

“MALPRACTICE” SCENARIO

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Background

Direct experience is the quickest way to erode old paradigms. “*What has been seen, cannot be made to be unseen,*” noted Galileo as he used his telescope to counter old beliefs about the nature of the solar system.

In a similar fashion, today's electronic “telescopes” -- computers and PETscans -- have provided conclusive evidence about the workings of the human mind as it learns that run counter to many of the assumptions upon which society has shaped teaching and schooling. This new knowledge has led many to conclude that knowing what we now know, we simply can no longer do what we now do!

But not everyone's “knowing” is at the same depth. For many of us, our “knowing” is almost a core belief. We have already accepted much of what cognitive sciences increasingly reveal about the human mind, and what the “new” sciences reveal about the connectedness of the universe. For us, these are not hypotheses, but closer to “fact.” And with that knowing comes understanding of the consequences of ignoring those facts. Since many of the most deplored results of today's schools are the consequences of not going with the grain of the brain, we must consider ways to bring others to that same level of “knowing” as quickly as possible.

But how? When we reflect on our own learnings, we recognize that this personal knowledge was not constructed by exposure to new *information* alone (i.e., reading, attending lectures, or watching media presentations.) Rather, we each reached that level through different combinations of *experience* that allowed us to challenge old assumptions and experiment with the consequences of different ones until we were more confident that these were “right” or “true.”

Using that knowledge of our own learning paths to inform us, several members of the *21st Century Learning Initiative* began to explore whether there were any realistic possibilities for catalyzing a major shift in mental models of learning, teaching, and schooling -- paradigms whose roots go deeply into most individual's early family and school experiences. What type of communication experiences could we develop that might help people surface and question their own assumptions and beliefs, expose them to new information about “what we now know,” and encourage realistic consideration of what they must do about it?

We knew this was not a simple communication problem -- “information” was not enough. A short time before we had viewed an ABC Video Special: *Common Miracles: The New American Revolution in Learning*. This well-researched, professionally produced, widely-broadcast material covered it “all.” In four parts, the one-hour video touched on what we all might agree are the important “messages” about learning, teaching, leadership, and community support. For example,

1. The nature, potential, capacity of the human brain, the growth of dendrites through learning; multiple intelligences -- all human beings have this capacity, etc.

2. How this happens in effective classrooms -- how teachers support brain-based learning, ...“treat each child as a surprise,” etc.
3. How schools with effective leaders support good teaching/learning -- the role of school leadership, processes of school-based improvement, “controlled floundering,” apprenticeships, cooperative learning, and parent power.
4. How communities support educational reform. Developing community consensus on a vision of what kids should learn, gift of values, etc.

The tape concludes with Peter Jennings asking a series of critical “why’s:” --

- Why a whole nation doesn't take the risks in policy and practice to do what ABC showed already can be done (“predictable miracles”)?;
- Why can't we stay with good ideas until they work? And
- Why can't we use processes that allow communities to make these changes “theirs?”

Yet, for all its valid content and communication quality, the presentation had no impact. Even ABC had trouble remembering anything about the tape when we called to get a copy.

Better than anything else this tape illustrated for us the nature and scope of the challenge we had taken on. Its essential content by itself was insufficient to produce the nature and scope of learnings required for necessary actions to be taken.

Changing our paradigm

So we decided to shift our own paradigm and start at the “end.” If we were to create a media presentation, what did we want those who engage with it to create in their own minds? Our answers:

- We want to empower people, who feel they are trapped inside systems, with the a sense of the *possible* -- meaningful visions, models that expand expectations of what is possible, and ways to participate in creating them.
- We want to embed persuasive images through simple stories and metaphors that resonate with viewers experiences, and which *challenge* many of their present assumptions.
- We are trying to change beliefs that are not just deep set but which, as mindsets or paradigms, provide invisible frames for the other beliefs and assumptions that support schools' present cultures. To move such powerful beliefs we must have ways to grab and hold attention and concern, and then we must provide hope and support to traverse this new area, so that from that new experience they might develop new, equally powerful beliefs.
- We must find ways to present what we now know about learning, not as something new to be applied in the future, but as something that already *IS*. Our problem was similar to Copernicus'. The real world hasn't changed, only the ways we now view and understand its nature in terms of a core human process that has always been there.

- We must help them understand past “failures” to change the nature and form of schools as the consequences of actions not consistent with what we now see as scientific facts.

If these were the results we wanted, we asked ourselves what form of experience(s) could produce them in a coherent manner. That is, help people surface and question assumptions and beliefs, expose them to new information about “what we now know,” and encourage realistic consideration of what they must do about it?

Our “answer” -- a dramatic presentation (teleplay, film, etc.) about a school system that is sued for malpractice by a group of its parents, and what happens in that community and its schools as a consequence.

