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Sharing Stories of Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Teaching is what matters most for improving student learning in the new millennium. Unfortunately, the teaching profession needs heroes and heroines—it is sadly in need of caring teachers who have the ability to influence the general public. If teachers and teacher educators are to be influencers or public leaders, then they must consider the constraints of the unschooled mind as shown in the writings of Howard Gardner. They must present their expertise so that their ideas influence parents, students, and community members—not just other professionals. All teachers must model caring in their classroom. A few teachers or teacher educators need to widen the circle of their influence so that they can become our Joe DiMaggios.

THE NEED TO TELL WHAT MATTERS MOST

“Joltin’ Joe has left and gone away.” Joe DiMaggio’s recent death has caused many of us to reflect on both his life and his legend. Why did he become our hero? How was his legend created? In his well-known song, Paul Simon (1968) asks: “Where have you gone Joe DiMaggio? A nation turns its lonely eyes to you.” Deborah Meier remembered her visits to Yankee Stadium in the 1940’s to watch the great outfielder’s beauty and grace, she then stated with reference to our students: “We need to be their Joe DiMaggios.” We need to inspire our students the way that heroes and heroines like Joe DiMaggio did (Gardner, 1999). What can we learn from the stories told of Joe DiMaggio? Gray (1999) tells us that:

In that pre-television era, sports heroes were made out of words, those spoken over the radio during play-by-play broadcasts and those printed in newspapers the next morning. No wonder legends arose. Most people experienced baseball by reading adventure stories in the daily press or by listening, the way the ancient Greeks did, to the voices of

the bards (p. 92).

Words continue to convey stories about Joe DiMaggio that describes him as a caring professional. According to his friend, Edward Bennett Williams:

Joe once told me that he played every game as hard as he could because he realized each day some youngster was seeing him for the first time. He would not disappoint them (Allen, 1999, p. 111).

We are sadly in need of stories that convey the idea of teachers as caring professional. Ducharme and Ducharme (1998) in an editorial for the *Journal of Teacher Education* report that teacher “bashing” is increasing: “We await the arrival of heroes in this continuing dilemma” (p. 48).

The purpose of this article is to explore the questions: How can teachers become their students’ Joe DiMaggios? How should teachers go about the job of convincing the general public that they are caring professionals? What is the impact for teacher education if we are to hold our teachers to high standard of caring and professionalism?

LEADERSHIP AND STORIES OF TEACHING

Throughout time, teachers have been the focus of many movies, plays, books, essays, and stories. The impact of these stories—whether oral, written, film, television or video—is profound. As noted by Bruner (1996):

Appreciation of the centrality of narrative comes not from a single discipline, but from a confluence of many: literary, socio-anthropological, linguistic, historical, psychological, even computational (p. xiv).

Stories influence our perceptions and attitudes. Powerful stories have the capacity to change our vision of teachers and schooling. According to Preskill (1998):

The protagonists in these narratives grapple with all of the difficulties that make teaching in contemporary school so daunting, but their stories highlight the imagination and commitment of teachers who see possibility in the most trying of circumstances (p. 344).

He describes how narratives contribute to our understanding of teaching—"the challenges, pitfalls, and joys of educating children." His examples focus on books and stories written by Herbert Kohl, Jonathan Kozol, Mike Rose, and other educators.

Educational researchers are beginning to understand the effective uses of narratives in teaching and learning (McEwan & Egan, 1995; Witherell & Nodding, 1991). Numerous books and articles describe potential uses of stories or narratives for improving teaching (Brunner, 1994; Isenberg, 1994). Although one important purpose for stories is to inspire future teachers, an equally important purpose is to communicate the power of teaching to the general public.

Effective leaders have long known the power of oral storytelling—narratives, myths and fables. Gardner (19995) argues that a key—"perhaps the key—to leadership, as well as to garnering of a following, is the effective communi-

cation of a story" (p. 62). Leaders tell vibrant stories that engage their followers both rationally and emotionally. Inspirational stories about leaders motivate us to do our best. These stories weave together ideas, values, and plans of action. Leadership is about change—about taking a group of people from where they are to where they need to be (Tichy, 1997). Gardner (1997) indicates that:

Individuals are prompted to change when they identify with an inspirational figure and an inspirational message; for human beings, compelling narratives are most likely to stimulate such identification (p. 108).

