Edgar Dale: Professional

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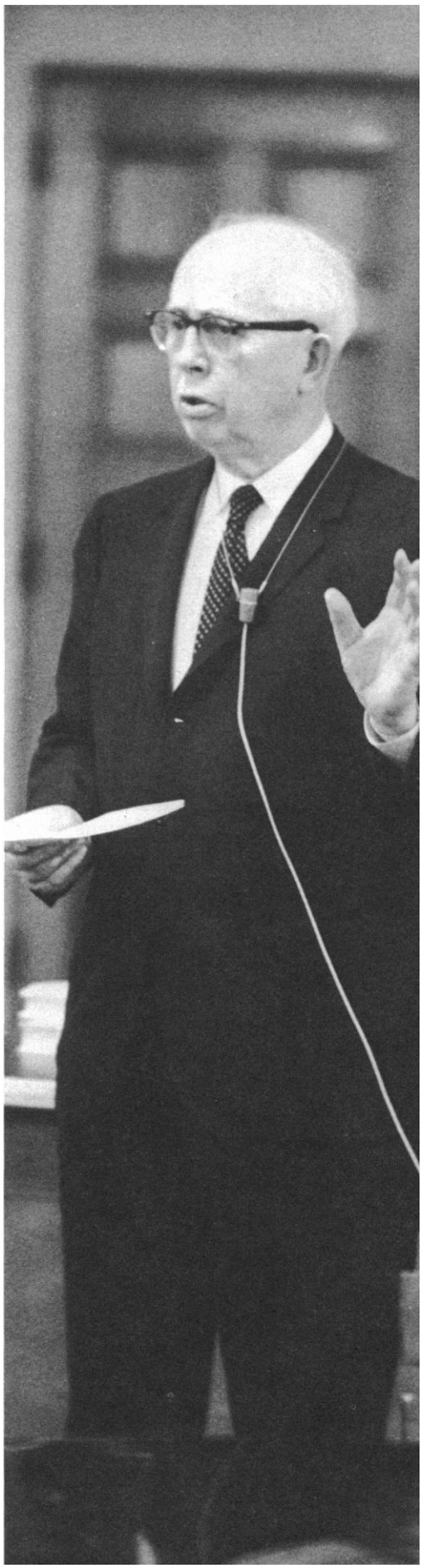
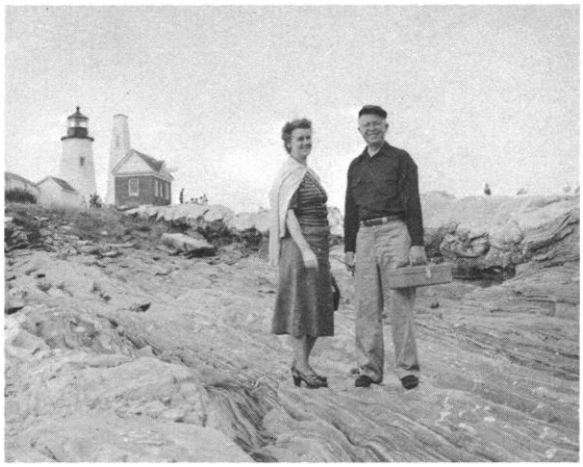


A "profession" according to Webster is "an act of openly declaring or publicly claiming a belief, faith, or opinion." It is also "a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive preparation in skills and methods as well as in scientific, historical, or scholarly principles underlying such skills and methods, maintaining by force of organization or concerted opinion high standards of achievement and conduct, and committing its members to continued study and to a kind of work which has for its prime purpose the rendering of a public service."

Edgar Dale is a professional. He is a professional writer, researcher, producer of materials of instruction and, above all, a professional teacher. In spirit, character, and method he is professional; and because of his public dedication, specialized knowledge, and scholarly work, stands above the flash flood of instant expertise, retread-research, amateur paperback prose, and turgid teaching which characterizes and adds to the confusion of education in our time.

