The Challenge of Change Leadership

Transforming Education Through 'Communities of Practice'

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Imagine, for a moment, that you wanted to learn how to play a sport or a musical instrument, but you had never seen the sport or heard the instrument played well, and there were no coaches available. You could only practice in a room all by yourself, day in and day out. How good would you be?

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Of course athletes and musicians, even amateurs, have ample access to coaches and to examples of best practices, and they are constantly subjecting their performances to the judgment of others. But most of us who are educators have none of the benefits of even those who are serious amateurs in other fields. Good coaches for teaching and leadership, or even videotapes of excellent teaching, are virtually nonexistent in most places, and our “performances” are rarely critiqued by others. In many ways, teaching and leadership in schools and districts are still more like 19th-century “handicrafts”—skills that you learn on your own and practice all alone for most of your career—than a real profession. And as with other handicrafts, like weaving or pottery, how skillful you become may be more a matter of having an innate “gift” than learning how to improve. Some craftsmen are, indeed, artists, but many are not. Most of us in education are mediocre at what we do, despite our talents and good intentions, because we have all too few opportunities to observe and be observed, to discuss “problems of practice” with colleagues—in a word, to be a part of what Etienne Wenger calls “communities of practice.”

I speak from personal experience. In my Master of Arts in Teaching degree program at a name-brand school of education, most of my time was spent studying subject content, education theory, and curriculum, but there was almost no discussion of the craft of teaching. There were no videos of teachers to analyze. I was required to spend a certain number of hours observing “master teachers” who, in retrospect, were not especially effective. Finally, I was observed and “coached” a few times by a university “supervisor,” but he had no training or supervision for this role and so could offer very little helpful advice.

Many veteran teachers chose the profession because they wanted security and autonomy, and so most schools and districts are organized to maintain the status quo.When I finished the program and was officially certified, I went to work in a high school English classroom where I was observed once in my first year of teaching by the principal, who stayed for perhaps 10 minutes. Later, we talked for a couple of minutes, and he gave me a copy of a checklist to sign. I was proficient at everything, it seemed. The same thing happened in my second and third years of teaching. And then I became tenured. For the next nine years, teaching in both public and independent schools, I was never observed. If I improved at all, it was mainly through an often lonely and painful process of trial and error. Later, when I became a school principal, the experience was essentially the same. I ran into trouble because I was too young and inexperienced for the job, and there was no one to whom I could turn for coaching.

A unique experience? Hardly. Many veteran teachers chose the profession because they wanted security and autonomy, and so most schools and districts are organized to maintain this status quo. We are the last bastion of the would-be self-employed, having really only moved our 19th-century one-room schoolhouses into larger buildings. Many of us try to improve, as best we can, without taking real risks or giving up even a shred of our independence. And for those who do seek help from others, it is often not available. I recently talked to a former businessman who has “retired” to teach middle school math in an inner-city school. Accustomed to giving and receiving feedback, he has begged his principal and department chair to come into his classroom, but no one has come. Many principals with whom I’ve worked complain that the classroom visits they’re required by the central office to do every year feel like a bureaucratic formality, because they have neither the time nor the training nor the “permission” to do real supervision. It’s become a numbers game for them—whether they have observed their quota of teachers and turned in the requisite number of evaluation forms for the month. And meetings with their colleagues are primarily a time for announcements, rather than substantive discussion of their real work as building leaders.

Remember Marcus Welby, M.D., and Perry Mason from 1960s television? They were Lone Rangers, like Jaime Escalante of “Stand and Deliver” fame, but unlike Escalante’s contemporaries, they’re long gone. Today people in law, medicine, and business rarely work alone—either on TV or in real life. Today, people work in teams at all levels of organizations, because teams can take on challenges and find new solutions far more effectively than can individuals, working alone. Even solo practitioners like psychologists have ongoing clinical supervision, seminars for peer review of cases. Nearly every profession has reinvented itself to create forms of collaborative problem-solving—except education.

