

[NOTE: This is from the original, and thus longer, draft of an article --“**Putting Unions and Management Out of Business**” in the December 99 *School Administrator* -- *Forecasting the Future: What’s Ahead for Public School? 16 Experts weigh in*]

“PUTTING UNIONS AND MANAGEMENT OUT OF BUSINESS”

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Putting themselves out of business

As they lifted their glasses in a mutual toast, the former directors of AASA and the combined NEA/AFT thought back to a similar meeting some 10 years before in 1999. Little did they know then that what started out as idle conversation at a conference reception would lead to the end of their organizations as they had known them, and would open up a vital new channel for widespread, sustainable educational change that none of the reformers at that time could have imagined.

That 1999 meeting had been called by some group (the two of them had jokingly called them the “paradigm people”) concerned with the educational implications of new knowledge about the inner workings of people and organizations. As AASA’s own journal noted at the time:

“We learn that quantum physics is changing its old theory base to one of connectivity and relationships to all matter and other sciences. In this era of chaos theory we realized that systemic change is our best path. Everything is tied to something else.”[John Hoyle School Administrator, 6/99]

This wasn’t all new information for either of them, but having to sit through meetings about it was part of the price one paid for working at the national level. At least they could serve as buffers for their members whose daily responsibilities for kids in the “old paradigm” didn’t provide time to muse and schmooze about future ones.

Somehow their 1999 conversation got around to the daily plight of their respective members in their “different worlds.” This, too, was not new knowledge for either of them, but after a while they began to notice how many times they were responding with “us, too!” A lot more seemed to be the same in their two worlds than different. And these were not just manifestations, at different levels, of the common conditions enveloping schools at that time. It seemed that something larger was going on. It was almost as if their "worlds" were undergoing profound, and similar, "paradigm" shifts.

For instance:

- In each world, those at the "tops" -- superintendents in the world of the district, teachers in the world of the classroom -- were being told by theorists to “empower” those *in* their system . And they were criticized as “controlling” or “power-hungry” when they didn’t.

Those at the “tops” were asked to *trust* that the empowered had the will and capacity to use that “power.” To trust that those at the "bottoms" [teachers, for the superintendent; students, for the teachers] had the innate motivation to do a good, steadily improving job -- continually building their own capacities by learning from their daily experiences.

Unfortunately, at that earlier time, this base of trust was understandably missing. Since neither teachers nor students had been seen and supported as *co-producers* of results -- and therefore sharing in accountability for them-- there had been few opportunities for them to be experienced as *trustworthy*.

As a consequence, those at the "bottoms" in both “systems” spent lots of their time "fighting the system" that asked them for continual proof that they were doing the job that they were intrinsically “programmed” to do.

- Moreover, each -- as leader of a *work* system, -- was being asked to "let go" of “old, controlling” ways of working before they had alternative ways to address all the requirements of that work for which they were still accountable. Driven by a personal need to “make a difference” and an organizational responsibility for “results,” each was controlling/commanding a “system” whose “results” reflected on them. Both their personal image and organizational accountability were linked to their actions.

- And to compound this already complex situation, teachers had to navigate in both worlds. In one they were the *controller*, the *manager*, the *leader*; in the other they were the *controlled*, the *managed*, the *led*.

- Both were hired for what they already knew, and were expected to “deliver” it effectively to the unknowing. Learning *from* the job was not an expectation built into either of their roles. If it happened, it happened on their own time.

“The new paradigm is coming, the new paradigm is coming....”

As they thought back to that chance conversation 10 years ago, they could see now how recognizing these common conditions helped them understand a little better what was happening out there where their members worked. But at that time, like the rest of this “paradigm stuff,” there was not much they felt they could do about it, except hold meetings, publish books, and act like *Henny-Penny* running through barnyards shouting “the new paradigm is coming, the new paradigm is coming....”

At which point someone sitting near them at the bar -- apparently a "*paradigm person*" -- leaned over and asked them "But what if it were true?"