No one has earned more of his way in education or spent more of his life thinking about what it means to teach and to learn than Professor Dale. From his earliest years as a North Dakota farm boy, he actively sought out both questions and answers, drawing from the experiences of the rural life about him, from his teachers, from farm hands, from the practical wisdom of his father (whom he still often quotes), and from well-remembered dialog with other members of his closely-knit,



energetic, and enterprising family of Scandanavian origin. He continues to draw upon the life experiences of his immediate family: Betty, his wife; Richard, his son, a college professor; Dorothy, his daughter, a teacher; and his grandchildren.

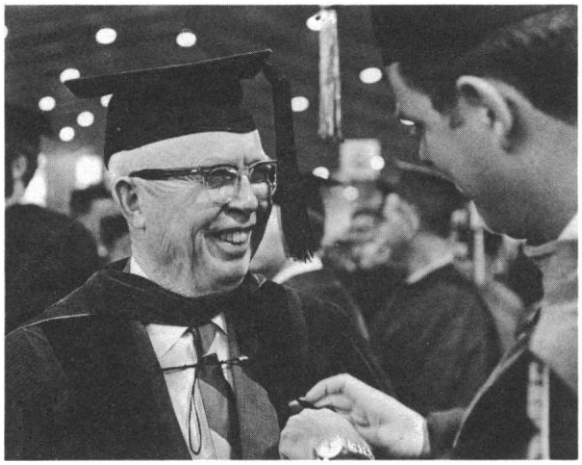
This awareness, wondering, concern, and dialog, extended to human beings of all ages and conditions—busboys, parents, taxi-drivers, government officials, itinerant workers, students, colleagues and friends—is his way of life. He observes them all with interest and love, just as he watches and learns how things grow and respond to change in the natural environment of his woodlot in southeastern Ohio. He exchanges observations freely in a process of "putting oneself in the other fellow's shoes" which has long has long been his working definition of the term, "communication."

But concern and commitment alone do not produce the professional. This, by definition, requires intensive preparation, scholarly effort, force of organization, intellectual discipline, and high standards of achievement reflected in action.

Edgar Dale quickly recognized the importance of what he has referred to as "access to excellence," and early in his career became associated with projects and people who represented experiences of this quality. After receiving the bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of North Dakota (partly through correspondence courses), he studied with W. W. Charters at the University of Chicago, receiving the Ph.D. in 1929. Later, he joined Charters in the great days of the Bureau of Educational Research at The Ohio State University where his colleagues included educational philosophers Boyd Henry Bode, Henry Hullfish, and Alan Griffin; Ralph Tyler, later to become the Director of the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences; Peter Odegard, the great political scientist; Norman Woelfel and I. Keith Tyler, pioneers in educational radio and the use of media in education; psychologists Samuel Renshaw and Sidney Pressey, father of the "teaching machine," and many others.

All along the way, he constantly sought new sources of information, continually tested applications of his theories in practice, always moving back and forth between concrete experiences and his own research, always religiously getting his reflections down on paper.

Immediately after leaving the University of Chicago, he joined the Eastman Kodak Company during the early experimental days of the teaching film, collaborating with figures such as the legendary Ken Edwards, a corporation man with a deep sense of social responsibility coupled with a rich sense of humor. During World War II, as consultant and coordinator in the Bureau of Motion Pictures of the Office of War Information, he worked closely with Lowell Mellett, formerly editor of the crusading Washington *Daily News,* and then one of the most influential figures in the Roosevelt administration, and with Elmer Davis, the Director of the OWI. During this period he also served as consultant for the War Department in the production of instructional films, never



compromising his critical judgments whether working with government filmmaking organizations or with the Hollywood industry with which he had frequent contact.