SHARING STORIES WITH THE GENERAL PUBLIC

We desperately need to hear and see inspirational stories of teaching. Students, parents, and community members represent important audiences for stories to improve the understanding of teaching and schooling. Could narratives or stories of caring and professional teachers be used to inspire students, parent, and the general public about the importance of teaching and public schooling in a democratic society? If we are to use stories of teaching and learning to improve the understanding of the general public, then we must come to understand how we are influenced by stories. The general public is influenced both by stories in the popular media and oral stories shared through conversations. If we are to communicate with the general public, then we must learn to utilize the mass media and informal storytelling in each community rather than expect our stories will be heard through our professional literature.

Each of us has felt the positive or negative impact of our teachers as we grow and learn. When asked, we can all share stories of our favorite caring and inspirational teachers. The challenge for teacher education is to not only recruit and develop inspiring and caring teachers—but to help share the stories of teaching.

WHO ARE THE INFLUENCERS OF EDUCATION

In order to understand how the general public is influenced in their views of teaching and learning, we must differentiate direct and indirect leadership. Direct leaders or influencers try to “directly” influence the general public. Gardner (1997) describes the important role of direct leaders or influencers in stories of creation and dissemination:

As I see it, Influencers are trying to bring about changes in the way their constituencies think and behave. To do this effectively, they need to mobilize the thought processes of their followers. A powerful means of achieving this effect is the creation of a narrative in which they make common bonds with their followers; by describing goals, they seek in common, obstacles that lie in the way, measures for dealing with these obstacles, milestones along the way, and promise that the desired utopia can eventually be achieved (p. 108).

In contrast, indirect leaders attempt to change the domain or profession from within—by communicating to other professionals. Teacher educators read and listen to the stories of other educational leaders. However, the stories of these indirect leaders frequently fail to reach the general public. Sometimes the reason is that these stories are only conveyed through presentations at professional conferences or through books and journals found in professional libraries. However, another important reason is the complexity of the stories of indirect leaders. These complex stories have difficulty competing for the hearts and minds of the general public. As teacher educators, we need to focus our stories on the general public—not just our colleagues (Gardner, 1997).

A story that might be very effective with an expert in a domain will not be effective with someone unfamiliar with the knowledge and expertise of that profession. When exercising indirect leadership within a domain or discipline like education, experts tell their stories to other

experts who are willing to struggle with abstract concepts and even jargon. Experts will generally appreciate a sophisticated story of high complexity. Gardner (1995) indicates:

Among experts, to be sure, there is a reasonable chance that the more sophisticated version will prevail. But once one moves beyond the realm of expertise, and, indeed, once the expert herself is addressed as a member of a heterogeneous community, then “all bets are off” (p. 64).

WHAT ARE THE DIFFICULTIES IN LEADING THE GENERAL PUBLIC

Leaders who wish to convince or motivate the general public must learn to respect the constraints and tendencies of the “unschooled mind” that resides in all who have not attained expertise. Gardner (1991) introduced us to the concept of the “unschooled mind.” He describes how we have failed to appreciate that in each of us there is a five-year-old unschooled mind “struggling to get out and express itself” (p. 5). For example, Deborah Meier, a teacher leader from Central Park Elementary School in East Harlem (1995), shares the following:

We laugh sometime at CPE about how our students (and even our own children), many of whom have never attended any school but ours, still play “pretend school” in a traditional way—the desks are lined up, “the teachers” yell at “the children”! At the age of four, my granddaughter Sarah loved playing school with me by acting like the mean old teacher I’ve strived not to be (p. 141-142).

The challenge for the storyteller is to create a familiar or stereotype story that is easily assimilated by the unschooled mind. The unschooled mind appreciates simple stories such as fairy tales and other magical adventures where the forces of light and darkness clash. Leaders who create and tell engaging stories exploit this universal sensitivity and appreciation for basic narratives (Gardner, 1991). For example, this

stereotypical thinking may result in the general public believing that all teachers have the same competence or qualifications—while in fact standards of preparation vary greatly. The unschooled mind focuses on simplistic or literal understanding while failing to appreciate complex, abstract, or symbolic interpretations. For example, individuals without expertise fall back on intuitive theories when they encounter narratives. Such intuitive theories of teaching are that teaching is simply telling or that all classrooms must be composed of desks lined up with teachers standing in the front of the classroom.

