

## **CHAPTER I**

### **The Basic Ideas**

In some educational organizations, protocols may at first seem foolish-their artifice an unwarranted interference in ordinary business. The more dysfunctional this business, the stronger the negative reaction may be. For example, schools or colleges mired in norms of private practice, and used to ignoring the actual impact of the practice on students' learning, may not take easily to learning with protocols. Encouraged to try them anyway, however, and pressed to see them all the way through, even reluctant participants may find something refreshing about protocols. Then, urged to reflect on the nature of this refreshment, the participants may find that the protocols help them imagine alternatives to ordinary habits of working together, learning, and leading.

Thus emerges the possibility of what we call a new workplace for educators-the kind that Peter Senge (1990) with great resonance calls a learning organization. In this chapter, we describe four basic ideas concerning the continuing professional education of educators. These basic ideas underpin all the protocols presented in Chapters 2 through 5, and all our advice concerning their use. Together, they also constitute the basis of our vision of a new workplace for educators. As we suggested in the Preface, readers can choose merely to use this book as a handbook of professional development activities, but we hope they will use it also as an invitation to help create such a workplace within their own contexts.

### **EDUCATING OURSELVES**

The first basic idea is that we professional educators should take charge of our own learning. That is because only we can direct it toward managing the real problems of our work, and toward meeting our students' real needs. Because these problems and needs are vastly more complex than they typically appear to others, inside perspectives are crucial to understanding them (Lampert, 2001). To say that we ought to educate ourselves, therefore, means that professional development activities for educators that are designed and conducted without benefit of inside perspectives are not worth the time and money they cost. It does not mean, however, that we should cut ourselves off from outside sources of learning. On the contrary, we desperately need what outside expertise can offer. However, we cannot effectively use outside expertise except in combination with our own intimate knowledge of practice.

It is important to note the plural in the phrase educating ourselves. The work it describes is necessarily collective. No educator works alone, though we seem to. Yes, we make lots of private moves, and our work demands an individual capacity for spontaneity, improvisation, and good judgment. But all our efforts for better or worse are mediated by the efforts of our colleagues. What they do matters as much to the learning of our students and the running of our programs as what we do. Thus their values, standards, and methods are our business-as ours are their business-and the problems of practice are inescapably mutual ones. For this reason, we must give up our pervasive tendency to try to manage them alone.

Indeed, we may even fail to see what our actual problems of practice are unless we dare to inquire about them together. This is because so much of our knowledge of practice is tacit, and becomes subject to critique only when we reflect on it in the company of others (Schon, 1983). It is also because certain aspects of practice-as we explain below-cause us to overlook the problems that inhere in it; and it is our colleagues who are best situated to help us understand this limit on our ordinary perspective. Finally, it is because the identification and analysis of problems require certain organizational components that are often absent within educational institutions. These include norms for open and honest conversation; meeting habits that support inquiry, dialogue, and reflection; opportunities for those immersed in particular work to take direct

action to improve it; and facilitative leadership capable of encouraging participation, ensuring equity, and building trust. The only way to ensure the presence of these things within our educational institutions is through collective work on the inside. No amount of external pressure can by itself manage the task, nor can any amount of solo effort.

## **EXPLORING STUDENT WORK**

One good way for us to educate ourselves is to pause periodically in our practice to become deliberate students of our students. This is the second basic idea underpinning this book. The point is to reach a different understanding of our students than the kind we're used to, one deeper than what is required merely to keep our teaching and their learning in sync. But this demands a great shift of energy, both practical and organizational. Instead of pressing for student work flow as we usually do, judging quickly the value of the flow's direction, we must on a regular basis suspend flow, capture images of the work interrupted, study the images calmly and deliberately, and explore together what they may mean.

Along with a broad alliance of teachers, school leaders, teacher educators, and reform-minded educators with many other job titles, we often refer to this great shift of energy with the simple phrase "looking at student work" (Allen, 1998). Here, however, we acknowledge that the "looking" we advocate is simple in the deep and disciplined way that Thoreau's looking was simple at Walden Pond and Annie Dillard's at Tinker Creek. Simple but elemental. Simple but difficult.

