> **The document below -** <u>The *Common Sense* of Common Practice</u> **was developed as part of the following conversation with [Seymour Sarason](#) in 1999 about our mutual *Why should it be so hard…?* frustration.**

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January 8, 1999

Seymour:

Before we meet in New Orleans I want to use the opportunity to share a frustration that has dominated my life the last several years. I'll try to present, on the following pages, the core of that frustration, and will apologize ahead of time if it's not clear because part of my frustration comes from not being able to communicate to others what *now* seems so "obvious" to me.

I know society locks up people who think of themselves as some historical figure, but sometimes I can't help but feel as *Copernicus* must have. He "saw" the world in a way that could make sense of the problems and paradoxes in the calendar, navigation, etc. that others just accepted as *the way things are.* And he couldn't convince those who most needed that information. In fact he wrote to Pope Paul III in 1543:

> *"… it is as though an artist were to gather the hands, feet, head and other members for his images from diverse models, each part excellently drawn, but not related to a single body, and since they in no way match each other, the result would be a monster rather than a man."*

Sounds like schools, doesn't it? (And most other organizations, too!)

I'm sure you've experienced similar frustration and have found, as I have, that just "communicating harder" (e.g., more and better writing -and in my case videos) doesn't get to the essence of the problem. So my frustration-relieving attempts have led me upstream to seek answers to the question: *Why should it be so hard to "see" what is before us?*

And that "us" includes my "heroes" - those whose views of the world opened up my mind to what I previously had not perceived. For example, much of John Goodlad's influence on the past several decades of planned educational change grew from his view that the *school building* is the "fundamental unit of change." Yet the failure to <u>sustain</u> building-based changes over those same decades strongly suggests that he may have been wrong.

Even you, Seymour, have noted paradoxes in the way we run schools, but have struggled with finding a wider lens that might explain them. You stated these most clearly in <u>*The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform:* Can We Change Course Before Its Too Late?</u> where you pointed out how much trouble we have "seeing" the *system* and then the *people* who <u>are</u> that system.

(The *system*)

"When you read the myriad of recommendations these commission reports contain, it becomes clear that they are not informed by any conception of a system. That is a charitable assessment.

. . . The reasons are many, not the least of which is that we are not used to or comfortable with thinking in terms of systems. It is a difficult and humbling way of thinking because you quickly come to see the complexity you are trying to understand and how little you know about how its parts transact with each other. . .

Having read scads of commission reports, I can only conclude that they rest on the invalid assumption that school systems are unique systems . . . those outside the system with responsibility for articulating a program for reform have nothing resembling a holistic conception of the system they seek to influence."

(The *people*)

"(The) trap into which almost all educational reformers, no less the public generally have fallen . . (is) the assumption, indeed it is one of those unverbalized axioms, that schools do and should exist primarily for students . . .

If questioning that assumption seems strange, it is testimony to the strength of what is now a self-defeating tradition . . .

The basis for my challenge to the unreflective belief that schools do and should exist primarily for children is that, for our schools to do better than they do, we have to give up the belief that it is possible to create the conditions for productive learning when those <u>conditions do not exist for educational personnel</u>."

But to return to my *Copernican* delusions, I've found that by pursuing my frustrations upstream to their root causes I've ended up in the same place that he did. We have met the enemy, and it is *common sense.*

Below, I've tried to explain what I mean by this. I'd appreciate hearing whether you think I should check in to a mental hospital.

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<u>The *Common Sense* of Common Practice</u>

Society's frustration grows today because of schools apparent inability to bridge the gap between *theory* and *practice*. <u>Theory</u>: what we know now about how *learning* actually takes place and, as a consequence, how *teaching* can support it; and <u>practice</u>: what we actually *do* in schooling. That frustration will continue to grow, until we recognize that another more powerful form of "theory" -- thought of as *common sense* -- makes it practically impossible to act effectively on what we now know.

How can "common sense" be a barrier to understanding? Isn't common sense what people seem to instinctively know (and therefore seldom think or talk about)? Isn't it a body of knowledge developed from our experiences of things that work? Or *seem* to work?

Well, there is a category of theory that the dictionary calls "common sense realism," "natural realism," or "naive realism." These are *"theories that the world is perceived exactly as it is.* We see it, and therefore believe it. Observable experience tells us it's so. The earth looks flat, it must be. The sun appears to move around the earth, therefore the earth must be at the center. When teaching young children these are termed "naive theories," and we expect a child to hold them until taught otherwise.

