

Instructional leadership for deep student learning.

Leadership in Focus (16) Summer, 2009, pp. 42-46.

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One of the most peculiar and confounding problems for educational leaders is the existence of fundamentally different views of what great teaching looks like. This is compounded by the fierce conviction of adherents to both views that they are right and their opponents are wrong. We (my wife and co-author) and I had to deal with this issue in the early 1990's. We wrote a book (Caine and Caine, 1994) that had a wide distribution, and that was well received. However, we found ourselves being complemented by people who interpreted the words in radically different ways, who endorsed radically different views of leadership and teaching, and who were using our book in support of their competing views. That included administrators who would use our words to support incompatible programs of professional development.

We have explored this issue for twenty years, both at the level of research and in our work with individual schools and larger programs in the U.S., Australia and elsewhere. This article is a summary of some of our conclusions, with some suggestions for practice. It does not detail our research, though much of that can be found on websites and in books listed in the references.

1. The conflict between instructional approaches misses the point.

In simple terms, there has been a tension between two different modes of instruction for at least 100 years. On the one hand is the top down, delivery model of traditional teaching that I will call direct instruction (DI). On the other hand is the experiential, constructivist, model, propounded in a wide variety of ways and initially associated with Dewey (1997). I will call that the guided experience approach to instruction (GEA). (Although there are many variations of both, I will ignore that for the purposes of this article).

We have spent many years investigating instructional approaches in some depth, both in theory and practice (Caine and Caine, 1997b). Our conclusion is that the apparent conflict and swings of the pendulum misses the point. Rather, there is a continuum of approaches to instruction. On that continuum, each step along the way transcends but includes the one that comes before. From this perspective, traditional, direct instruction is very useful. It is simply less sophisticated than good experiential teaching, which includes but transcends it.

The practical implications are quite profound. It suggests that there is a path of professional development. It is simply not true that all modes of instruction are equally effective, nor that all opinions about good teaching are equally valid. By and large there is a path from novice to expert. There is a way to improve. And there is a direction to follow. That is the path from Direct Instruction to the Guided Experience Approach.

One example stems from the work over a 10 year period of the *Learning to Learn Initiative* in South Australia, wonderfully led by Margot Foster, and with which we have been associated since its inception. They openly advocate a direction of professional development along the lines suggested above, and to which we have contributed (*Learning to Learn* website). They frame the shift, then, in terms of a move towards constructivism.

2. A critical function of educational leaders is to see and set a good path of professional development.

Educational leaders need a vision. One aspect of that vision should include a grasp of what great teaching looks like, and a way to get there. Leaders must see where they are going in order to support the staff in getting there. Clarifying that path, therefore, is a very early step in our work with educational leaders.

One method that we use is compare and contrast videos of different instructional approaches. Much of the time we use excerpts from *Youtube*. (e.g. *Youtube 1*, *Youtube 2*). With those, and other examples, as a background, we explore the conditions that must be met, and the sort of thinking and acting that has to occur, for instruction to move from one mode to the other.

The analysis is detailed and intensive. It calls for a grasp of how people learn, of the sorts of outcomes that occur with different approaches to instruction, of the nature of standards and curricula and how to embed them in experience, of the ways in which authentic assessment and standardized assessment work, and more. We describe all of this in our terms (Caine and Caine, 1997b, Caine and Caine, 2001, Caine et. al., 2008). But similar ideas have been developed by many others and so a great deal of material is available to those who are interested.

The bottom line is that educational leaders develop a better sense of where they are going, even if they do not yet know how to get there.

3. Making the invisibles visible.

As we pondered the question of why people so vehemently advocate apparently competing positions, it gradually became clear to us that their positions and opinions were grounded in a way of thinking that operates at an often invisible, and sometimes inaccessible, level. As Senge (1990) and others have noted, people act in accordance with their mental models of reality, and these are sometimes very

different from the theories that they espouse. We may all profess, for instance, that our teaching is student centered, but it is quite clear that many of those who profess to be student or learner centered are largely teacher centered. We test for this by examining the sorts of decisions that teachers and leaders make, and contrasting them with the sorts of decisions that their students are allowed to make. The more learner-based decisions and choices that are allowed, the more learner centered the teacher is (within some limits, of course).

In the mid 1990's we constructed a questionnaire to unpack the invisibles. We sent it to several hundred teachers, and supplemented the findings with our observations of many teachers and leaders in many schools.

Our conclusion was that many people cannot implement, and do not value, experiential, constructivist teaching and leading because they can not see it! That is why some people simply cannot see the difference between a messy, out-of-control, unproductive classroom and a messy but self-organizing, and very productive classroom.

We framed the differences in terms of perceptual orientations or world views, and we looked at four parameters that leaped out at us from the responses to the questionnaire and our observations.

From power to empowerment: One parameter has to do with the use of power. Students must be adequately empowered for the GEA to succeed. This means, in part, that students must be able to make authentic and significant choices and decisions. And so, of course, should teachers. Sarason (1993) addressed the same issue when he argued that schooling would never change until the issue of power relationships was addressed.

