

John Gohorry

The Future Arrives Last Year

THE SUCCESS of the college was certainly due to the foresight of the Principal and the other administrators—but especially the Principal—back in the 1980s. DS39, Senior Manipulator of English/Communications, remembered the critical meeting of the Governing Body, having been a mere staff representative at the time. “The kids of today”, urged the Principal, “are brought up on electronic technology. They’ve all got calculators, space invaders, the whole caboodle of gadgetry—they take it for granted. And what are we proposing to offer them? A few white chalk-marks on a piece of board? A few still pictures on a projector screen? We might as well offer a pointed stick in the sand.” He had taken off his glasses, and looked around the room. The Governors stiffened, and held their breath. “Give me your backing”, asked P8. “Equip the outfit with micros, as many as we can cram in, hardware, software, floppy discs, the lot. The future’s already here. If we react to it, well and good. If we pretend nothing’s happened, we’ll be out of business in five years.”

The Registrar had presented the costings, and the support of the staff was unanimous. The Governors had given their backing, and the installations had gone ahead.

As the new session began, and the course organisers selected a capacity intake from the annual welter of new applicants, DS39 reflected on the benefits that had come to his section of work in the interval. First, his environment was much more congenial. His own office was no longer a clutter of papers, books, filing cabinets, acetate sheets, and interminable piles of half-marked essays, overdue for return to students. Instead there were three small boxes of discs at the side of a

keyboard, a VDU screen behind it, a comfortable armchair and a telephone handset on a cushioned base on a table to the right. His office, or rather his suite, was dust-free and airconditioned; he shared it with two other Senior Manipulators, in Law and in Economics.

Second, his management of learning was much more efficient than it had been in the days when he had been—for want of a better word—teaching. He no longer had to worry about the preparation of classroom material; it all came packaged from Omnilit, carefully and professionally programmed in the software at his side. He no longer concerned himself with evaluation and assessment of students’ performances, since Omnilit provided programmes that would do this with each of the learning discs that they supplied for his own and the students’ use. He had only to insert assignments into his machine for a thorough and an objective set of judgments to be printed out. This in turn was another improvement, since in his former role he had never been quite certain that he had seen everything the student had intended, or that, even so, his own judgments had been free from the taint of any subjectivity.

And of course the students achieved much more work than had ever been possible under the old system. Years before, it had taken five terms to plough through half-a-dozen set books and a handful of critical appreciations on the A-level syllabus; now, there were programmes to cover not only *Macbeth*, but the whole range of the tragedies; Sophocles, Aeschylus, and all the background material; theories of tragedy from Aristotle to Schanzer, Jaspers, and Kott, and even a programme designed to

guide students in their own composition of a tragic drama. And they certainly used the material. They devoured it.

And lastly of course there was the expansion of his own small sphere of influence within the College. Ten years before, he had been the one full-time lecturer in his area, with a staff of three part-time tutors. But he had honed his mind to the Law of Excluded Middle, and now he was head of a section of twenty—a dozen Junior Manipulators Grade 1, and a further eight Manipulators Grade 2. He had reached a position of some eminence, and he reaped a salary in proportion to this.

The buzzer at the entrance to his suite sounded twice, and he pressed the button on his desk to send back the sliding doors. With a soft hiss they retracted and slipped back again, as a young man in rope-soled shoes came across to speak to his superior. DS39 could not conceal his displeasure.

"Is something the matter with the phone?" he asked.

"I don't think so", the other replied, cheerfully. DS39 picked up his handset and slipped his ear to it.

"Seems to be all right", he said. "What can I do for you?" He could not bring himself to like the younger man, but the computer had selected his profile from among those of a hundred applicants, and so necessarily he was the best man for the job. BJ7, or Ben Johnson—with an H—as he still referred to himself, had two excellent degrees and a Manipulation Diploma in which he had achieved a distinction. It was his first teaching post, and like all newcomers, he was on a year's probation.