“MALPRACTICE”

The premise

We now have a body of knowledge about the brain that, if it related to any other body organ, would drive related medical practice. Practitioners would be compelled to use it, not just because of the obviously better results, but the consequences or risks of not using it would be more obvious. An example might be present day treatment of ulcers which have only recently been found to be caused by bacteria rather than stomach acid. If this available knowledge weren't used, and patients continued to receive antacids instead of antibiotics the organization's customers could sue it for malpractice.

In the two-part initial scenario outline below, we suggest how the trial would provide a setting at a focal point of community stakeholders' interests -- their children's and community's survival. Also, how the trial's action and interaction could allow viewers to identify with one or more characters or groups so that they are carried through the story as involved participants not just passive observers. In the second part we return to the community five years later to see the consequences of a community acting on what they learned from the trial.

The general outline of the drama

Part 1

- At the beginning we see a variety of the traditional experiences that children have in school. Their parents had them, too, and they have become accepted as the way schools are *supposed to be*. We also see the ways students have always reacted to them that we have also accepted as “natural.”
- We also are introduced to a small group of parents through the interaction they have with their children, about school. For instance, “what did you do in school today?”
- We begin to follow these parents as they become aware of the “new knowledge” through exposure in the popular press (news magazine's, TV.) Because of the simple, clear ways the media present information about what's really happening in children's minds, and

what the mind's potentials are, they begin to relate this to their own experiences as learners in schools and outside them; and wonder why they see so little attention paid to it in their children's schools.

- When they begin to question teachers or their principals about why they are not taking advantage of the mind's natural programming, or actually are going against it, they hear a variety of responses. But once they get by the first defensiveness there is an underlying theme. We know we "should," but we "can't."

The principles make sense to teachers and administrators, too. And many of them are validated by their own experiences when they have had the time to work with individual children. In fact, a lot of the "reforms" they have been trying to make in schools for over thirty years have usually focused on one of those principles. But of course those reforms didn't last.

- The parents begin to look for why they "can't." ... who to "blame" ...who can "fix" it. But they can't seem to find that one person or place in the system that could create specific changes that would impact their children.

- Their frustration mounts as they hear policymakers, researchers, etc. point to changes in the future, or changes outside the schools-- e.g., teacher training, different policies, increased funding, etc. Or they hear angry proposals to wipe out the whole system of public education and start over. And they are encouraged by these advocates to give up on public schools and start their own where they could make sure it's done "right."

In considering those alternatives, they continually come back to *their* criterion for changes -- their children, now, and in their schools. From what they had picked up from the popularized cognitive research they realize that some windows of learning opportunity or development seemingly just come by once-- (optimum times for certain skills or capacities)-- so they begin to see that there can be consequences for not acting on this "new knowledge," and they don't want those consequences for their children.

- Finally, one of them gives up and attempts to review what they've learned.

"Why are we spending so much of our time on this... because its our children. But we're taxpayers, why should we have to figure this out? They are supposed to be doing that. How can we make them?"

"Our children have specific learning needs and styles that are not being responded to appropriately. Would we send them to a hospital that didn't treat them in terms of their individual characteristics? No! Would we send them to a hospital that didn't use what science told them has a better chance of working. No! It would be malpractice."

"Hey, Let's sue them for malpractice!"

- During the trial itself, we want the audience to be pulled back and forth by the arguments of each side. Like listening to *Fiddler's Tevya* "...on the one hand... but on the other,..." we want every strong point the plaintiff's make to be countered by a seemingly rational defense based upon what most people think schools are about, and can do.

- We also want viewers to recall some of their own memories of their personal learning experiences during school years and after in their business or home lives; and to use these as "data" to judge the validity of what they are seeing and hearing.

- We want them to realize that some of their own beliefs about the nature of schooling and teaching may have reflected what they are hearing the defendants saying about why they “can’t” act on this “new information.”

- The plaintiffs call expert witnesses who present generally irrefutable evidence or findings about learning that suggest a necessity for different or earlier interventions. They build a sound case that the audience can’t help but agree with, especially as the dialogue helps them recall their own or their children’s learning. This was the way it was for them, and in some cases still is.

- The school’s defense includes...

“We only did what expected...;

“The ways we do it had worked for “them” (the adults of the present generation) and therefore “knew” it could be effective (but under questioning, “only for some”);

“Where was the proof that they caused “harm” - how can you prove that harm can be a projection of a potential not achieved?”

“And anyway, even if research is valid, the real problem doesn’t start on our watch. It would have to start sooner. Parents would really have to be the child’s first teacher, and be held accountable for it.”

- At one point, when they feel they may be losing the case, the plaintiffs call back a local businessman known to be an effective leader who had come up through the community’s schools, and as a taxpayer was satisfied with them (at least compared to all those others he hears about in the media,) and who had testified for the schools.

Their questioning focuses on his *assumptions* -- first those that underlie the ways he organizes and conducts the work of his own successful business, and then those he holds about organizing and conducting the work of schools. Apparently they don’t match. Why?

