Hello, everyone.

I tried playing “the doubting game” with Lortie’s book, and have had a very hard time with it. Perhaps it is my strong agreement with most of the conclusions he comes to, or my view of his study as consistent, thorough, and mostly non-judgmental. In the end, I had to work hard to find a few cracks into which I could try to pry my academic fingers. The following is my attempt to break up some of what I read.

Dan Lortie makes several arguments based on sociological research of teachers in the book *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*, but there were a few that caught my eye in particular. First, Lortie addresses the slowness with which schooling changes in this country through his historical recap in chapter 1, and furthers this view by using data in chapter 2 to support the notion that teachers are, at the very least, culpable. Second, many of his arguments and conclusions, though perhaps relevant and valid in the mid-1960s, are suspect in a twenty-first century educational atmosphere.

In his historical walkthrough of schooling through chapter 1, Lortie discusses the slowness of change in the field in an unusual light – by comparing it to the endeavor of agriculture. He claims that “the principal modes of instruction (lecturing, recitation, demonstration, seat work, small group instruction, etc.) were known and used years ago,” (p. 23) thus implying that the wide range of newer methods are being ignored. Furthermore, by comparing teachers ignoring newer methods in their classroom with farmers employing more advanced methods in their fields (pun intended) – and receiving greater yields in productivity, to boot – it is obvious to Lortie that teachers are just not advancing fast enough. I fundamentally disagree with this argument on several levels.

First, there is the direct comparison of a physical activity involving an individual’s actions toward the goal of crop cultivation, with the (mostly) intellectual activity involving an individual’s actions toward the goal of cultivating mental capacity and learning. These concepts are infinitely more subtle and complex than the scientific control of the growth of plants and animals. Both may happen naturally (without a farm or a school), but dealing with classrooms full of human minds, human emotion, human psyches, and human motivations is not something to be categorized with food production.

Secondly, the assertion that technical advances in agriculture are equivalent to “advances” in schooling is suspect. He states that teachers do not claim to teach more in less time as if this were a drawback. Equivalently, one could claim that sculptors do not produce more work in less time, and playwrights are simply not pumping out more plays per annum. Teachers, though perhaps not falling into the same artisan-category as the examples mentioned, engage in a truly human endeavor; and this human aspect makes the outcomes subject to changing demands and expectations.

Lastly, I disagree with the assertion of slow adoption of technical advancements in teaching. The most compelling constants in teaching around the world revolve around communication and connections between students and cultures. The advent of new ways to communicate and interact over the last century – and, in a way relevant to education, within the last fifty years – has dramatically changed the face of the profession. The photographs, telephones, slide-shows, filmstrips, videotapes, Internet, and video-conferencing that exist in schools today show a steady (not slow) adoption of technology within instruction. Given the uneasy funding due to school budgets being derived primarily from politicized tax base and low amount of user support for changing technologies it is astounding that schoolteachers have managed to incorporate these
technological advancements in their “principal modes of instruction,” that Lortie so readily dismisses as dated.

This raises the second issue I have with Schoolteacher. Surely, Lortie can not be faulted for neglecting to discuss the relevance of information technology in the way teachers work. This document, nearing its third decade in circulation, tells an interesting story about the development and present circumstances of teachers, but only up to the middle of the last century. Are situations involving women in teaching still statistically as skewed as they were at the time of his survey analysis, or has the face of the profession changed drastically? Can teachers’ reminiscences of the Great Depression still be a motivating factor in why job security is an important lure? Are education colleges still as permissive about accepting applicants, or is the much-hailed, upcoming teacher shortage a sign of different times than those reported by Lortie? As the data for Lortie’s conclusions approaches 50 years old, is it not reasonable to ask whether a newer study should be enlisted for creating a cross-comparison, lest we be lured into a view of teaching that is both outdated and no longer resembling the profession? Much the way undergraduates were trapped into pursuing teaching by virtue of their lack of funds for further study, might we be trapped into thinking about teaching as it was rather than how it is by virtue of the lack of information regarding the last half-century of schooling in America?