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# Changing Teaching Takes More Than a One-Shot Workshop

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*To genuinely improve teaching, we must say goodbye to quick-fix workshops and hello to staff development that provides intellectual stimulation and opportunities to develop new knowledge and skills.*

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The school reform movement is in trouble. In more than a century, no fundamental changes have been made in the way American teachers teach (Cuban 1990; Sarason 1971, 1983; Warren 1985). Further, student achievement is unchanged from 20 years ago, the Educational Testing Service recently concluded (Mullis et al. 1990). Perhaps most damning, ETS asserted that the rhetoric of instructional innovation far surpasses the reality of classroom change.

Once again, it seems, reformers have underestimated the difficulty of achieving genuine changes in the ways teachers teach (Sarason 1971, 1990). This underestimation has occurred even in some otherwise commendable efforts, such as the new California curriculum frameworks (e.g., California State Department of Education 1987). These visionary frameworks are part of a more general movement toward active, constructive, goal-oriented learning by students (Shuell 1986, Putnam et al. 1990, Resnick and Klopfer 1989).

If we are to achieve the goals of this new framework and similar efforts, important changes in teaching practices will be required. Unfortunately, however, if past experiences are any guide, these changes will elude the reformers.

Everyone seems to want change, but

with a few exceptions, the reform movement is not achieving its aims. What's the problem? Our research suggests that (1) the "new kinds of teaching" required to implement the reforms are described in terms too general for teachers to use, and (2) even if these new kinds of teaching were clearly defined, current staff develop-

ment practices are inadequate to effect meaningful changes.

One solution, we suggest, is to say goodbye to quick-fix workshops. We must, instead, create contexts in teachers' work lives that assist and sustain meaningful changes. These contexts should consist, preeminently, of engaging teachers in rigorous examinations of teaching: the concrete challenges and problems they face, the range of possible solutions, and, most important, close examination of whether, over time, there is progress in addressing these challenges.

Staff development, in other words, must be grounded in the mundane but very real details of teachers' daily work lives and in a form that provides the



*Children engaged in an "instructional conversation" with a skillful teacher are interested and engaged, focused and participative.*



Charles Ochoaberg

*A skillful teacher knows when to bear down to draw out a student's ideas, and when to ease up, keeping everyone on track.*

intellectual stimulation of a graduate seminar. By intellectual stimulation, we mean engagement with the substantive knowledge to be taught and the sustained analysis of teaching as a professional pursuit.

In our research, and to help advance the goals of efforts such as the new California curriculum frameworks, we've attempted to work with teachers in precisely this way. Some of what we've learned is summarized here.

### **Wanted: Definitions of New Practices**

We have been working with small groups of early elementary teachers to encourage them to use what we call "instructional conversations" (Goldenberg and Gallimore 1991; Tharp and Gallimore 1988, 1989). In a sense, there is nothing new about instructional conversations (ICs). In one form or another, teachers have been talking about this type of interaction with pupils for millennia, although it seems to get talked about more than done. Most people have a reasonably intuitive sense of what such a discussion is like. At its very best:

- It is interesting and engaging.
- It is about something. It has a focus which evolves, but remains discernible throughout.
- There is a high level of participa-

tion, without undue domination by anyone, particularly the teacher.

- Students engage in extended discussions with the teacher and among themselves, exploring ideas and thoughts in-depth.

- A teacher (or discussion leader) questions, challenges, clarifies, coaxes—or keeps quiet. The teacher knows when to bear down to draw out a student's ideas, and when to ease up, keeping everyone on track without squelching participation, reflection, and diversity of thought.

- The tone of the discussion varies, from an electrically charged give-and-take to a more quietly thoughtful tone. Either way, participants' minds are engaged in extended verbal exchanges with one another, which allow them to reach new levels of understanding.

### **Wanted: Precepts for Learning New Practices**

Virtually every California teacher and administrator with whom we've worked immediately recognizes that instructional conversation, or something like it, is essential to making the new frameworks succeed, particularly in the language arts. Some claim they already do it. But many also recognize that conducting such conversations involves skills few teachers have learned well enough to execute systematically and intentionally.

Our experiences in California and Hawaii suggest that when the kind of professional development contexts

needed to learn to use ICs skillfully and purposefully are provided, teachers can learn them and use them to help implement the California framework and comparable innovations (Goldenberg and Gallimore 1991; Rueda et al. 1991; Tharp and Gallimore 1988, 1989).

Our research on professional development contexts points out what is required for teachers to learn teaching skills as complex as IC:

1. *Teachers must have opportunities to meet with colleagues and a skilled consultant for an extended period for the explicit purpose of learning new knowledge and skills.* For example, in our most current work, Goldenberg met weekly after school for two hours, during a school year, with groups of four to six teachers. Teachers in Hawaii also met regularly with consultants to analyze previous lessons and plan futures ones. The meetings had many of the same conversational and instructional features as ICs. Over time, teachers increased their ability to implement new modes of teaching (Rueda et al. 1991, Saunders et al. 1991, Tharp and Gallimore 1989).

2. *Meetings should be productively organized around teachers' perceived needs in their own classrooms.* Teachers with whom we worked felt that something was missing from their classroom instruction. Recitation or direction instruction—the stock-in-trade of U.S. schools—is useful for certain purposes but has limited utility in other domains, such as those implicitly suggested by the California Language Arts Framework.

