-minute class period. It is difficult to see how this difference can have more than a marginal effect, in which case the main difference would seem to be the proportion of 'direct' versus 'indirect' instruction.

The studies quoted by Flanders concern only 2 subjects in two lower grades of certain American schools. It is quite possible to imagine age-groups, cultures and subject matter where direct teacher instruction may be usefully tolerated for almost the entire instruction period, depending on the motivation and expectation of the students. Cronbach, in fact, (in Gagné, 1967) postulates two distinct types of student, the dependent type who benefits from almost entirely direct instruction, and what he calls the constructive type, who prefers a more open-ended approach. Quoting the Grimes and Allinsmith study of 1961, he observes (p.35)

> ...studies give considerable support to the hypothesis that defensive pupils will learn most if the teacher spells out short term goals, gives a maximum of explanation and guidance ... The constructives, on the other hand, should face moderately difficult tasks where intermediate goals are not too explicit... Perhaps these are the pupils most apt to profit by a shift from didactic teaching to learning by discovery.

This sounds much more like the everyday experience of the practising teachers than Flanders' one-way tendency. Cronbach indeed is highly suspicious of Flanders' experimental methodology elswhere in the article quoted above.

> ... I note also that it is quite possible that Flanders made his indirect teacher supportive and his direct teacher unsympathetic and antagonistic. (p.36)

With this extra, powerful variable, it would be hardly surprising to find the 'indirect' teacher more effective.

The proportion of direct instruction necessary, though, might also depend on the subject matter. Most school subjects contain a great deal of basic and often not particularly palatable groundwork which must be learned and tested. The idea that all learning must be enjoyable to be effective is quite alien to the European tradition in education for example, where too heavy a reliance on student initiative and discussion in the early stages of academic learning is often regarded as time-wasting and a poor trade for the speedy imparting of basic knowledge. However lively pupil discussion may be, it is unlikely quickly to elicit, say, the table of the elements or the conjugation of a Latin verb.

In language teaching, in fact, we have evidence that the frenzied search in recent years for 'enjoyable' methods has been largely fruitless. Jakobovits (1970) asserts (p. 82)

> Although an overall assessment of the FL teaching program is not an easy business, its lack of success in imparting meaningful knowledge in sufficient proportions to generations of schoolchildren and college students is well known and hardly needs documentation. Faced with this obvious failure, the FL teaching profession has been seeking an explanation.

He offers a ray of hope, however, in the following paragraph.

> It may be instructive to reflect upon the fact that one instructional setting where FL teaching has had a considerable amount of success is the 'intensive' course as developed by the Army Language Schools in Monterey, California and still used there today as well as in the U.S. Foreign Service Institute run by the State Department and in the Berlitz schools throughout the world.

It would be difficult to find more authoritative and teacher-centred learning situations anywhere. The Berlitz system in particular is quite exceptionally rigid in its application of standardised textbook and methodology.

It may well be argued too that the educational climate in Ethiopia is more suited by tradition to a more teacher-centered approach than educationalisists in the U.S. might favour. Also, a great deal of student initiative and discussion is not always easy to handle in the large classess resulting from rapid educational expansion even if tradition did not sanction the authoritative image of the teacher with a consequent effect on pupil and parent expectations of classroom behaviours.

If we can for a moment, however, leave aside all these questions of relative suitability of teacher type to situation, and imagine it would be possible to determine somehow, the exact type of instruction and teacher personality we needed for a given situation. What chance is there that if the teachers we have at present do not match up to that pattern, we can change their personalities and approach to their group interactions in the classroom environment. The evidence is that no amount of Interaction Analysis, introspection, personality cultivation or group interaction practice will have any effect whatsoever on the group handling capabilty or psychological reactions of a mature adult.

Reviewing a wide range of experiments in this area, including management and leadership courses as well as teacher training, a leading British group psychologist, Michael Argyle concludes (1967, p.198)

> However, what is acquired by these methods is primarily knowledge and understanding rather than the capacity to make skilled responses.

and again (p.197)

> The most important question is whether overt behaviour back on the job changes in the desired manner. ... In most of these studies there is not much evidence that trainees become any better at their job - it seems to be sensitivity rather than behaviour that is affected.

On the specific question of teacher training, Argyle gives some very slight encouragement in reference to 'imitation of model' techniques, but emphasizes that such methods, like all passive techniques impart surface mannerisms, not insights.

> One difficulty about learning new skills by any passive method is that it is very hard to appreciate the problems the performer is facing. Secondly, it is hard for the observer to see what cues the model is responding to. (1967, pp. 191-2)

Flanders himself offers similarly cold comfort, when at the very end of his book (1970, pp. 346 - 7 et seq.) he comes down to what actual effect adult teacher-training programmes, with or without his Interaction Analysis, have in actually changing teacher behaviour

> Given a teacher who wants to learn more effective teaching behaviour, does thinking about shaping and reshaping behavior help or hinder the process? ... There are no clear answers to these questions.

and again (p. 347)

> ...our attention has centered on the objectives of helping adults improve their teaching behavior ...These are possibilities not yet evaluated in a college program for prospective teachers or in an inservice program for experienced teachers. ... However, there is very little evidence that the existing, more traditional programs actually influence teaching behavior, one way or another, in spite of the confidence with which state certification requirements are established.