Students' work is the text we read in order to understand our own work. It is where our moves as educators and their impact on students are most traceable (McDonald, 2001b, 2002). It is where what we know and also what we don't know become most apparent. For these reasons, our efforts to explore student work-together-are crucial to our efforts to revise and improve the collective work of our educational institutions. But for these reasons, too, such efforts are threatening. This is why protocols are useful.

## **PROTOCOL-BASED LEARNING**

The third basic idea underlying this book concerns our use of the word protocol. It may seem at first an odd fit with our purpose. In diplomacy, protocol governs who greets whom first when the President and Prime Minister meet, and other such matters. In technology, protocols enable machines to "talk" with one another by precisely defining the language they use. In science and medicine, protocols are regimens that ensure faithful replication of an experiment or treatment; they tell the scientist or doctor to do this first, then that, and so on. And in social science, they are the scripted questions that an interviewer covers, or the template for an observation. But in the professional education of educators? One could argue that elaborate etiquette, communicative precision, faithful replication, and scripts would prove counterproductive here. Don't we best learn from each other by just talking with each other?

No, we claim. Among educators especially, just talking may not be enough. The kind of talking needed to educate ourselves cannot rise spontaneously and unaided from just talking. It needs to be carefully planned and scaffolded.

### **Making Our Work Transparent**

Why should educators in particular need protocols? It is because belief in the efficacy of our efforts is a principal tool of our trade. Even when our students seem resistant, it is partly our persistence in believing in the possibilities of their learning that gives them in time the faith they need to perform well. But our unconditional believing is an occupational hazard when it comes to reflecting on our own practice. That is when, as Peter Elbow (1986) argues, the educator must temper methodological belief with methodological doubt. A good way to do this, he claims, is to alternate the two. This idea was one of several important

inspirations for the design of the Tuning Protocol, whose debut we describe in the Preface. Another was the practice of the National Writing Project (NWP) in juxtaposing in its summer workshops for teachers three risky opportunities. The first involves sharing drafts of their own writing with each other. The second involves sharing examples of their teaching of writing with each other. And the third involves learning about the teaching of writing from experts and expert texts (Lieberman & Wood, 2003). In facing up to the first two risks-and thus gaining the benefits they offer-NWP teachers become open to understanding the comparable risk of the third and thus gaining its benefit, too. Of course, teachers hear from experts all the time-for example, in professional development workshops; but they gain real benefit from such encounters only when they dare to put their own expertise at risk (McDonald, Buchanan, & Sterling, in press).

This is difficult for us educators because we must believe in ourselves as much as in our students. We must project confidence in the directions we offer, or our students lose faith in these directions. But this has its downside. It encourages us to hide the real complexities of our work from our students, and inadvertently even from ourselves. We project such confidence in the directions we set that we conceal the choices, hunches, and inescapable uncertainty and arbitrariness that underlie them. Over time, this habit can insulate us from the gaps and faults of our own expertise, and seal us off from new expertise. Dangerously for both ourselves and our students, it can also mask the real dynamics of learning.

Protocols force transparency. By specifying, for example, who speaks when and who listens when, protocols segment elements of a conversation whose boundaries otherwise blur. They make clear the crucial differences between talking and listening, between describing and judging, or between proposing and giving feedback. In the process, they call attention to the role and value of each of these in learning, and make the steps of our learning visible and replicable.

Meanwhile, absent any effort on our part to make our work more transparent, our students grow up thinking that everything in education is clearer and more certain than it actually is-for example, what to teach, how to teach it, whether the students have learned it, what to do if they haven't, how to organize the school or other institution, and how to make it effective. Then some of the students grow up to be school board members, trustees, mayors, members of Congress, even President-and in these roles, they make policy decisions based on their faulty understanding, and these policy decisions have consequences. We work among the residual effects (in our organizational structures, institutional cultures, and work routines) of nearly a century of efforts to make education as predictable (and controllable) as it seems it should be. Educators have responded to these efforts in turn by substituting hurried privacy and spurious certainty for the publicly accountable authoritativeness and creative uncertainty that our work really requires (McDonald, 1992). One of the benefits of working with protocols is that they disturb the privacy and certainty by interrupting the ordinary flow of conversation. Some of them force the raising of questions, the suspension of judgment, and the withholding of response.