3. *A specific goal should emerge within a reasonable amount of time and remain the focal point of a group's work.* For example, in 1989-90, although the teachers began with different conceptions of alternative teaching modes they wished to explore, by the third month all agreed that instructional conversations represented the common elements they wanted to achieve. "Doing instructional conversations," they came to realize, was one

way of putting the spirit of the Californian framework into action. This concept, then, provided a tangible focus for the group's activities, affording them a relatively clear agenda, even if the group's understanding of instructional conversation was sometimes murky.

4. *The context for teachers' skill development must be intellectually stimulating, and teachers must acquire a conceptual understanding of pedagogical processes as well as learn new techniques.* At the beginning of the 1989-90 year, for example, the group talked in general terms about the need to enhance children's language use, promote higher-level thinking, and so forth, but without conceptualizing the sorts of teaching/learning interactions required to achieve these goals. Through readings, discussions, and videotaped lessons, the group came to conceptualize and use ICs, identifying specific elements designed to promote desired educational aims.

Our sessions also helped clarify the point that for some goals and objectives—many of which are very important—direct instruction is applicable; moreover, it can be used in conjunction with IC as part of an overall instructional program. The teachers' analytical mastery of pedagogy was enhanced as a result of our meetings, a crucial factor in their development of IC skills and surely a prerequisite for using the conversations.

5. *Teachers who wish to do instructional conversations must thoroughly study the intellectual substance of what is being taught through the conversations.* After considerable inconsistency throughout the year, for example, one teacher showed dramatic improvement in her IC lessons. When asked why, she responded, very simply, that having "studied the story" she was reading with the group of children had made a big difference.

Some of the group sessions resembled a graduate seminar in literature. Planning came to be seen more as "mental preparation" than as writing out objec-

tives, procedures, and so forth. Teachers had to understand the story (even if it was in a 1st grade basal reader) and think about how to help students derive the greatest possible meaning from it—how to talk about it, in other words, in a way that would "enlarge [their] understanding of ideas and values" (Adler 1982). The intellectual—as opposed to procedural—side of lesson planning is rarely mentioned in discussions of training teachers to teach in new ways. Yet we found it to be critical.

6. *Videotaping teachers' lessons and providing opportunities for them to review and analyze their efforts to do IC are indispensable.* The tapes help focus and sharpen the group's efforts and provide teachers with unambiguous feedback on their lessons. Simply watching themselves and having an

opportunity to, as one teacher said, "self-analyze" causes teachers to reflect on the quality of their lessons and direct later efforts in particular directions. Our analysis of meetings over a year's time showed a dramatic decrease in the number of generalized comments teachers made and an increase in the number of analytical statements.

Viewing the lessons was not always a pleasant experience, especially at first. Many of the initial meetings opened with teachers' disclaimers for the tape to be viewed that day: The story was inappropriate for an IC lesson; the students were unusually distracted; children had insufficient language or experience; and so forth. But the self-consciousness that accompanied watching the tapes was very important. It prompted the teachers to attend to the

## 10 Principles of Instructional Conversations

Instructional conversations suggest a way to achieve the ambitious, but elusive, educational goal of helping students comprehend texts and complex ideas. This kind of teaching might be particularly important for students who lack adequate opportunities for academic, conceptual, and linguistic development at home. ICs comprise 10 principles:

### Instructional Principles

1. Based on a thorough understanding of the text being used, the teacher selects a theme or ideas to serve as a starting point for focusing the discussion.
2. The teacher either "hooks into" or provides students with pertinent background knowledge.
3. The teacher provides direct teaching of a skill or concept when necessary.
4. The teacher stretches students' zone of performance by promoting

and eliciting more extended language and expression.

5. The teacher promotes students' use of text, pictures, and reasoning to support an argument or position.

### Conversational Principles

6. Much of the discussion centers on questions and answers for which there might be more than one correct answer.
7. The teacher responds to unanticipated comments and opportunities for discussion provided by students.
8. The discussion is characterized by multiple, interactive, connected turns, where succeeding utterances by teachers and students build upon and extend previous ones.
9. The atmosphere is challenging but nonthreatening.
10. All students feel free and encouraged to participate.

—Claude Goldenberg

details of their own behavior (Carver and Scheier 1981), then adjust their behavior to meet the standards they were jointly developing—in this case, using IC lessons. Being observed or taped is a key to initiating the self-analysis process on which professional development depends (Gallimore et al. 1986; Tharp and Gallimore 1988, Chapters 9, 10, and 11).

7. *Teachers need one to two years of intensive work to achieve a reasonable mastery of IC skills.* Some do it more quickly, but they are exceptional. This insight from our research helps explain why so many past efforts to change teaching practices have not succeeded. Many of the needed changes in teaching are hard to achieve, and there is no tradition in U.S. education for training of the length and intensity required to achieve substantive change.

### Needed: Fundamental Change in Schools

What if our conclusions are right? What if such extraordinary efforts are needed to achieve the goals of the California Framework and other such reforms?

We do not think the answer lies in the creation of a huge, but temporary, training program but, rather, in *permanent and fundamental change in schools*. Such a change would ensure that the intellectual and professional life of a teacher becomes more stimulating, demanding, and satisfying.

An indispensable feature of this change must be opportunities for teachers to do detailed and continuing analysis of their teaching in a context with the atmosphere and substance of a graduate seminar. What teachers did in our research projects should become a permanent feature of teaching life, not a one-shot training program. Without such changes in the structure of schools and the daily life of teachers, it is unlikely that the California Framework or any other reform will have lasting impact.

But much of this has been said before. Sarason pointed it out over 20 years ago. Perhaps Gide, as Cuban (1990) has recently reminded us, was right: "Everything has been said before, but since nobody listens, we have to keep going back and begin again." □

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