"What if what were true?" they asked her.

"Well, you've been talking about your two separate worlds as if they were parallel universes. What if they were the same... just one world that you've been trying to understand and manage as two?"

"What if that single system were already there but you couldn't see it -- a situation sort of like the people in the centuries before Copernicus who couldn't see the true scope and nature of the solar system? They believed what they saw, and then tried to come up with theories that made sense of them."

"What I've just heard you complaining about sound to me like conditions that can't be solved within the --if you'll pardon the expression, -- 'paradigm' within which you've placed them."

Both of them tried to look like they understood, but blank expressions in their eyes gave them away.

"Look, I can tell from the way you've used words such as "vision," and "tops" & "bottoms" that you are caught in a paradigm you're not even questioning. And you really should. For example, the way you've been tossing around the term "vision" suggests that you see it as a map of the future. Of course that's needed, but unless you also have a map that accurately portrays the territory from which everyone starts and takes each step of your journey, you're going to have trouble getting there."

"And it's at that front end where you seem to be having your problem. Your unquestioned paradigm seems to be a school district organizational chart shaped like a pyramid. What if that hierarchical pyramid did not exist, except in your minds?"

"Yes, for centuries, our whole society has been caught up in a self-fulfilling loop as we've translated that mental picture of a pyramid to paper, called it an organizational chart, and then created roles and relationships that fit within that sort of framework. This then became the map on which we tried to plan solutions to organizational problems -- problems that at their roots were caused by the "unnatural" nature of those same roles and relationships.

Map or Territory?

"But what if that map was not the territory? What if that triangular frame for understanding how to organize the work of people in pursuit of common purposes did not represent the territory your members actually experienced each day?"

Noticing their questioning looks, she hesitated, then continued,

“Consider this:

- If a school district organization were a pyramid with teachers at its “bottom,” then teachers would not be faced with the conflicting knowledge that it is *their* continual interaction with the individual student that most influences the quality of the entire system’s efforts. Hasn’t much union development been the consequence of others ignoring this continual teacher experience? ”

- If a school district organization were a pyramid with superintendent’s at the “top” they would be able to control what they command. Their visions for creating quality learning opportunities for both *each* and *all* children in their districts would be accepted and followed. But from what you’ve been saying, they seem to be hired for their visions, and then fired about 2.7 years later because the “system” they *think* is there doesn’t respond the way it is supposed to -- if in fact it were a “pyramid.”

Interesting isn’t it that people who sought these leadership jobs because of a commitment to making more of a difference in the learning of more children find they are just as powerless to “control” the quality of this pyramid’s ‘results’ as when they were teachers?”

That seemed to get the response she wanted, as both leaders asked--”Well if we’re not working in, or with, a ‘pyramid’ ...what’s really there? What does this “single” system look like?”

Seeing the system that’s already there

“Don’t worry too much about its shape right now...that’s not really important, she replied. It might be more useful to use some familiar metaphors to understand its characteristics. The old *Blind Men and the Elephant* parable is a good one for understanding how fruitless and frustrating it is to be doing your best and still not having any systemic effects. Remember how at the end -- “*Though each was partly in the right, they all were in the wrong!*” One of the things that story suggests is that in a living system, like an elephant, the shape of the system’s skin or outer boundary helps define it, and enables those who deal with its parts to understand their “fit.”

But elephants are more than their skin. That’s just the ‘container’ for all the parts that contribute to its survival so it can do what elephants are supposed to do. Let’s call all that connected inside stuff the ‘nature’ of an elephant. To think about the nature of your system, I’m going to switch metaphors on you.

After overhearing your gripes about your member’s working conditions, I think the old problem of dealing with either the *Forest or the Trees* might actually be a more suitable analogy. One of you represents individuals who are personally accountable for the survival of

the “forest.” The other, individuals who are accountable for the survival of individual “trees.” And from what I’ve overheard so far you don’t seem to have a ‘paradigm’ that allows you to see how those the two responsibilities are directly connected -- especially how much your members need each other if either is to be effective.