### Enriching Learning

In our experience, teachers who participate in protocol-based learning in their own education often adapt the protocols for their teaching. This happens, we think, because teachers already organize their practice in terms of routines-ones for which protocols may substitute, and also because teachers continually use their own learning experiences as grist for their teaching plans. Recently, Nancy Mohr worked with a group of teachers from the Packer Collegiate Institute in Brooklyn, New York, who were learning to use protocols to explore their students' work. Over the course of several months, the teachers also adapted many of these protocols to use with the students themselves, and were impressed with the quality of the work that resulted. One adapted a protocol to help her students identify whether they were predominantly visual or auditory learners, and then to reflect on what this means. The students came up with powerful lists. They were first graders. Another teacher used a protocol to help his students explore their own artwork in the same way that he and his colleagues had done.

We hope that one benefit of this book will be that readers and their colleagues will not only use the protocols we describe to educate themselves, but to educate their students as well.

Thus protocols may encourage an environment for learning (by educators and their students) based on the theory that knowledge is socially constructed. That is, encounters with other people's understanding enable learners to gain and deepen their own understanding. It is a theory well supported by research (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). Moreover, along with John Dewey, we believe such learning environments foster democracy as well as cognition. They encourage learners whether they are first graders, graduate students, or colleagues in professional education-to appreciate the value of diverse ideas and deliberative communities (Glickman, 1998; Greene, 1988; Oakes & Lipton, 1999).

Like their counterparts in diplomacy, technology, science, medicine, and social science, the kind of protocols we describe and promote in this book constrain behavior in order to enhance experience. Some protocols enable enemies to sit at the same table and make peace. Others enable scientific advancements and medical cures. Still others ensure reliable data collection and valid inference. The ones we write about help enrich educators' descriptive powers, intensify their listening, enhance their qualities of judgment, and facilitate their communication with each other. They help us to become genuinely professional and genuinely accountable.

## **A NEW WORKPLACE FOR EDUCATORS**

The fourth basic idea informing this book concerns the consequences of taking the other ideas seriously-of educating ourselves, exploring student work together, and gaining experience in the facilitation of protocols. These can lead, we believe, to the development of what we call a new workplace for educators. This is one where the power to assess outcomes and to take action to improve them is distributed throughout the organization, and where the people who do the work are able, willing, and even eager-in consultation with their colleagues-to make changes as needed in order to make the work more effective. Management theorists call this a high-performance workplace (Applebaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg, 2000; Ichniowski, Levine, Olson, & Strauss, 2000). Eileen Applebaum and her colleagues outline its components within the manufacturing sector of the economy against the backdrop of the traditional workplace:

In traditional manufacturing plans, conceptualizing and planning what needs to be done is separated from carrying out work tasks and executing plans. . . . Most employees have little autonomy or control over work tasks and methods. Managers coordinate the gathering and processing of information. . . and then use knowledge concentrated within management ranks to make decisions based on the information they have gathered. There are few opportunities for ideas to flow upward from front-line workers. Once decisions have been made, orders are relayed back down the chain of command to the front-line workers, who carry them out. Supervisors act as monitors. . . . Workers are paid to follow orders, not to think. In this setting, time spent in training or in problem-solving meetings represents lost productivity. (pp. 101-102)

With some modification, this description fits certain sectors of traditional American education, too, especially urban schooling. Indeed, the original design of urban schooling in the United States, with its emphasis on mass production and "scientific management," was imported from manufacturing (Callahan, 1962; Tyack, 1974). Sadly, evidence of these roots may be stronger today than in recent decades, given today's heightened attention to accountability. That is because pressures to achieve greater accountability are often filtered through the century-old organizational paradigm, resulting in ever more scripted curriculum, ever closer monitoring, and ultimately spurious accountability.

The lesson from the 1990s turnaround in American manufacturing, however, is that higher performance requires a change of organizational paradigm rather than greater dedication to the existing one. The heart of the change in manufacturing, according to Applebaum and her colleagues (2000), has been to reorganize

work "to permit front-line workers to participate in decisions that alter organizational routines" (p. 7). Specifically, this has involved more front-line authority exercised in production teams; greater communication within and among the teams, between teams and managers, and between teams and experts in other parts of the organization; and participation by front-line workers in off-line problem-solving. In the manufacturing enterprises that Applebaum and her colleagues studied, these changes resulted in greater profitability and greater worker satisfaction.