As one of a handful of pioneers in the new and still somewhat suspect field of "audiovisual education," he was a close friend and colleague not only of those concerned with media in education, but also with the leadership in the vanguard of educational philosophy and experimentation in many fields. His practical experience in public school work, first as a teacher in a rural school, three years as Superintendent of Schools in Webster, North Dakota, and two years as a junior high school teacher in Winnetka, Illinois, served as ballast and continued referent to the realities of the American classroom, and the problems of both the teacher and the learner.

Dale gave a lot of talks to teachers, parents, administrators, and educational organizations in the days immediately following World War II, hammering away at the theme that educationally useful experiences are those which are "rich," "shared," "fruitful," "simple," "concrete," and, above all, "meaningful." His influence was strongly felt in important professional organizations such as the Division of Audiovisual Instruction of the National Education Association, the Educational Film Library Association, the National Society for the Study of Education, and many others. In 1963, he was among the first five faculty members to receive The Ohio State University Alumni Award for Distinguished Teaching. In 1968 he received the Eastman Gold Medal Award from the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers for his continuing contributions to the field of instructional technology. He became a consultant to the Ford Foundation and the World Book Company. His knowledge and wisdom carried abroad through his international students, his personal travels, his oft-translated writings, and his work with UNESCO.

Through it all, everything became grist for his mill. He developed a remarkable ability to turn his daily life experiences to good account, continually sifting, cataloging, analyzing, sooner or later communicating what he had learned in refined, reflective, and useful forms widely shared by others. Part of his drive may be due to his sharp awareness of the relative shortness of time in which to get the things done which need to be done in education. The result has been a life distinguished by simplicity, directness, and economy of approach which minimizes or eliminates the side-show distractions which take time from what he thinks he should do and what he believes he can do best. He has not, for example, been a Dean of a College of Education, or even a department head, nor has he committed himself to active responsibility in more than a few, select professional organizations.

As a professional, Edgar Dale exhibits a remarkable ability to know what to do—and what not to do. His well-ordered priorities seem to be simply and clearly based on an early decision to research specific areas in depth and "nail them down"; to write about what he believes can be and should be put into practice; to produce a

relatively few good and, if possible, distinguished graduate students; and to contribute what remains of his time to carefully-selected university, industry, and public service.

Much of his influence is directly visible in the lives and works of his graduate students, including the late, great James D. Finn of the University of Southern California, founder of the *Audiovisual Communication Review;* Seth Spaulding, presently of UNESCO; Tahir Razik of the University of Buffalo; the late Robert Kilbourne of Wayne State University; Sherwin Swartout, New York State University at Brockport; Gerald C. Eicholz, University of South Florida; Roy Wenger, Kent State University; Ilhan Özdil, formerly Cultural Attache of Turkey in London and presently with the Ministry of Education in Ankara; among others mentioned in the body of this paper. Although each has gone on to do his own thing, each, in Milton's words, owes Edgar Dale "the debt of immense gratitude."

Beyond teaching, his influence is obviously attributable to expert and extensive writings growing out of his continuing research. As part of the seminal Payne Fund Studies, Dale wrote *How to Appreciate Motion Pictures* (1933) and *The Content of Motion Pictures* (1935). With Lloyd Ramseyer, another of his graduate students who was later to become a college president, he road-mapped educational film programs, at that time just beginning to come into being, in a publication titled *Teaching With Motion Pictures: A Handbook of Administrative Practice* (1937).

In 1935 he began editing a modest four-page publication which was to have an impact far out of proportion to its size. Titled simply *The News Letter,* it arose as Volume 1, Number 1, November, 1935 announced, "out of the conviction that one of the major contributions that can be made to the education of secondary-school pupils is to teach them to use with intelligence and discrimination information which is disseminated by the radio, the press, and the motion picture." With the able assistance of Hazel Gibbony, another of his doctoral students, Dale has produced eight issues of *The News Letter* a year for thirty-five years—a unique publication which continues to reach more than 25,000 readers today. His choice of topics ranged widely—"Why Listen to Music?", "Can Individuals Help Prevent Wars?", "What Does It Mean, To Read?", "Who Has The Power?" In 1967, forty-five of these essays were collected under the title *Can You Give The Public What It Wants?* in a book dedicated to Frances Payne Bolton and the Payne Fund, the sources of financial support for *The News Letter.*