The union leader smiled. “Maybe that’s why the *Saving Starfish*” metaphor has become so popular today with teachers. You know, where someone sees a person running along a shore tossing starfish back in the ocean one-by-one and tells him that “It won’t make a difference.” To which the person responds -- “Yes, but it will for *this* one!”

“It’s sad though,” the AASA leader chimed in, “I just realized that our view of the beach hasn’t let us see that we’re losing starfish-savers , too -- no one is saving the starfish-savers. The work teachers must do with *all* of the individual children can’t be done unless their accountability for the “saving” results is shared by the rest of us in the system.”

“*Shared Accountability*...hey, this is getting to be fun,” the union leader responded. “It reminds me of another metaphor. Whenever there seems to have been widespread and sustained changes in an entire school system [and that’s not often], someone usually notes that the superintendent and the union president were “in bed together.” Could it be that sustained changes were possible because those two create and manage the connecting relationships between the ‘forest’ of all the children’s needs and the individual needs of the ‘trees’?”

“You may be on to something,” the woman interjected, “in organizations like yours where people work separately for common goals they say - *Relationships Rule*. It sounds like you’ve identified who, in your system, rules the relationships. That could be a critical learning for your system’s ultimate survival and, I might suggest, the survival of your two organizations. When the effectiveness of the whole system is a function of the nature and quality of those relationships, then the industrial era practices of dealing with management and labor as disconnected, frequently adversarial components produces what, in living system’s, would be called an “*auto-immune disease*.” Parts of a body attack each other, and eventually contribute to the destruction of the whole.”

Maybe the drinks were wearing off, but suddenly the two national leaders began to forget about the limitations of their “Henny-Penny” roles. “Okay, maybe you’re right that we’re not using a lens that lets us see the actual scope and nature of the ‘elephant’ we’re already riding. But what can we do about it?”...“And now...” the other quickly added.

Seeing is believing

“Actually, it’s simple,” she responded. “To ‘see’ or define, your system you only really need to know two things. (1) What is its scope or boundary -- you know, the “skin of the elephant” within which all the critical interactions necessary for survival take place. And (2)

what is at its center. What is the central reference point for defining all of its relationships and interactions?”

“And that’s all there is to it?” they remembered asking.

“Yes, I told you it was simple.... at least, if you’re only concerned about map-making.

But unfortunately, it will leave you with the same dilemma Copernicus had. You’ll have a better picture of the actual “system” and its relationships, but you’ll have to convince people whose daily observation of that same system seem to deny it. [It still does seem as if the sun goes around the earth, doesn’t it?]

It might make your job easier if you forget about convincing anyone of the truth of what you may find. Focus instead on helping them act as if it were true.

You, and others, will begin to see and understand a “system” you may not yet be able to draw on paper, but which for the first time makes sense to you individually and organizationally. You’ll have a better sense of *why* things happen, *who* or *what* seems to be involved,... but not necessarily what to do about it.”

“That’s nice,” one leader responded, “but we, and our members, are hired and paid for already knowing what to do, and we still don’t quite understand that part of it.”

“I know.. and there is a critical piece I’m purposefully leaving out. It’s for you to discover once your new understanding of the system you already have convinces you that you can no longer continue to do what you now do. Unless, of course, you want the consequences.””

What did we do?

It didn’t make much sense back then in 1999, but now in 2009 they could see the wisdom of that strategy. What they had learned since then was now fully tested by their experiences, and led them to where they stood -- drinking a toast to the end of their two organizations as they had been known. Of course, they noted, even if they could have foreseen *that* it wouldn’t have made much sense either.

When they returned from the “paradigm meeting” the two leaders met a few more times over lunch, and then decided to bring together a small group of people with a common concern for children and schools, but with varying perspectives on each. To themselves, they jokingly called them “the Blind Men” who worked around the elephant. Similarly, they saw their charge as finding the scope and nature of a sustainable elephant within which could be met the learning needs of each and every child in a community.