The high-performance workplace shows up today also in the service sector of the American economy—at least, the high end of it. Charles Fishman (1996), for example, describes the high-performance workplace of the profitable and upscale Whole Foods Supermarket chain:

The Whole Foods culture is premised on decentralized teamwork. "The team," not the hierarchy, is the defining unit of activity. Each of the 43 stores is an autonomous profit center composed of an average of 10 self-managed teams—produce, grocery, prepared foods, and so on—with designated leaders and clear performance targets. The team leaders in each store are a team; store leaders in each region are a team; the company's six regional presidents are a team. Whole Foods supports teamwork with a wide-open financial system. It collects and distributes information to an extent that would be unimaginable almost anywhere else. Sensitive figures on store sales, team sales, profit margins, even salaries, are available to every person in every location. In fact, the company shares so much information so widely that the SEC has designated all 6,500 employees "insiders" for stock-trading purposes. (p. 103)

Of course, measures of success in education are different than in steel or apparel manufacturing, or in the retailing of natural foods; and the kinds of information that people need to work smartly in schools and colleges and other educational organizations are different, too. Still, it seems plausible that some workplace innovations in manufacturing and high-end service may also work well in our field. These may especially include the use of teams—both "front-line" (to do the work), and "off-line" (to study ways to improve the work); richer information systems and far broader access to them; and the cultivation of a commitment to the organization's mission at all levels, purchased by the decentralization of management authority and accountability.

Some recent studies of school reform bear this out. Here the high-performance workplace has been associated with the development of what are called professional communities of practice. Reporting on a 4-year study of 16 high schools in two states, for example, Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert (2001) depict a subsample of schools that consistently engaged diverse students in challenging academic work, and kept them engaged and successful over time. These schools were notable for the presence of a "strong professional community committed to making innovations that support student and teacher learning and success" (pp. 38-39). Similarly, Fred Newmann and Gary Wehlage (1995), reporting on a national study of 24 restructured schools, conclude that "the most successful schools were the ones that used restructuring tools to help them function as professional communities of practice" (p. 3). Where such communities had the right cultural and structural conditions to exert continual leadership, the researchers say, and where they focused on improving the intellectual quality of their students' work, the work did improve (Newmann & Associates, 1996; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

In a recent national survey of American public school teachers, 69% reported a higher amount of collaboration in their work life than 3 years before, with 36% reporting a "lot more" collaboration (Belden Russonello & Stewart Research and Communications, 2000). Still, the presence of professional communities of practice in American schooling seems far from the norm. Indeed, the same survey suggests that the decline in front-line privacy reported by teachers has been accompanied by increased rather than decreased bureaucratic constraints on their work, especially in the form of testing requirements.

Meanwhile, many calls for accountability in education and plans for achieving it continue to take little account of the gap between aspiration and organizational reality. For example, some reformers argue that malfunctioning urban school systems can be redirected toward student achievement by turning them over to "accountable" mayors (Kirst, 2002). Cities now implementing this "reform" include New York City, Boston,

Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit (Gewertz, 2002). It is as if accountability were a kind of fluid that could be squeezed through an educational organization starting from the top, and as if the organization were a kind of vacuum of accountability to begin with.

We think differently. For one thing, we know that the status quo is not an accountability vacuum but a different (though inadequate) kind of accountability system based on different assumptions about the goals of education (Abelmann & Elmore, 1999). These are rooted in policy-making focused on controlling how every job is done, rather than on building capacity for doing the real job well (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Doing the real job well involves unlearning the controls, and substituting an accountability based on faithfulness to learning. This is one that combines front-line scrutiny of student work, collective responsiveness to individual student needs, and strategic flexibility at all levels of the organization. In this way the smallest units of the organization become the source of its cohesion overall, as Margaret Wheatley (2000) explains:

If the organization can stay in a continuous conversation about what it is and what it is becoming, then leaders don't have to undertake the impossible task of trying to hold it all together. Organizations that are clear at their core hold themselves together because of their deep congruence. (p. 343)

The best way to be clear at the core, we think, is to build professional communities of practice (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). This is where educators can learn and unlearn whatever scrutiny, responsiveness, and strategic flexibility require. This is where they can educate themselves accordingly. Such education is usually needed, since no education preset in its purposes-whether offered in outside courses and workshops or "in-service" ones-can fully meet the needs of professionals really attentive to their own students and their own contexts. Professional communities of practice inevitably need learning that only its own members can supply.