"I'm running through the programmes on the modern novel", said Johnson, "and they make no mention of Blackwell. Nor of Amsijar." DS39 expressed irritation. "Blackwell", he said, thoughtfully. "Amsijar. What are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting nothing", said Johnson. "I'm just saying that none of the modern novel programmes makes any mention of these authors." He paused. "You know who they are?" DS39 had to admit that he didn't, but he added hastily, "If they're recent authors we'll probably find that Omnilit are revising the package."

"But they're not what you'd call recent",

countered Johnson. "Blackwell's first novel was published in '85, and Amsijar's even before that. No later than '83, anyway."

Leave it with me", said DS39. "I'll get on to the suppliers." His tone was dismissive. He would have to bring Johnson up to a level of professional discipline. As he pressed the desk button to open the doors for him, he said, "Perhaps we could spare all this face to face business next time, BJ7. Please use the telephone." The door closed behind Johnson.

JOHNSON LEFT the matter of the missing novelists with DS39, and busied himself with the supervision of his students, who began classes later that morning. There were a dozen in the A-level English group, and, being students in their second year, they quickly immersed themselves in their own individual choices of programmes. He found that he had little to do. He telephoned the maintenance engineer when Rothwell's VDU screen failed to register symbols; the engineer arrived promptly and carried out a repair. He advised Secombe on the correct sequencing of a particularly complicated set of manipulations, and so helped him complete a programme on the rhetorical structure of Hamlet's soliloquies. He also came to the assistance of Linda Bright, who could not tabulate her answers to a questionnaire on the image clusters in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. But although students got up from their machines and wandered about the classroom for little discussions with one another from time to time, he noticed that they were discussing entertainment or social arrangements, in a desultory fashion, rather than the material on their screens. Each student seemed to be locked in his own little world of exploration and manipulation, and was not sharing and perhaps could not share this with the others.

However things progressed tolerably well, apart from the question of missing discs on the modern novel. Rothwell in fact had asked for these already, though when Johnson explained matters he had busied himself enthusiastically with a set of programmes on William Blake. Johnson gave it a couple of days, and then telephoned DS39.

"I've been on to Omnilit", said the superior, "and they're reprogramming." There was something in his intonation which made Johnson intuitively uneasy.

"Have you placed an order for the update?" asked Johnson.

"Naturally." DS39 disliked what he took to be the implication of Johnson's question. He did not wish to prolong the exchange. "A few days." The handset went down.

THE FEW DAYS passed, and extended themselves into a week, but the promised updates did not materialise. Rothwell, who by this time had completed his study of Blake and was already three parts through an introduction to Ezra Pound, was becoming restive; McLean and Webb were also expressing their frustration. Another enquiry from DS39 produced nothing. It was clearly expected of Johnson that he should act, and this he did.

Taking Omnilit's telex number from a slip on the disc cabinet, he went to the college office and made his own inquiry. In a couple of minutes a reply came on the print-out and Johnson read it, rather puzzled. PROGRAMME SUPPLIED, it stated, giving a date six months previously. He transmitted a second telex, referring specifically to the updated programme requisitioned by DS39, and mentioning the missing novelists. There was a longer interval; then came the second print-out. REPEAT PROGRAMME SUPPLIED, it ran. NO UPDATE. BLACKWELL, AMSIJAR, INSIGNIFICANT.

Tearing the paper off the roll, he reflected briefly on his alternatives. A confrontation with DS39? An explanation to his students? Realising that it was almost time for the class to be finishing anyway, Johnson decided to take his time. He returned to the class for its closure, promising positive measures for the next class in a couple of days.

He chose the novels and the extracts which he would present to the students very carefully before placing them on the college photocopier. From Blackwell's *The Tower of Babel* he took the passage which describes the moment that the tower fell, and the different languages shot like particles of dust from some volcanic explosion and took root in men. From the same author's later novel,

Unit 6, he took the encounter of the hero and the heroine after the latter's long imprisonment in the isolation hospital. He took only one extract from Amsijar—the celebrated passage in *The Man who was a Machine* where the Bibliothèque Nationale is invaded by Ferhomme and his supporters. He produced sufficient copies for each student to have perhaps a dozen pages of material to himself.