In 1941 when nobody else thought it important enough, he wrote *How to Read A Newspaper* and is revising it in 1970. With Marjorie East, he contributed to a book called *Display for Learning* published in 1952. However, his text, *Audiovisual Methods in Teaching,* which first appeared in 1946, proved to be his most important book—a seminal work revised twice since, the third edition appearing in 1969. Through this book alone, it is safe to say, he has

influenced at least two generations of teachers in this country; familiarized them, through his "Cone of Experience," with the range of educational experiences and media at hand; and made memorable, through his "COIK Fallacy" (Clear Only If Known), the danger of believing we are communicating to others when we are actually talking to ourselves.

Although preceded by the work of Thorndike, Lorge, Flesch, and Gunning, Dale's long-range interest in the problem of literacy and concern for readability came to fruition in the benchmark "Formula for Predicting Readability" first published in the *Educational Research Bulletin* of The Ohio State University, in 1948. The co-author of this historic work, Jeanne S. Chall, another of his Ph.D. students, is presently Professor of Education at Harvard. The Dale-Chall measure of readability was a simple two-factor formula involving (1) vocabulary load as determined by the relative number of words outside a Dale list of 3,000 words tested for comprehension at the fifth- to sixth-grade reading level, and (2) sentence structure involving average sentence length. The effect of this work has been reflected in textbooks, newspapers, reference books, verbal components of visual media, and in curriculum development to the present time.

As I have observed this man over a period of thirty years as his student, colleague, and always his friend, the answer to the question first put to the writer by the TIP editor, "Who is Edgar Dale?" turns out to be curiously but inseparably involved with the fundamental question of man's ability to win the legendary race between education and catastrophe when the finish-line seems very near.

Again, one must refer to the professionalism of Edgar Dale. In time of crisis the pro does not abandon hope. While he continues to be a realist, asking the critical, difficult questions, he also actively seeks answers, and proposes solutions, urging, and even forcing, his students to do likewise. He opens issues but also helps close the gap, insisting that his students be doers, designers of positive experiences in a world where the easier and far more popular course is endless and sometimes irrational dialog, dissent, or complete withdrawal from the arena of real events. He does this, at least in part, by continually testing his hypotheses on every occasion, through word, print, and action.

Dale constantly casts about for ideas, but he is also a fisherman in the spirit of Izaac Walton and his techniques in the latter sense relate to his methods in the former. His concrete piscatorial adventures for more than forty years have been largely confined to the lake region of Maine, to which he regularly returns, and to the waters of a latter-day Walden pond which we have long shared in common. His system is simple. It consists of continually and accurately casting the plug in likely spots, exploring the area thoroughly in the light of know-how gained from his own long experience and that of local New England characters, some of whom still remember when herring, the most important commercial fish in the area, were known as "Kennebec turkey," and all of whom are more likely to greet

you with "How's fishin'?" than with "Good mornin'." The important thing is to never forget what you've learned the day before—and the day before that—and to never give up; to keep casting the plug.

This persistence and drawing on experience, coupled with a sense of pure enjoyment and enthusiasm, characterizes Dale's approach to everything he does. It explains, in part, his unique ability to pull abstractions out of the vast school of concrete experiences about him, and to toss ideas back into the restless sea of action and thus stock it for future generations of fishermen. It explains, in part, the specific, blunt, often personal, but always relevant questions with which he has been known to address students and colleagues alike, and his method of casting out a line in *The News Letter* baited with questions like: "What Does It Mean, To Teach?", "Why Aren't We Smarter?", and "Does Anybody Really Care?"