In fact, Flanders' entire final section on research into change in adult teaching behaviour is a catalogue of unsatisfactory or at best, inconclusive results. But Flanders, with a kind of desperate optimism pleads for patience at this apparent crucial failure of the entire, laboriously constructed apparatus of IA.

> Research on helping another change his teaching behaviour has barely begun. Most of the work lies ahead. It is little wonder that the review of research which follows is sketchy, and, in some ways, relatively inconclusive. (p. 348)

But perhaps after all, he really knows the answer, which is that the instillation of desired teaching habits must begin before the adult personality is fully formed, that is, as early as possible, while the prospective teacher is still a student. In the very first chapter he observes (p.9)

> No matter how difficult improving collegiate teacher education programmes may be, this approach to effective classroom instruction seems more efficient than expending the same resources on the inservice education of teachers on the job.

At bottom perhaps Flanders really knows that only the young, keen mind and, more important, the newly forming adult personality is malleable enough. Argyle (1967, p. 123) comes to the heart of the matter.

> During adolescence and during student life, there is still no need to decide on a particular identity, and young people are allowed to experiment with and play at various identities, before they finally commit themselves. For the adult, however, there is a strong drive towards consistency: somewhere between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two ... he is forced to make up his mind ... The basis of this is partly the necessity of adopting one occupational role rather than another.

Interaction Analysis, then, or any other aid to teacher behaviour moulding is best applied to the young student teacher, but even then, it would be better to employ much stricter selection procedures for entry to Education faculties than are commonly applied in most countries today. Personality and aptitude testing to select the desired character-type to direct group situations would prevent a great deal of the misery that large numbers of basically unsuited people go through daily under the name of teaching. A great deal of time and money is wasted in the faint hope that sows' ears might in fact by some miracle provide raw material for silk purses.

But how, meanwhile, are we best to deploy the vast numbers of mature, more or less unsatisfactory but not totally incompetent people who form the mass of the teaching profession. One thing we cannot do is change them to any great extent, but Rebecca Valette and Renee Disick in a recent book on Performance Objectives (1972) tell us how best to make the most of ourselves, warts and all. The whimsy of their choice of names may border on the tiresome, but they make the point well.

On pp.116-118 Valette and Disick postulate the school district of Evan Gard which has just appointed a new go-ahead school inspector. The teachers reacted in different ways to the new appointment. Miss Lotta Rapport was confident, because her class was always warm, co-operative and friendly, inspector or no. Mr. Martin Ette was confident too. His lessons ,were characterised by meticulous preparation, split-second timing and firm-handed discipline. Woe to the laggard who couldn't keep up with his classes! An observer could never fail to be impressed with him!

Mr. Mac Anick was going to use a new filmstrip with his class. It came with a synchronised tape so he could write the new words out and project them onto a screen with the overhead. Individual student responses he could record on a second tape recorder, while the entire lesson would be preserved on video-tape. His teaching certainly wasn't old fashioned.

Olaf A. Minit chuckled in anticipation. His childhood ambition was to be a circus clown, but he went into teaching as a steadier living. Inspectors were never bored with his lessons as he always had a fund of jokes and games the class enjoyed immensely.

I. Mona Stage was also pleased. She had had training in theatre, art and music. Her class sang in four part harmony, staged playlets, or 'did authentic folk-dances at the drop of a hat'. They were always pleased to entertain visitors.

When the new inspector finally made her report, none of the teaching profiles emerged *per se* as better than any of the others. The report ran.

> ... it would be foolish of me to try to impose on you one standard teaching procedure. I recognize that every person is a different individual and each of you has evolved (or is in the process of evolving) teaching techniques that work for you and for your particular classes.
>
> ... In other words, teachers are not judged on their personality, nor on the order or disorder prevailing in their classrooms. They are not judged on their professional knowledge, nor on their mastery of specific techniques. Only two questions are asked:
>
> (1) Has the teacher set appropriate performance objectives for his students?
>
> (2) Is the teacher, by whatever means he employs, enabling his students to attain these performance objectives? (p. 118-9)

In-service training, then, for established teachers should enable them to discover themselves and make the best use of the abilities and personality they have, rather than be sepent in futile attempts to force them into a persona that would sit unnaturally on them.

The time for observation, shaping, technique profile plotting, is when the young recruits first enter the profession, preferably after they have passed through a screening process to measure not only intellectual ability, but character and personality as well.

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