What did we see?

It had seemed to make sense to start with the boundaries of the system: the “skin of the elephant” within which all the critical interactions necessary for survival took place. But they quickly discovered that although everyone talked “systemic,” few agreed on what the system was in which permanent changes could be embedded. Arguments over whether it was the classroom, school building, district or state continued until someone thought about Copernicus’ experience. There the perceived boundary of the solar system changed when the sun rather than the earth was accepted as its center. The boundary of a system seemed to be influenced by the system’s centerpoint -- the reference point from which all system relationships are defined.

So they decided to find the center -- the fundamental purpose that gives the system called “schooling” its meaning, serves as the point from which to understand and define its internal relationships, and which ultimately determines its viable boundary or scope.

“Boy, we had a lot of baggage to let go of there,” one recalled. “But we were lucky. At that same time new research on learning and the working of children’s brains was leaving academia and becoming public knowledge. Parents and policy makers began to demand that we act on it. This “pressure” eventually helped us realize that the true ‘center’ of our system was not a classroom, or a school. It was a child’s *mind*. Here was something with certain common characteristics and capacities that could be developed, and assessed, in terms of continually improving *capacities*. Sort of like the ways we think about and develop a person’s physical capacities. Just as the lung’s purpose is to breath, the brain’s business is to *learn*.”

“Yes, I remember telling one of the business members of our group to think about our “product” as a bundle of capacities that comes to us partially assembled, and with batteries included that drive an installed-at-the-factory learning engine with the capacity to run itself. I think he got it.”

From the inside out

So now, at the center, with a better picture of what our system was supposed to do, we turned to finding the “elephant” that could sustain the development of those capacities. Here we had two more surprises.

The ‘container’ that could sustain most of the critical interactions necessary to develop those individual capacities was a *school system*. Up to that time most major reform efforts were designed to either get the district out of the schools or the schools out of the district.

Then we made one final discovery about our system map -- the time frame it portrayed. At first we were frustrated because some of our best teacher and administrator members wouldn’t participate. They said they didn’t have *time* for this sort of thing. Get back to them, they said, when we could tell them *what to do about it on Monday*. That’s where their accountabilities connected them and they couldn’t “let go.”

Even some of the parents and business leaders resisted. They wanted simple, quick changes. In their roles they directly interacted with children growing up today. Their opportunities for making a difference in those children's lives were *now* -- not tomorrow, after the educational "system" changes. "Vouchers" and "Charter Schools" dealt with now; school improvement processes seemed to focus on changes for tomorrow.

It took us awhile, but we finally got the message that had been there all along. For practitioners, parents and policy makers there is only "Monday!" It's their "kids," right *now*. Wherever a future vision is "supposed to" take them, the trip has to start where they are... on "Monday." It was clear, our "paradigm" had to provide a map of a territory that made sense for children in 1999's schools, as well as those of the 21st Century.

Believing is Seeing

Now the wisdom of our 1999 bar companion's advice became evident as people began to explore present "relationships" and "roles" through this different lens. What they began to perceive "made sense" in terms of the visible problems they dealt with, even though at that time they might not have known what to do about it.

As she had anticipated, once we all began to believe what we were now seeing, we could no longer justify continuing to do what we had been doing.

Now with a more believable picture of the "lay of the land," we began to see exciting possibilities for connecting already existing resources to the daily interactions of students and teachers. Even though this removed the old crutch of waiting for new resources before starting changes, tapping these available resources wasn't going to be easy. We would be fighting a resisting culture.

But once more, we were "fortunate" in our timing because a new pressure for changing schools *as a total system* appeared on the scene.

Change it all ..and do it now."