THE DAYS went by, and Johnson busied himself with manipulations. His class met at the appointed time, and he outlined what was to happen. First a brief outline of what they would find on the Omnilit modern novel programme. Then what was omitted, and Omnilit's rationale. He covered this quickly, in spite of some restiveness, and himself read aloud the first of the Blackwell passages, rather movingly, as he thought. He came to the end. "What do you think?" he asked. "What do you think?" To his dismay, there was no response. "Come on", said Johnson, encouragingly. "Let's talk about it. What do you think?" The politer students looked distantly, and with evident embarrassment, out of the classroom window. The whirr of electric currents on the static screens was distinctly audible. Rothwell asserted himself.

"Frankly, BJ", he said, "I don't see anything in that. Nothing at all." There were murmurs of agreement from McLean and Webb. "A waste of time", said Webb. He addressed himself to his keyboard. "If they're not on the programmes", said McLean, "they can't be that much cop, can they?" The other students shuffled.

"All right", said Johnson. "Here's what we'll do. At least give them a chance. Have a look at the other sheets." There was again silence, broken by the hum of the resting screens. Gradually, papers were picked up. Rothwell, Webb, and McLean displayed their displeasure by lurching, shuffling, and dropping things on the carpet. Johnson buried himself in the texts.

Time passed very slowly. Johnson noticed that even Linda Bright had not progressed beyond the opening paragraph, and he asked her what was the matter.

"It's this reading", she said. "We've never

actually. . . ." Her voice tailed off.

"All right", said Johnson, swallowing his surprise. "Is this thing general?" He found that it was, so he began reading aloud the extract from Amsijar.

His reading was interrupted by DS39, who did not on this occasion make use of the telephone, but appeared in the doorway, and called Johnson out. "Get on with your programmes", he called in to the students. They bent to their screens, relieved that things were once again normal. "I don't know what you think you're doing", he said heatedly to Johnson. "But you're clearly disrupting the pattern of programming. Telexing Omnilit, wasting people's time, holding your own paltry preferences up on view. I shall report the whole matter to the Principal, and I've no doubt there'll be a disciplinary hearing."

AND INDEED THERE WAS. The Principal's immediate decision was to suspend Johnson on full pay pending the tribunal, which followed within the week. At the hearing, the neutrals listened carefully to the

evidence submitted by both parties, and Johnson, though he chose not to be accompanied by a friend, put up a good case for himself. But the outcome was never in doubt. P8 came down on the side of a policy that was a proven success, and the management of the section's work had been delegated to DS39, in whose judgment he had every confidence. When he delivered the panel's decision, his voice was unexpectedly kind and humane.

"In this outfit", he reminded Johnson, "the future arrives last year. Probation works both ways—you've given us a try, and we've given you a try, but it hasn't worked." He paused. "There's a transfer on offer to the school up the road where they have more . . ." he pronounced the word with distaste ". . . traditional methods. I advise you to take it." There were no alternatives.

Johnson did so, to the satisfaction not only of DS39, but also of the A-level students, who were able to resume their ordered and accustomed modes of study without further discomfiture. And Johnson, at his new post, found in a short time that he had the makings of a very good teacher.

Mr Cowper's Sunday Driving

He was driving home, his head haemorrhaging
with images of the hypochondriac's
delicious nightmare—the surgeon's
sheathed fingers rummaging in the slack
shopping-bag of the opened stomach,
the enquiring blade, its lenient incisions—

when, flushed from the elate hoardings
of the hedgerow, a superfluous sparrow
dipped like an aimed thing into the bonnet,
fleeing the engine's impending terror.
Its wing signalled in the mirror
until the ministering next tyres saw to it.

Now, a known hymn bores its dusty way
through a thin partition wall;
the dying sun sheds its parting ray
down the length of the same wall,
and he sits there thinking nothing,
nothing, nothing, nothing at all. . . .

Simon Rae