From control to relationship: A second, and related parameter, deals with control. Much of traditional DI calls for a great deal of control over student behavior. Some

of that control must be relinquished for a genuine GEA to occur. But control must be replaced with something else. Those who succeed, it seems to us, have excellent rapport with their students and know how to create moderately self-organizing, moderately self-managing communities within the classroom, even in the lower grades.

From narrow to broad cognitive horizons: Great constructivist, experiential teaching, calls for teachers who have at least two cognitive capacities. One is personal expertise in some domain. Teachers must be able to do more than simply follow a text. They must know their stuff because that knowledge is indispensable for implementing authentic assessment and guiding students who are navigating through material as they work on projects and so on. Another capacity is a grasp of the interconnectedness of concepts, processes and subject areas. Those who are committed to direct instruction, it seems to us, tend to see ideas and subjects as externally existing, individual and unrelated chunks of curriculum. A feeling for and understanding of interconnectedness makes it possible to work with different student interests and across subject areas (such as history and literature or physics and art) and still introduce mandated material in an effective way.

A grasp of process: Process is a complex notion.

- In the first place everything, including student learning, is always in process. Coming to understanding and mastery cannot be predicted though it can be guided. So it is really important to see students as works in progress and to know that their insights and jumps may occur in unexpected ways.
- In the second place, process is analogous to the notion of digestion. Experience must be digested, just as food must be digested. One of the reasons why many activities in schools don't really lead to deep learning is that there is not nearly enough of what we call active processing. This is the art of analyzing, consolidating, exploring, reflecting on, and generally "kneading" experience in order to extract the meaning, insight and skill development that it has to offer.

- In the third place, process deals with personal learning. The teachers who are best equipped to become constructivist educators and implement GEA tend to take the notion of reflective practice to heart. They know that much of their learning needs to be about themselves.

4. Process leadership: The art of helping others to learn from experience

The task of the school leader has now become clearer, albeit more difficult. Here are two components of such leadership that seem to us to be essential.

First, school leaders need a sense of the path from direct instruction to the GEA and constructivist teaching. They need to be able to see it in operation and have a good understanding of how the approaches differ. With this understanding in mind, they are better positioned to set a vision for teachers and a school, make good decisions about the selection and integration of programs of professional development, and see the deep interconnectedness of such issues as attendance, discipline, community, student engagement, and academic results.

Leaders also need to be able to recognize in general terms where a teacher is along that path, and have some tools for helping teachers see where they are and how to progress. There are many ways into the circle, and much of the time the way in needs to be self-selected. However, a leader who is both coach and facilitator needs to have a view of the whole circle.

Second, part of the art of great instructional leadership is the ability to create a good, professional, learning community. Much has been written about professional learning communities (*Educational Leadership*, 2009) and communities of practice (Wenger et. al.). In our view, an essential key is to put relationship back into community. Good community emerges from respectful listening, honest relationship, the capacity to deal with conflict and grasp individual differences, and

more. It is not enough to simply gather together to solve problems or analyze data or practice skills.

Community grounded in good relationship is essential because change is difficult. It helps to be working on development with others who are also in process, but it is vital that the space be safe. A really good community creates that safe space. In addition, good professional development is intellectually rigorous and calls for an increase in skill and expertise. That means that the community must generate and encourage a rigorous analysis of the foundations of the profession (including, for instance, becoming up to date on how people learn). The community must also develop the processes and protocols for what expertise researchers call “deliberate practice” (Ericsson, 2000). It takes a lot of work to become expert.

Looking out, looking in

School leaders have a parallel path of professional development. Some may be constructivists at heart. Others may be totally at home with a command and control approach to teaching and leading. And their own mental models are often invisible to them.

Here lies one of the profound dilemmas for leaders. How do they assess themselves? And even if the assessment is accurate, is it possible for them to lead others to a place that they have not visited themselves?

Sometimes it can be done. For instance 360^o assessment can be used. This means that, in addition to self-assessment, responses about a person are solicited from their subordinates, managers, peers, and others. This provides a very useful broad perspective of how a person functions professionally. In particular, it can reveal whether a leader at least has a world view that contemplates the coexistence of DI and the GEA. Second, many is the administrator who has left a wonderful teacher to his or her own devices, knowing that the teacher is very good without knowing

precisely how that teacher does it. So it is possible. Preferably, however, a school leader will already be constructivist in outlook because it is much easier to see the path looking back than to find it moving forward.

A final comment

The approach to school leadership described above is not easy. But it is essential for the world in which we dwell. The job is to prepare students for the complex world of social networking, Google, floods of information, and more, and that means that direct instruction just won't do the job. An experiential, constructivist, education is indispensable for high quality education. That is how students develop the capacity to sift through mounds of information in a rigorous way, discern complex patterns, work with others, monitor and regulate their own behavior and performance, and generally develop the capacity to deal with change.

And process leadership (or the equivalent under different names and in different guises) is indispensable for generating the shift from direct instruction to the guided experience approach that prepares students for the world that they will inherit.

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Web sites

<http://www.naturallearninginstitute.org>

<http://www.learningtolearn.sa.edu.au/>

Youtube1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-S54bbX6eA&feature=related>

Youtube2 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyfgcE2PCVs>