The need to use this lens to find ways to support more immediate, total change received unknowing political support from a group we always thought had unreasonable expectations for us -- CEO's in both the private sector, state and local government. Like other's at the time they often had a diagnosis for what was wrong with schools and a prescription for what should be done about it. But something was different when they called for "systemic change."

There was a particular consistency in the "answers" being called for by these corporate and political CEOs. It seemed to come from their unique experiential perspective -- as *system* leaders they were accountable for the *individual actions* and *total results* of a complete, connected work system. They knew from experience that system thinking and planning was not enough.

Effective results required an organization able to act as a system. These system leaders, each in his or her own way, was saying:

“Change it all [i.e., the whole school system and its parts], do it all at the same time...and do it now.”

But unlike their own work systems, they lacked a map of how “everything connects to everything else.” They could “see” education’s “parts,” but couldn’t make sense of how they interconnected to form the system that was producing the results they were seeing. Because of this fuzzy map, the seemingly-logical, linear process of piecemeal changes produced mainly frustration and then blame. Soon it began to appear that there might be only one truly *systemic* process that met all three of their criteria for changing an entire system quickly -- destroy it.

No Choice!

Now, with external pressure to do the unthinkable, and internal pressure to think in new ways about doing it, we found ourselves with *no choice*. And it’s remarkable what can be done when all your old “answers” don’t seem to fit.

We went back to our map to seek a different answer -- a way to continually increase the effectiveness of schools’ daily interactions with children, *and at the same time* develop those schools capacities to continue those improvements. We knew that whatever we would come up with had to meet these internal and external criteria.

To be accepted, integrated and sustained it:

- Must focus on needs of children presently in schools
- Must not require resources that draw services away from these children.
- Must be part of everyday school operations, not an add-on
- Must engage and interact with present classroom, building, and district operations [work] by providing a “safe” way to question practices, purposes, and eventually assumptions and beliefs; and from there try new approaches, learn from what doesn’t work well, and try again.
- Must enable curriculum design and delivery to be interactive, continuous and developmental, by anchoring it in classroom experiences, and then providing the means for the tacit learnings from classroom experience to be translated into explicit new knowledge for the system to apply to its own continual growth and survival.
- Must allow the need for solutions for current problems to serve as the “drivers” for training, professional development, and use of new technologies. And these processes

must provide learning scaffolds to support the continued professional and personal growth of those involved.

- Must sustain the *district* as the unit-of-change; and provide a continual knowledge base that allows those changes to be developmental.

How could we do all that? The old “Pyramid” still stood in the way. Even if it no longer seemed adequate as a way of understanding organizations of humans at work, it couldn’t just be dropped. It provided *structure* the human mind requires in its continual search for purpose and meaning.

Part of the “reality” we now had to deal with was that the organizational pyramid was embedded too deeply in the “programming” of our minds to be eradicated by continuing to “fight” it. Anyway, from what we knew about that same “programming,” its replacement had to be re-constructed from experience. It had to be built from the inside-out as people developed new beliefs and assumptions *from* their daily experiences. People had to act *as if* the parts of the system were interdependent even if their experiences had seemed to deny it.

Scaffolding Systemic Change

We started our own search for a way to begin by again seeking helpful metaphors -- this time related to “structures.” We found that doctors and architects had known something about structures that psychologists were finding also true in their work. Structures -- whether internal like a skeleton, or external like a frame -- hold things together *functionally*.

In a system [by definition, a function of its relationships,] you can’t take away any of the functional structure without providing something to take care of its interdependent relationships, even temporarily. That’s why architects and engineers put an external structure -- a “scaffold” - - around a building so work can go on within it, and doctors provide internal “bypass” mechanisms or processes to ensure that the *whole* system keeps functioning while they’re working on one part. What cognitive science added to this fundamental requirement for support while new development takes place is the idea of “scaffolding” for learning. This is the type of teaching support that gradually fades away as the learner gains competence and confidence in his/her own knowledge and skills.