But for adults, on the other hand, the "teaching" (or unlearning) task is much harder because the roots of "common sense realism" go much deeper and have become entwined with other observable conditions that we "saw" because we believed. Cognitive science has provided new terms - "mental models," "paradigms" - to confirm the old belief that our minds program themselves by a self-fulfilling cycle of *"seeing what we believe and believing what we then see."*

So with adults, as we know from *Copernicus'* and *Galileo's* unfortunate experiences, alternative explanations for *why* things happen have a difficult time breaking through what people think they "know" because they observed it. Usually there is no real pressure on them to change their view. For example, before *Copernicus,* work could still be done, people could get from here to there even if they believed the earth was flat and also the center of the universe. They may not have accomplished their tasks as effectively as they could have, but they still could use their "common sense" to get much of the work done. The only ones who would have had to take the new theory seriously would have been those whose task accomplishment required it. For example, had NASA existed then -- using "common-sense"-based pre-*Copernican* maps -- they could do everything "right." They could have the best trained astronauts and the latest equipment, but would seldom get where they intended to go.

This condition is just as true today, as Peter Drucker recently noted:

> *"Today, all over the world, previously successful organizations are facing a "what to do" dilemma. They find themselves "stagnating and frustrated, in trouble and, often, in a seemingly unmanageable crisis." And it happens just as often in public sector organizations as businesses.*

"The root cause of nearly every one of these crises is not that things are being done poorly. It is not even that the wrong things are being done. Indeed, in most cases, the right things are being done -- but fruitlessly.

What accounts for this apparent paradox? The assumptions on which the organization has been built and is being run no longer fit reality. These are the assumptions that shape any organization's behavior, dictate its decisions about what to do and what not to do, and define what the organization considers meaningful results. ...They are what I call a company's theory of the business."

..."what underlies the current malaise of so many large and successful organizations worldwide is that their theory of the business no longer works. ...Whenever a big organization gets into trouble--and especially if it has been successful for many years-- people blame sluggishness, complacency, arrogance, mammoth bureaucracies. A plausible explanation? Yes. But rarely the relevant or correct one."

That schools today also find themselves "stagnating and frustrated, in trouble and, often, in a seemingly unmanageable crisis" can be traced directly to education's "common sense" -- the assumptions that shape its behavior, dictate its decisions about what to do and what not to do, and define what it considers meaningful results. And unfortunately this "theory of the business" derives from a hollow base of *common sense realism* . It is a theory based upon what we "see" when we look at classrooms and schools, and then the "common sense" that we create from those observations. For example:

First, we see a single teacher acting in an isolated classroom setting and conclude that what we see happening is the *teaching process*. The <u>teaching process</u> is what we see the <u>teacher</u> doing. The person and the process are the same.

Then we leave the classroom, and "see" that the classroom interactions of teaching and learning take place in a school *building* -- a manageable "system" created with the expectation that it can support and sustain that teacher's management of those interactions. It appears as if

the building and the system that influences the quality of teaching and learning are the same. We conclude that the building must be the sustainable container for the *teaching* process.

As a consequence of accepting the building as "the system," we believe that *systemic change* must be directed at creating more strong, *self-contained* units like this. When we do, we have changed the "system."

It also seems like common sense to hold the two individuals we've observed accountable -- a teacher accountable for the outcomes of a complex teaching process, and a principal accountable for the system of related support that is expected to meet the unique teaching needs of each teacher. We then provide rewards and punishments based upon those expectations. And when teachers and principals suggest that they are being held accountable for outcomes they don't totally "control," we blame them for being "defensive."

This is one of those paradigm paradoxes that plague schools. Just as the earth looks flat and it seems that the sun revolves around the earth, when you look into classrooms it does seem that teachers "cause" learning. And when you look at school's it seems obvious that "all" a teacher might need to cause learning can be found there. (In one-room schoolhouse days, a teacher was the whole school.)

But do teachers *cause* learning? Do building principal's *cause* teaching? Do acorns *cause* oak trees?

No! Acorns, teachers, and principals are each critically necessary, but not sufficient, contributors to the final result. In each case, the other influences must come from the *environment* -- the immediate system of influences on the teacher/tree and the developing seed/learner.

But because of our "common sense theories" we have trouble "seeing" the actual scope and nature of that immediate environment. It seems to make sense that the "immediate "system of influences is the school building because of it's physical proximity to the classroom. Yet we continually fail to sustain effective changes in that environment when building leadership changes, or to spread (or scale-up) that effective model to other buildings in its own district. Our common sense answer (since our minds are pre-programmed for sense-making, they must create

connections between effects and their "causes") is that the *problem* is out there -- outside the "system" -- in the school district.