## **FACILITATIVE LEADERSHIP**

Karen Seashore Louis and her colleagues (1996) argue that the crucial components of professional communities of practice are the following:

- Focus on student learning
- Deprivatization of practice
- Collaboration
- Shared norms and values
- Reflective dialogue

The first two of these require difficult shifts in organizational values and structures. By and large, most educational organizations today are focused more on their own smooth running than on student learning, and this smooth running depends in large measure on keeping practice private and serious talk about practice minimal. Some reformers aim to improve matters quickly by pressing directly for a focus on student learning and/ or the deprivatization of practice, while paying insufficient attention to the rest of the items on the researchers' list. These reformers may insist, for example, on accountability with respect to certain indicators of student learning such as test scores, but neglect the problem of how educators used to working alone and ignoring such indicators might suddenly reverse emphasis. Or they may insist on educators working in teams, but provide no models or coaching. Or they may provide time for educators to meet together for planning, but no norms for planning or frameworks of values to guide it.

We argue that all the elements on the list are crucial, and that efforts to achieve a new and more genuinely accountable workplace for educators must work simultaneously to cultivate them all. We argue

further that a good way to do this is to invest systematically in the development of distributed facilitative leadership. This means working to ensure that there are people throughout the organization who know how to do the following (Schwarz, 1994):

- ✓ Gather colleagues together with a purpose
- ✓ Establish effective ground rules for the gatherings
- ✓ Enforce the ground rules by identifying behaviors consistent and inconsistent with them
- ✓ Enable the colleagues to share information freely with each other
- ✓ Help them attend fully to each other's perspectives
- ✓ Help them make a collective commitment to the choices the group may make

When we use the word facilitator in this book, we mean someone empowered by role or opportunity to do these things. In an educational organization, this someone may be a workshop or task force leader; a member of a teaching team; the principal, dean, or other administrator; the chair of a standing committee; a parent or student leader; or any staff member suddenly called upon on an ad hoc basis to organize others to learn together, improve practice, solve problems, or develop action plans. Of course, the facilitator may also be an outside consultant. However, over time-and partly as a result of the thoughtful use of outside consultants-enough insiders can become good facilitators that outsiders are needed only in special circumstances. This is when the organizations may be said to have developed facilitative leadership.

One of the values of using protocols as learning formats, in our view, is that they can accelerate the development of facilitative leadership, and thus assist in the creation of new workplaces for educators. This is because in some important respects they make the tasks of facilitation more transparent. Of course, facilitators of protocols still have to make many important on-the-job calls: how to strike and keep a balance between comfort and alertness, whether to speed up the pace or slow it down, how to press for honesty but also soften its occasionally hard impact, and so on. On the other hand, they do not have to make many other calls-for example, who talks when and for how long, and even what they talk about. That is because many protocols preset these. Moreover at least as we promote the role and the task facilitators of protocols do not decide the purposes of the learning they facilitate, nor judge its ultimate effects. Our claim that we professional educators need to educate ourselves means especially that these decisions need to be collectively made.

Thus freed from some kinds of decision-making, facilitators of protocols have more energy for making the decisions they must, and for reflecting on the results. Such experience over time can make them good facilitators of other meeting formats besides protocol-based ones, and thus deepen their organization's overall capacity with respect to facilitative leadership.

In the next chapter, we examine more deeply the facilitator's role, and offer practical advice to facilitators-including some protocols they may use to manage some parts of their role. Here we say merely-and in conclusion-that this role may be more powerful than it usually seems; that those good at managing the "process" of educational reform may, in the end, control the fate of its "content"; and that the more an educational organization cultivates people who can play this role well, the healthier it may become.