

When Stephen Hawking, in an advert to recruit teachers, named a teacher who had inspired him as ‘Mr Tahta’, those who knew Dick well were not surprised at the accolade – and not surprised that Dick had never mentioned teaching this famous pupil. For one who inspired several generations of teachers, Dick was always reticent about his own achievements.

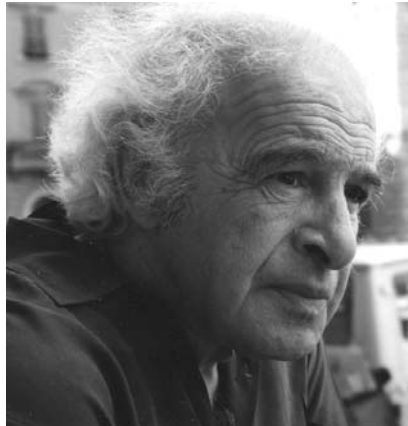
Dick joined ATM in the early 60s and had a lasting loyalty to it: his first article in *Mathematics Teaching* was in *MT17*, his last in *MT200*, and he participated in ATM seminars and working groups throughout his life. He believed strongly that the best means for ideas of teaching and learning to become practical realities was through cooperative effort. As a result, much of his work was collaborative: he was part of the ATM collective who wrote the books *Some Lessons in Mathematics*, *Notes on Mathematics in Primary Schools* and *Mathematical Reflections* in the 1960s. He wrote pieces for the *ATM Supplement*, founded and edited *Recognitions* and was co-editor with Ray Hemmings of *MT* from 1983-7. As editors, Dick and Ray radically redesigned and invigorated *MT* – producing a format that lasted for 10 years. There were many other articles and pamphlets which frequently drew upon his wide range of interests – Renaissance painting, church history, poetry, linguistics, amongst others.

After school teaching, Dick became a lecturer in mathematics education at Exeter University. There he built up a network with students and teachers. The PGCE students found themselves making 8mm animated films, exploring Dartmoor and baking bread as part of developing their thinking about teaching and learning. Many ex-students took influential roles in ATM and continued to look to him for inspiration. His work in schools led to him co-authoring in 1972 the seminal book *Starting Points*, which introduced to a wider world the ideas of investigations, ‘write-ups’, and the creative use of materials.

In the 1970s he gave much of his energy to Leapfrogs, a group of mainly ATM colleagues who produced a wide range of innovative teaching materials including books, photographs, posters and audio tapes. These were again created collectively, mostly without attributions to individual authors, but Dick played a leading role. The group, including Dick, went on to produce the ground-breaking educational TV mathematics series *Leapfrogs* (later called *Junior Maths* and which ran for 12 years).

Dick forcefully promoted visual approaches to mathematics and, as geometry was one of his enthusiasms, developed new ways of using the films of Nicolet and of Gattegno. He was a driving force for the group that produced the ATM book *Geometric Images*, and he co-authored *Images of Infinity* for Leapfrogs. Later, several pamphlets and articles came from his enthusiasm for *Cabri*.

Dick Tahta



1928 – 2006

But the visual was always a means to each learner’s inner world of mathematics. Dick pondered deeply the human side of mathematics, and brought to teaching insights into the psychology of learning, whether of the active life of young boys and girls or the emotional needs of adolescents. He was much influenced by the thinking of Gattegno and of psychoanalytic approaches to child development. In working with adults his awareness of the group dynamics, his ability to support others, and a continual questioning of his own role, made working with him a journey of discovery. He constantly urged others to reflect and think for themselves, rather than rely on external authorities; to rethink received ideas and make new connections – aspects that he personified. Above all, his

infectious enthusiasm and sympathetic responses energised others. His seminars at the Easter conferences were always oversubscribed and led participants down paths they had never imagined. His influence on the classroom practices of his former students, of members of ATM – and through them, of many teachers – has been profound.

At the end of the seventies Dick retired early: his energies increased. His inspiration led to the formation of several groups around the country examining new approaches to the teaching of algebra; another group worked on ideas from the writings of Gattegno, one of whose books Dick edited. He was involved in innovative professional development courses for teachers at Keele and in Cumbria, and contributed to courses at Warwick University and the Open University.

He saw the history of mathematics as a source of insights to be used in deepening understanding of mathematical ideas, and in his writings tried to lay bare what was lost as well as gained in successive developments in mathematics. He was fascinated by minor Victorian amateur mathematicians and his last book, published only days before his death, was *The Fifteen Schoolgirls* on the combinatorics problem posed by Kirkman.

It is tempting to think that there were two sides to Dick: the erudite, scholarly author and the charismatic teacher. But these were two sides of the same coin. His writings embody his humanity and sense of audience; his role in seminars and working groups was underpinned by deeply absorbed reading and thinking. He exemplified the view that in order to engage with teaching mathematics you needed to think deeply about mathematics and about teaching as well as about ‘mathematics teaching’.

Eric Love

You can read more about Dick Tahta and write about your memories of him on the ATM website www.atm.org.uk/people/dick-tahta.html.

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