POLITICS AND THE “LAZY TEACHER”

“What It’s Like to Be a Pioneer”

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By
Debra Lyneis

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School board members get all kinds of calls. I remember one call that I received when I was serving on the board in Carlisle, Massachusetts. A parent phoned me to complain about our eighth grade science teacher, Jim Trierweiler. As she explained, her child was having difficulty with a lab assignment in Jim’s class. Students had been working on the lab in teams. (Jim’s entire introductory physical science course is structured around lab work in cooperative teams, which she did not like, but that is another story.) Stumped, her child’s team asked Mr. Trierweiler why their experiment was not working as expected. “And do you know what Mr. Trierweiler told them?” the parent demanded indignantly. I held my breath, and she continued, “He said, ‘Well, what do you think?...How about trying this?’” As I breathed a quiet sigh of relief, she continued to insist that Mr. Trierweiler should have just given the students the answer. His failure to do so confirmed her opinion that Mr. Trierweiler was “just a lazy teacher who probably didn’t even know the answers himself!”

Now, what do you do with a call like that? I knew from experience with my own children that this parent’s description of the class was accurate. I also knew from observing Jim that it is entirely by his design. Jim is a master at learner-centered learning; he firmly believes that students learn best when they take charge of their own learning. Led by their own questions, students seek answers and grow in the process, building on their own natural curiosity and eagerness to learn. Jim loves to see students of all levels scratching their heads together in labs. Students long remember Mr. Trierweiler as a favorite teacher because he teaches them to think and work together. The administration not only supports Jim’s approach, but also asks him to mentor new teachers, believing that learner-centered-learning brings fundamental improvement to education by providing students with skills they will need in a rapidly changing world.

Still, if one parent calls a school board member with a concern about this teaching approach, there are sure to be others out there who feel the same way. And, their concerns should not be lightly dismissed. These principles guide our response in Carlisle:

1. **Recognize that these parents genuinely care about providing the best education for their children.** They would agree with us that education must improve, but their solution would be to do more of what has been done in the past, with the teacher as the central dispenser of knowledge and facts, and the students as passive receptacles. It is natural for parents to find comfort in this approach because that is how education was structured for them. In their view, intensifying the same effort would lead to much-needed improvement in education.

   However, one basic lesson of system dynamics states, “If you do more of what you’ve always done, you’ll get more of what you’ve always ‘got’.” If education must improve to meet the needs of a changing world, then it has to change fundamentally. This is a very difficult idea for some parents to accept for their kids.

2. **Make sure that you set very high standards for children and for yourselves.** Learner-centered-learning does not mean that students can do whatever they want or that teachers are not teaching. On the contrary, learner-centered-learning must set very high and clear expectations for children. It is actually much more work for teachers because they must structure the class for problem-solving, they must continuously
monitor each student’s progress, and they must be available to offer guiding questions to help students figure things out for themselves, keeping them challenged but not frustrated. Teachers must also relinquish their role as dispenser of all knowledge and become guides and learners, allowing students to raise questions which may not always be easy to answer. It would be much simpler for teachers to just stand there and spoon-feed “the facts,” but the students’ enthusiastic response and deeper learning are the rewards for the effort.

Many parents who were skeptical at first come to appreciate this different approach to teaching and learning when they witness their kids’ progress. The students are definitely challenged. They learn a great deal on their own. They thrive.

3. Keep the community informed and involved. A school belongs to its community, and open lines of communication between the two benefit everybody, especially when innovation is considered. In Carlisle, we explain our curriculum through newspaper articles, newsletters, parent meetings, and school board meetings. We also invite the community to our annual Carlisle Education Forum where townspeople, teachers, and parents get together on a Saturday morning to listen to a guest speaker and discuss their vision of education for the future. According to Jim Waters, education investor and long-time school board member in his home-town: “Don’t get too far ahead of your taxpayers.” Look to your community for feedback and support.

4. Remember the long run. Although many parents will be convinced by improved student performance, and many townspeople will offer support for change, others who are wary of educational innovation will continue to resist. They are entitled to their opinions; respectful disagreement is a healthy thing. However, our school will continue to encourage the spread of learner-centered-learning and system dynamics in our curriculum because we believe that in the long run it is the best way to prepare children for their future, not our past. Advice from Jay Forrester puts it into perspective: “There are those that we can convert, and there are those that we will just have to outlive!”

Resistance to educational innovation is inevitable; the deeper the change, the deeper the resistance. If you are introducing system dynamics and learner-centered-learning in your school, you will hear it. Recognize that resistance, though frustrating, lends stability to the system insuring that lasting change is gradual. Maintain very high curriculum standards so that students will win converts slowly over time, and slowly build community support. Then, armed with a vision of better education for children, find the patience to “outlive.”

Jay Forrester has suggested that we could speed the spread of learner-centered-learning and system dynamics in K-12 education by sharing tales of “what it’s like to be a pioneer.” It might help others who are starting out, or just curious, to know about other teachers’ experiences, positive student outcomes, pitfalls, political issues, responses of administrators and fellow teachers, student and parent feedback, triumphs and tribulations. Forrester has long experience in pioneering, first as an early inventor of the digital computer, then as the founder of system dynamics, and now as an education reformer. This paper presents just one little vignette. Please let me know (LyneisD@cle.tiac.net) if you have other tales to share. Thanks.