That conclusion, unfortunately, keeps us from recognizing (1) the scope and nature of the school district "tree" as the smallest bounded unit that can support and sustain the system's required processes; and (2) that within that system, those *processes* are the acts of interdependent people. In American education, the school district is the "container" that can, and must, frame that interdependence.

Missing that understanding, we continue to confuse individuals with the interdependent acts of individuals -- the processes. And look what happens when we believe what we see -- the *teacher-as-cause-of-learning,* and the *school building as-cause-of teaching*:

• Only one teaching role -- making information accessible -- receives systematic and systemic support. Insufficient resources exist to support what we now know as more critical dimensions of the teaching process not involved in the presentation of information. This puts all *constructivist* instructional strategies at risk.

• If we want to hold someone accountable for the quality of *teaching's* results, it must be the teacher. Yet student learning is the product of a process with critical interrelated and interdependent elements for which only the "system" really can be held accountable.

• Conversely, the school system is held accountable -- through its hiring and supervisory practices -- for the quality of the individual teacher. Yet this is a process of continual growth and development for which only the individual teacher can be ultimately accountable.

• That accountability model then is carried through to the classroom where teacher's are accountable for a process - learning - that is housed in and controlled by the learner.

• Comparatively little effort can be devoted to providing tools and fixing processes that could support teachers' complex classroom roles, and which would then allow them to grow into these roles as part of work regardless of their initial competencies. Because these types of school

system actions are not *direct* services to children, they are not seen as priorities for schools funds.

• To "fix" teaching, you must "fix" teachers! Teacher-fixing becomes the major thrust of never-ending staff development activities because it must be repeated every time a "fixed" teacher or staff member moves to another responsibility. To fix (or change) schools) you must plug in a new principal, and then when she or he leaves, start over again. When a school system has troubles, change the superintendent.

A very current example of the pervasiveness of this "common sense" problem can be found on the front page of the February 3, 1999 <u>EdWeek</u>. An article titled *Teaching Partnership Regroups To Define Mission and Survive* describes the troubles of a $23 million dollar US Department of Education contract to create a <u>National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching</u>. With a goal of "generating new knowledge about "teaching," and then mobilizing policymakers and educators to use it," they find themselves "struggling to define (their) mission and defend (their) very existence."

The root of their "troubles" is apparent (to me.) When one looks at the three core strands of their research aimed at "the improvement of <u>teaching</u>" -- *Teacher Preparation and Recruitment, Professional Development and Induction,* and *Standards & Assessment* -- they all are directed at the improvement of <u>teachers</u>. (Another victim of *common sense realism!)*

For my own sanity, I find *metaphors* help me break through the filters masking what I see in schools so I can recognize that I already have a base of common sense that seems to work in other settings. For example, teacher's roles managing the critical interactions at the end of a process called teaching are similar to those of physicians managing the process called *curing*. (*Curing*, like teaching, is a person-centered, diagnostic-prescriptive, problem-eliminating process. On the other hand, *Healing*, like learning, takes place within the patient, and to a great extent is influenced positively and negatively by his/her own actions.)

In simpler times (and even now when healing requirements are minor) doctors played out their roles in a self-contained office. Now, however, they work more effectively and efficiently

because support elements of the interactive patient-centered process are provided by the fundamental infrastructure of the hospital or other group setting in which they work.

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I could go on, Seymour... but I won't. This much has provided an outlet for some of my frustration and I appreciate your reading it. I realize however that I'm being driven not just by the frustration of *Copernicus*, who only provided a different worldview map, but of a *NASA* that realizes we have sufficient knowledge, people, and technologies to actually get where we want to go. But without the "map" of reality, people can't *see* how it "makes sense."

My recent experiences with the Charter Schools *Scaffolding* process strategy I developed has only increased this frustration. (I think I sent you an early draft - <u>Scaffolding Sustained School System Change</u>.)

Maybe R.D. Laing captured my "problem" in fewer words when he wrote:

<center><u>*Noticing*</u></center>

> *The range of what we think and do*
> *is limited by what we fail to notice.*
> *And because we fail to notice*
> *that we fail to notice*
> *there is little we can do*
> *to change*
> *until we notice*
> *how failing to notice*
> *shapes our thoughts and deeds.*

Where's your damn Martian, now that I need him?