Nearly every profession has reinvented itself to create forms of collaborative problem-solving - except education.How might groups of educators be organized to go beyond mere “learning communities”—a current catchphrase—to work on ongoing problems of practice in schools and districts? What might communities of practice look like in education?

There are already some examples of teachers’ working together, with varying degrees of effectiveness. “Critical-friends groups” have been used by schools for the past decade as a means of organizing volunteer teachers to discuss their work. However, these groups often do not go beyond looking at student work to analyze the “teacher work” that may get better or worse results. For critical-friends groups to be more effective, they need to be data-driven. I was recently in a middle school where there were two earth-science teachers who had the same grouping of students, but one had managed a 92 percent pass rate on the state test with her students, while just 49 percent of the other teacher’s students had passed the test. Only the principal knew this, and he couldn’t tell me why the two teachers had gotten such different results. We need to disaggregate data by teacher, not to expose those who may be getting poor results, but to identify and learn from those teachers who are getting results far above average with comparable groups of students.

Perhaps the most well-developed model of teacher collaboration to improve practice is the “lesson study” process, described by James W. Stigler and James Hiebert in The Teaching Gap. Used in Japan as a primary means of professional development, lesson-study groups are organized by grade level or subject-content area. These teams meet regularly to discuss the learning challenges of their students and to collaboratively develop lessons that more effectively meet their students’ needs. Teachers take turns teaching these model lessons and critiquing one another’s work until they feel the lessons are polished enough to share with colleagues. Stigler and Hiebert believe the lesson-study process goes a long way toward explaining why the level of instruction in most Japanese classrooms appears consistently higher than that of other countries.

Much less attention has been given to the challenge of how to organize groups of principals and central-office leaders to learn from one another. West Clermont, Ohio, a school district with which my colleagues at the Change Leadership Group and I have worked for the past five years, now uses principals’ meetings regularly to look at videotapes of teaching and talk about what is effective instruction. We also use school walk-throughs as a means to “calibrate” principals’ and central-office supervisors’ perceptions of teachers’ effectiveness. The San Diego school district uses school walk-throughs for the same purpose and has even constructed a special classroom with one-way mirrors to facilitate principals’ discussion of “live” teaching. And in a recent meeting of 11 Washington state district teams, sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we spent part of a morning looking at a videotape of a Bellingham, Wash., 9th grade teacher’s class and then watched a live and unrehearsed coaching session with that teacher.

Transforming education from a craft to a profession is the greatest challenge school and district leaders face.We have found in our work with Gates Foundation district grantees that regular use of a common teaching tool in law, medicine, and business—the case-study method—is invaluable for administrators’ learning. Groups of principals can be encouraged to present real case studies of teachers they are supervising, and even to role-play supervision conferences in meetings. Principals should have opportunities for colleagues to read and critique one another’s drafts of their schools’ annual improvement plans. Assistant superintendents and other central-office supervisors can also present real case studies of principals and schools with whom they are working. Finally, the recent work of the Connecticut Center for School Change suggests that superintendents also benefit from being in ongoing communities of practice where they conduct school walk-throughs together and discuss their work as instructional leaders with peers.

Unlike critical-friends groups and Wenger’s communities of practice, however, this new organization of work ultimately cannot be left only to those who volunteer; it must become the way we all do our work in schools and districts. Superintendent John Deasy’s work in Santa Monica, Calif., suggests a strategy for such a transition. He recently gave teachers in his small high schools additional planning time, but only on the condition that they form triads to visit each other’s classes to give and receive feedback. School and district administrators need to think creatively about a variety of incentives for participation in communities of practice that can, over time, become part of the culture of accountability and how work gets done. A first step is for leaders to model this approach to learning and problem-solving in all their meetings.

Transforming education from a craft to a profession is the greatest challenge school and district leaders face. Above all, “professionalizing” education means creating ongoing opportunities for discussion of problems of practice at every level in the organization. It is only through such discussion that we can collaboratively create new knowledge about how to continuously improve learning, teaching, and leadership.

To read article as originally published in Education Week Magazine on October 27, 2004 click here