This metaphor and concept seemed to make sense. We needed figure out how to help districts create an infrastructure “scaffold” over the present work of schools that could directly improve the ways school practitioners meet the learning needs of *today's* school children *and* at the same time directly improve the school system’s capacity to support today's and tomorrow’s teachers. And to meet our other criteria it could not draw human resources away from direct services to children.

Changing it all from the inside out

We went back to our map to look at the resources and relationships that had been there all along, but never seemed to “fit” into the total process of making a daily difference for children. Outside of schools we found many practical, “Monday”-type, hands-on processes and tools that had proven their value in business and industry. Seldom had they seemed practical for schools however because of assumptions about the nature of the “work” that went on there.

But the most important resources we “found” weren’t from outside the system at all. Inside, we had two rich pools of human resources that had not been able to contribute their experience and expertise to directly support daily learning and teaching. In fact, they were frequently bypassed because they were considered to be the “enemies” of effective changes. These were the staffs of the *central office* and the *unions*. Remember when “Hi, I’m from the central office [or union] and I’m here to help....” always produced an “Oh yeah...” chuckle?

We had to find a functional way to redeploy the time and resources of central office and union staffs, and align them in support of the teaching process as a whole, not just the isolated individual teacher at the critical interactive end of the process? They would need to be held accountable for a *capacity-building scaffold* that “fit” over and involved the daily work of everyone in a school system and community whose actions were intended to “make a difference” in the learning lives of children.

But they all had full-time jobs. In light of those present responsibilities, what need could override and drive such a fundamental change in roles?

Here is where our “elephant” strategy of involving other organizations in exploring the scope and nature of our system paid off.

The missing process

We had been using our “new map” with a group of CEO’s in healthcare, social services and the private sector. Suddenly one of them shouted “Hey, there’s something missing here! I’ve never thought much about it...but I think I just understood why I was so turned off by school but thought that it was something wrong with me...the school was just the way it was supposed to be.”

As we listened to him, and leaders from organizations outside of education joined in, we were taken by surprise by the picture they presented. When we send a children to any other institution for support in their healthy growth and development, each child is assumed to be similar in some ways, ...but *different*.

And in those other institutions there is a standard process -- missing in schools -- for identifying and continually monitoring the effects of the organization on those differences. For

example, in hospitals universal acceptance of everyone's "sameness" in the ways they are internally organized and function enables the work of medical practitioners to focus on and respond to the "differences." A base of common knowledge like this -- universally accepted as fact, not theory -- is a hidden assumption underlying the organization's core processes.

With the facts of the body's nature serving as the starting point from which to identify "differences," the medical practitioners' work -- "treatment" -- has at its core a mandatory requirement for becoming, and continually remaining, *aware* of those differences, *responding* to them appropriately, and then *continually* repeating that cycle. This fundamental self-correcting process of interactive diagnosis and prescription [e.g., "Take two aspirin and call me in the morning"] grounds *all* medical practice. This *informed interaction* has become such an invisible "given" in the equation that it is just assumed. One wouldn't go to a hospital that treated everyone the same.

The Moments-of-Truth

At that point, one of the business members reminded us that this core interactive process is not just found in hospitals. *All* effective organizations today are structured and managed around the same simple, common sense, continual learning process regardless of whether they provide services or products. The process consists of two elements:

1. A core work process that is by nature *responsive* to the needs and requirements of the client, customer, or product. In that process, *informed interaction* between the "worker" and the object of the work engages the human mind's natural trial and error way of solving problems and achieving purposes. At the "end" of that process, the "quality of results" -- the match between intentions and outcomes, between needs and results -- is directly dependent upon the frequency of that interaction and its appropriateness. And "appropriateness" is shaped by the *knowledge* that informs it.

2. An organization in which every function supports the *response-ability* of the core interaction. That is, continually *informing the interaction* between caring workers and the "outcome." The organization's flow of information informs that interaction, and time and tools are provided to support the process's *interactivity*.