This line of questioning is repeated with a local doctor using the hospital as an analogy. Why are all the processes, roles and relationships in that work setting created from a fundamental belief that each person must be responded to in terms of their individual differences? Why not in schools?

- When the schools try to point out that education is a “state” function and they have to follow the rules and policies, the plaintiffs bring in someone from the state education department who points out that they are not the ones responsible. Their “job” is to set standards, and provide ways to test students to see whether they meet them. Further, if these test scores show that schools don’t improve, they will “take them over.” Under cross-examination, he is asked about what the state would do differently after a “takeover” that the school’s aren’t already doing? And if they actually know, why aren’t they helping those schools do that now?

- To help clarify why there seems to be discrepancies in the assumptions so many adults hold about the ways organizations work, we find a way to introduce some of the most easily understood findings from the “New Sciences.” (Wouldn’t it be interesting if a hostile lawyer called Meg Wheatley to the stand in his attempt to prove how “New Wave-y” all this is, and she explained these concepts so simply that they resonated with experiences most of the viewers have had throughout their lives?)

- Someone suggests that these findings from the “new Sciences” are as revolutionary as the findings about learning from the cognitive sciences, and like them are so “recent” that we as a society haven’t had a chance to deal with them as if they were true, with consequences if ignored. Someone suggests that for the moment they assume they were true, and use them as a lens to look at some of the “bad” things we see happening today in most organizations, not just schools.

- We also hear, and have sympathy for, a lot of caring practitioners --teachers and administrators -- who are obviously trying as hard as they can everyday, -- but they seem to be swimming upstream against a current they can’t identify except its “the system.”

The first part of this "story" is designed to engage the minds of those with the energy to drive future change. These are primarily those with most to gain in the present. These include:

- Parents with children in or about to be in schools,

- Practitioners who “know” the “truth” but have either given up on ever getting the support to act on it or have pulled in their fences to just do what they can do with what they have, and

- People in leadership positions who have been looking for, or have launched, school “reform” efforts oriented towards the same general goals.

- Policymakers who are on-the-line and feeling the pressure to “do something!”

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- We want them to leave this experience “knowing” that something has to be done-- *no choice!* The “data” can’t be ignored. But also recognizing that whatever is done can’t be accomplished by schools alone, or parents alone. The assumptions and beliefs are so pervasive that it will take a community-- *learning together* -- to do it.

Part 2

In the second part

- We want viewers to recognize the dimensions of a strategy for coming up with a solution that will make sense for their schools, community...and in particular, their children.

- One of the “*ah-ha*’s” we want to lead them to is that the same learning principles they want the schools structured around can be applied to their own minds in this community learning problem. In fact, if they want to affect all of their children, it is the only way to shortcut the generally “top-down” processes suggested by reformers and policymakers.

In the end we want them to believe as we do that **“*knowing what we now know, we simply can no longer do what we now do!*”**

The second part draws from the scenario -- ReWeaving a Community By Learning Together-- that was included as an attachment to the AASA *Connecting Leadership and Learning* strategy paper. (To provide an idea of the story line, it is attached here in its original form, and has not yet been adapted to fit with the Part 1 narrative.)

It is now several years later, and a reporter visits this community and school district undertaking to erode old, constraining mental models from the *inside-out* using knowledge developed from their own experiences in support of children's learning.

We can see the structure that the people of the community have developed to support school and community transformation as part of the way it conducts the business of schooling. We also see the effective integration of effective *learning*-based instruction at school and in the home . (We would use tape shot at actual schools today to make the point that this is not "futuristic.")

The reporter traces the history that led to this, and takes us back to what happened after the malpractice trial. For example:

- Something must be done, everyone agreed, and the depth and scope of the necessary changes required a total commitment and approach. The school district would have to work as a single unit -- a team committed to changing itself. The community would have to understand how it, too, could work more systemically in support of its children and families.
- Many of the working group's suggestions were accepted, and *the community* committed itself to a *community*-based strategy -- Learning about Learning. A total community recognizes that, for their own children's survival, they must learn about *learning*, act on those learnings, and learn again. (see *ReWeaving a Community By Learning Together* for rest of the story.)

Bringing the story to life

The above provides a skeleton around which we must begin to add flesh. To put that meat on these bones will require an initial development meeting of a small group that would be representative of the varying viewpoints that come together in the dramatic presentation. Here we will begin to flesh out the scenario through a combination of role playing and brainstorming. The roles represented at the session would include, at a minimum:

- a lawyer with a courtroom background,
- someone[s] with background in cognitive science and its applications to learning and teaching,
- someone[s] with background in the "new sciences" and their applications to purposeful organizations such as schools,
- a school system leader who has had to balance community and school interests,
- teachers' union person,
- a parent advocate,
- and of course a skilled dramatic writer.

We propose to seek funding for this project in two phases. First will be for this small planning meeting. We feel the product of that meeting will make it a lot easier to develop funding for the full production.

If this idea intrigues you, and you have thoughts about potential sources of funding, please let me hear from you.

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