An idealist in purpose and a realist in effect, Dale lives on the cutting edge of educational and social change. He actively fought for better schools, academic freedom, civil rights, and other causes long before these became popular issues. He has caused his students to face equally realistic problems, often providing them with the financial means whereby to engage in such projects during the course of their academic careers. In this process, he has not been content with theoretical answers to theoretical questions but rather has addressed himself to finding answers based on clearly stated objectives, and amazingly accurate predictions of solutions.

In the first issue of *The News Letter,* W. W. Charters wrote:

> Preparedness in education demands a procedure by which those who look ahead will begin, a decade in advance of popular participation, to experiment with the new idea in typical situations . . . . This means in relation to the motion picture, radio, newspaper, and magazine that the time has arrived for the immediate exploration of these media of education and recreation.

To which Dale added three specific objectives:

> They are to acquaint students with the influence on children, youth, and adults, of the motion picture, the radio, and the press; to teach high-school students to evaluate critically these three media; and to develop student leadership in the solution of problems arising through the motion picture, the radio, and the press.

The recent surge of interest in the "new" media of education, in "screen education," in "visual literacy, " and in the effects of media on youth only proves that Charters and Dale were not "a decade in advance of popular participation" in these concerns but more than *thirty years* ahead of a crowd of media enthusiasts today, many of whom, simply because they have not done their homework, are not yet even aware of the Payne Fund Studies.

Dale concluded his first edition of *Audio-visual Methods in Teaching,* in 1946, with "Eight Predictions" of things to come in education. Elsewhere in this issue of TIP, he mentions other, even earlier prognostications. The important thing is not only how remarkably accurate they turned out to be, but also how optimistic, yet realistic they are. He has provided a model of the possibilities of putting theory into practice; reassuring proof of the individual's capacity to live an examined life and, by his personal efforts, to effectively educate and hence change or modify human lives and institutions.

In *The News Letter* of May, 1941, under the title, "Not By Arms Alone," Dale wrote of those troubled times as he would doubtless write of those today: ". . . hysteria and pessimism are self-defeating. They lead either to a do-nothing, hand-wringing attitude, or to thoughtless action. Fear is the result of not knowing what to do. The way to relieve fear and hysteria is to sit down and figure how to develop a sound national policy. As we do so, we shall discover that there is good reason for seeing hope, not ruin ahead." Then, from his impressive fund of knowledge of historic and contemporary thinkers and writers, he capped his position with the apt quotation—a technique characteristic of all his writing. "Charles Beard," he remembered, "once said that a generalization of history was that when it got dark enough you could see the stars."

We shall need all of the professional abilities and personal qualities of an Edgar Dale in the decades ahead in education, including his energy, courage, dedication, and optimism. And we should try to discover what sustains him in

the hope that some of what we learn might help sustain us all.

In the Prado Museum in Madrid there is a drawing by Goya which portrays a very old man hobbling along on two canes, below which is found the legend: *Aun aprendo*—"I am still learning." Aldous Huxley once said that in an age of heraldry, he would have chosen Goya's image as his crest, and the words as his motto. John Dewey, whose influence is deeply ingrained in the philosophy of Edgar Dale, summarized the result of the educative process as "the capacity for further education."

In the long-run of a career yet to be cataloged and assessed because it is still in active process, Edgar Dale is a model of both the learner and the teacher. His tremendous capacity for continual self-renewal, his capacity to learn, is somewhat the key to his remarkable ability to reach out to those he teaches, enabling him to practice what he preaches, making him a communicator's communicator and a teacher's teacher. And what is it, finally, that he really teaches? The answer, on this one, last cast, like a fine pickerel or a small-mouth bass, is pulled out of the deep pool of the strangely timeless writings of Professor Dale himself:

"Some instructors when asked what they teach may say: 'I teach English,' or 'I teach children.' I suggest that there is another meaningful answer: 'I teach learning.' "

A professional educator, Edgar Dale continues to educate our profession.

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