To illustrate the power of appealing to the unschooled mind, Gardner (1995) uses the example of the general public being influenced by the Star Wars movies and underlying story. The impact of the “Star Wars” scenario was not restricted to adolescents and children. The general public was compelled by this simple story of good and evil. According Gardner (1997):

Many Influencers are quite successful in creating two groups (us and them); in fostering conflict between the two groups; and in rallying the members of “us” to prevail over “them” (p. 117).

For example, to gain popularity and increase defense spending, President Ronald Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative became known as the “Star Wars program.” Although derided as simplistic by his opponents, this story of our plan to build a shield to protect the “good” United States from a nuclear attack by the “evil” Soviet Union helped compel voters to support Reagan during his entire eight-year presidency. As a political observer of the United States, Margaret Thatcher indicated that Reagan’s use of the Star Wars story was the best political decision of his career.

Leaders compete with each other through their stories. New stories must compete with one another for acceptance with other stories or “counterstories” (Gardner, 1995). If one story is that anyone with natural abilities can easily become a teacher, and another story is that teachers require specific training and continuous professional development—which story will pre-

vail? The challenge of the storyteller becomes clear. To the extent that a story is familiar, it will be assimilated. To the extent that the story is innovative, it will attract attention. However, the determination of which stories will prevail is not a simple process. Leaders must somehow deal with the enduring strength of the unschooled mind. The leader who plans to lead the general public must create a familiar or innovative story that any individual living in that society will understand.

We must help tell stories to the general public like those told to other educators by Deborah Meier. Meier (1995) tells a complex story of changes needed to improve public schools that applies not only to the inner-city, but to all schools. She shares her proven results from small elementary and secondary schools she helped to create at Central Park East in New York’s East Harlem. Her story includes many ideas for forming learning communities, inspiring teachers, and challenging her students to achieve high standards. According to Meier (1995):

The central myth, one causing serious mischief, is the notion that in the past public schools taught more effectively and children learned more thoroughly (p. 82).

If we believe in the myth of the past effective schools, then we must accept that our reform efforts have failed. She points out that: “we’ve mostly never yet tried for anyone but a small elite” (p. 83). Her “small schools in Harlem” are linked to other effective school reforms through the Coalition of Essential Schools led by Theodore Sizer.

The writings of Theodore Sizer tell his long story of school reform from *Horace’s Compromise* to *Horace’s School* to *Horace’s Hope*. Sizer tells the story of his fictional high school teacher, Horace, who must lead a team of teachers in school reform similar to Sizer’s work with the Coalition of Essential Schools. He focuses on what works in the public schools. He describes how we must assess students’ “habits of mind” through the use of projects and performance assessments.

My informal survey of parents and community members shows that none are familiar with educational leaders such as Deborah Meier, TheodoreSizer, or even Howard Gardner. The important ideas for improvement recommended by Meier, Sizer, and Gardner are not presently conveyed in stories that can easily be grasped by the general public.

BECOMING INFLUENCERS

We need all teachers and teacher educators to become influencers of learning in the new millennium. According to Gardner (1997):

Influencers cut their teeth in local circles: their family, their group of friends, their schoolmates. The diameter of these circles rapidly expands, so that the Influencer finds herself dealing with hundreds if not thousands of individuals (p. 112).

Teachers and teacher educators need to draw upon their knowledge of storytelling. Through actions and stories, we must show students, parents, and community members that the future of teaching and schooling can be exciting and challenging. Our dynamic stories must illustrate what caring and inspiring teachers do to improve the lives of their students.

The first step is for all teacher educators and teachers to model the story of caring professionals in their own classrooms and other learning environments. Gardner notes:

Their dramatic “story” is most likely to be effective if they do not merely relate the story with effectiveness, but if in some sense their own lives capture the essence of that story and convey it convincingly to others (p. 108).

