The Rapid-Rater: What happened to Teaching Machines?

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In the 1950s, teaching machines became popular as individual instruction devices, and by 1959, they were considered one of the “hot-test items among the nation’s self-education enterprises.” (Fry, 1959) The Rapid-Rater by Shaw Laboratories, Inc. of Syosset, New York, was a teaching machine produced from 1961-1981. Similar to one invented by Sidney Pressey in the mid 1920s, the Rapid-Rater used a punchboard-like system to record student answers. This teaching machine also provided instant feedback, self pacing, and active responses (Saettler, 2004).

The Rapid-Rater was used as a classroom tool for instruction in grade schools through college. It is a hand-held recording device for up to 80 multiple-choice questions and is made of particle board with two scoring plates and a punch device. The two scoring plates can be used in multiple directions to create many different answer keys. Students would insert an answer sheet into the Rapid-Rater and then use the punch device along with mimeographed set of questions and answers. If the student chose the correct answer, a hole was punched through the paper. If an incorrect response was given, only a

Figure 1: The Rapid-Rater is available from the AECT Archives Blackwell Museum of Education located at Northern Illinois University and is in working condition.

small mark would appear. Once students completed the assessment, the answer slip would serve as a record of their efforts.

The use of the Rapid-Rater declined in the mid-1980s. Reasons for the declining use of teaching machines included overuse and negative attitude towards programmed instruction (Feldhusen, 1963). Additionally, research on teaching machines did not substantiate that student learning improved over a more

traditional approach (Saettler, 2004). Another consideration in the demise of Rapid-Rater and teaching machines may be attributed to the beginning use of computers in education (Teaching Machines, 2009).

Today’s personal response systems provide many of the same features of the Rapid-Rater and similar teaching machines, including active, individual use; instant feedback; and the ability to be self-paced through programmed instruction. One may consider that the Rapid-Rater has been replaced by personal response systems.

References

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