

# Systems (low literacy part 2)

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**L**ast week, an American visiting professor stated that the teaching profession has lost popularity in almost all US states. Due to shortages it is therefore not even possible to give each class its own teacher. When I compare how I started teaching 12 years ago with how the new colleagues started this month, a lot has changed. In a word: systems!

The Corona pandemic has played a facilitating role in this, we now work hybrid, both online and fragmented in regularly empty (lifeless) university buildings. But there is much more to it. Instead of 1 mail account, we now communicate through countless channels (Teams, Blackboard, WhatsApp and LinkedIn etc.). Where we are, what we do, is registered hour by hour via other software and reporting systems. Even in "our" class we are no longer the only "authority", we have to compete for attention with TikTok, or more substantively, with online lectures and knowledge clips from sometimes world famous colleagues available 24/7.

Three components identified by Deci and Ryan are invariably associated with intrinsic motivation - autonomy, competence and relatedness - have come under pressure due to all this system involvement in the profession. It is difficult to determine whether all this directly plays an explanatory role in making it increasingly difficult to recruit enough teachers. Some primary schools in Amsterdam have switched to 4 school days a week in the highest classes due to the teacher shortage.

The philosopher of technology Jacques Ellul stated in 1964 \* that the search for applications and profits, growth and capitalism are a result of technologization and not its cause. Ellul argued that a scientific-industrial complex simply innovates where it can innovate and develops where it can develop, without considering in advance what society will gain from the resulting products, let alone what the unwanted side effects and consequences will be which inevitably arise. Systems to make things easier, for example, often grow into an increase in the administrative burden on users, and on a strong focus on measurable (often numerical) aspects, which inadvertently threatens to lose sight of the non-measurable aspects – the magic.

On top of that, many systems are indeed being implemented untried, sometimes with much reluctance from the users. In the power game that follows, such a system can then be developed clumsily due to the reluctance and sometimes outright opposition of those users, so that it ultimately only does what it was designed for to a limited extent. The Dutch documentary *Deadly Care* about electronic health record (EHR) systems used in many hospitals is a sad example. In the documentary, doctors say that because of all the checks and red tape in the clumsy system, they can only treat half the number of patients before use. A lot of information is also lost during many manual retyping, which sometimes even costs human lives (hence the title). The documentary ends with the comment that the majority of the money intended for healthcare does not go to direct patient care, but to large system owners, such as ICT companies, real estate managers and large pharmaceuticals.

As mentioned in the documentary, the power of large systems often literally gets in the way of job satisfaction for professionals such as doctors, nurses and teachers. And this system power is growing and growing, everywhere we are being tracked and watched by systems, data driven by cameras, GPS, control systems. The digital crumbs that we leave behind via our smart devices are data gold in these systems, to set up evermore systems. Sometimes it feels like all I have to think about is a new bathroom to get bathroom supplies ads on my screen. Defined in terms of the systems, we are all at risk of becoming illiterate. Flip the classroom software, Google Learning. Who else wants to participate in this race for robotic behaviour? Do we still need teachers? But I think I begin to understand why teachers drop out.

\* Ellul J. 1964. *The Technological Society*. New York: Vintage Books.