One counterstory told by some students and by the media is that schools are uncaring and boring. However, most students agree that their teachers matter most. According to *Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think about their Schools—A Report for Public Agenda* (1997):

They want interesting, engaging teachers who care about them personally and have a special knack for getting them to do their best. But they also voice respect for teachers who are demanding and consistent whether or not they qualify as “entertainer of the year” (p. 25).

If interesting and engaging teachers significantly impact student learning, then our stories and actions must change to creating stories about interesting learning environments and caring teachers that make the student say “Wow!” We must convince our public that teachers are professionals—that teachers are more than just babysitters. Our stories must be compelling and dynamic. To maintain the credibility of our story we must hold teachers accountable for teaching with caring and inspiration—and for the results of their students’ performances. As Gardner (1997) explains:

I have written of “story creation” as a conscious process, and, indeed, much weaving of narratives is indeed intentional, particularly in a period of “image makers” and “spin doctors.” Yet Influencers are unlikely to achieve success unless their story is genuine, one that grows naturally out of their own experiences and touches the lived experiences of their audience. At least some of this communication occurs at an unconscious level; and the story cannot be dissociated from its vivid teller, be it the simply clad Gandhi or the bulldog-like Churchill (p.118).

An important step for teacher educators is to clearly articulate their “Different Drummer” story about teaching. Can we make the public appreciate the complex view of teaching shared by teachers of teachers? Teacher educators should march to a different drummer—a sophisticated drummer with a complex rhythm. As teacher educators, we hold a vision of public education that often seems at odds with that of students, their parents, and the general public. According to *Different Drummers—Report from Public Agenda* (1997):

Professors of education regard teaching as an elaborate, highly evolved craft practiced by specialists trained in the latest techniques and supported by the latest research (p. 13).

If our research and best practices show that teaching is a complex activity, then we should not settle for simplistic stories of teaching. But, how can we communicate this sophisticated story? How can our complex stories of teaching compete for the unschooled minds of the general public? Influencers must share stories that show students working toward deeper understandings through individual and collaborative projects while demonstrating important knowledge and skills. . *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future—Report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future* (1996) proposes that:

America will provide all students in the country with what should be their educational birthright: access to competent, caring, and qualified teachers (p.8).

If teaching is what matters most; then caring and inspiring teachers must be central to our vision for improving our schools. When we share stories about teaching and learning, the teachers should be the heroes and heroines of these stories.

In the new millennium, the general public—students, parents, and community members—will probably learn many stories of teaching and learning from words spoken over the radio and written in the morning newspaper as well as through newer media such as movies, television, videos, and the Internet. The “true” stories of teaching and learning are more complex than the simple stories conveyed in the media. Can stories from the Disney “Outstanding Teacher Awards” replace the stories of the new television series, “Boston Public?” If we are to tell a sophisticated story to the general public, then we must begin telling this story to our family and friends now. We must slowly educate the general public. We must gain confidence that our “different drummers” story can prevail. As Howard Gardner (1997) explains:

It is possible to convey a more complex story, but this process takes a long period of time. The Influencer in this case becomes an educator, instructing his audience over time to think in a subtler manner. In my view Mahatma Gandhi attained heroic status precisely because he succeeded, over many years, in convincing thousands, perhaps millions of individuals to think differently about the most important human issues (p. 117).

Like Gandhi, we have a unique story that requires the general public to reject the simple counterstories of good and evil—(phonics is good, whole language is evil; memorization is good, outcomes and standards are evil).

Finally, we need extraordinary influencers like Joe DiMaggio—teacher educators and teachers who become legends and symbols of our teaching profession. After telling their story in local circles, the best storytellers need to create stories for the public media of movies, television, and newspapers. Writing complex and abstract stories to each other will not have the necessary impact. Telling stories of teaching on Larry King Live and Oprah would have more impact on the general public. We must recognize Gardner's (1995) insight that “it is much easier to deal with a single authorized leader, and our need to share their burden, rather than try to exploit or undermine their authority” (p. 305). Like the life and legend of Joe DiMaggio, our inspiring story must impact the emotions as well as the mind. Just as Joe DiMaggio reminds many of us of the values of baseball at its best, so must our inspirational teachers remind us of the importance of teaching as a profession.

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