It was easy to see why industry calls those critical interactions at the "results" end the "*moment-of-truth*" -- the choices made by the "last person in the line" that fulfill or diminish all those decisions from "above" that went before. Medicine, as they had noted, calls this type of informed interaction -- sound "*diagnostic/prescriptive*" health care. In education, it's always been known as the essence of "*good teaching*." But in education it has always been assumed that the teacher had to do the whole job alone.

Schools, as opposed to other human response services, are not organized to support those “*moments-of-truth*” as if they were in fact a core requirement of the teaching process. But now with what neurobiology and cognitive science had added to our knowledge of the workings of a child’s mind, we no longer had that choice. We now had - just like hospitals - a common picture of the ways children’s minds are the same. We only lacked the ways to stay focused and act on the differences.

System thinking and system acting

These insights gave us the unique compelling reason needed to drive scaffolding development in every school district. Its unique value was the capacity it offered each teacher to respond more appropriately to each child’s learning needs. Regardless of their personal experience, expertise and training they would have timely access to critical information about that child, and collaborative support for understanding and then acting on it.

Now, ten years later, we could understand how our different way of “seeing” [they still weren’t ready to call it a “paradigm”] had impacted their beliefs and assumptions.

They were able to start with an “assumption” missing from most other “systemic” [or wholesale] reform agendas: From the beginning they believed it is possible to effectively impact the “retail” fundamental interactions between teachers and individual children at a scale that can make a difference for *all* children in a school system. Instead of starting with the hope of “someday” influencing that core process, they had an approach that started there.

Critical for the setting of priorities, it was seen as an operational process, not an improvement process. It provided an organizational operating strategy to directly affect the ways school practitioners meet the learning needs of *today's* school children *and* at the same time, directly improve the school system that supports *today's* and tomorrow’s teachers.

By redeploying the time and resources of central office and union staffs, it created a *capacity-building scaffold* that “fit over” the teaching process as a whole, not just the isolated individual teacher at the critical interactive end of the process. It involved the daily work of everyone in a school system and community whose actions were intended to “make a difference” in the learning lives of children.

Just as many world-class organizations in the 90’s had figured out ways to hard-wire the process of adaptation and reinvention into their corporate cultures and take what began as a one-time revolutions and make them ongoing, this strategy similarly involved a process for “hard-wiring” a “trial and error” process of adaptation and reinvention into the on-going ways schools do their work at all levels of a school system.

This had made it possible for school districts to support teachers' responsiveness to *individual* children's needs in the same ways that hospitals, regardless of other issues, align and sustain the processes that support its core work of responding to individual needs. The public had known, and accepted without question for hospitals, that the individuality of the "customer" requires that the core of all services must derive from an interactive, diagnostic/prescriptive process that attempts to match treatment to need. The "scaffolding" infrastructure provided that capacity for schools.

And most important for 1999, it was both results- focused and content-free. School systems had to navigate through an inseparable local and state political, economic, social environment. This provided a functional way for them to separate their support for the fundamental diagnostic-prescriptive work of teaching and learning from the ebb and flow of the larger wholesale issues that must occupy policy makers.

Back to the future

Here in 2009 they could see now that this scaffolding process linked -- in real time -- the work processes of a school system's many *communities-of-practice* into a single *community-of-interest* -- a school district that could both plan and act to support the knowledge work of its "workers" and "customers." Because it dealt with *power-tapping*, as opposed to *power-shifting*, they had created an *out-of-the-box* solution that drew its strengths from what was already in the box. They could see now that they had made it possible for school districts to become learning organizations by first developing their capacity to be an organization of learners.

They were going to continue reflecting on how much they had learned from that process over the past decade, but were interrupted by the beginning of the meeting that had brought them back together -- the new national initiative. When it had been announced they knew they had safely made it across the edge of the new century. The "map of the territory" where the other end of the bridge to the future was now embedded had begun to change because of what could now be seen.

Communities around schools now had begun to "see"...and then *believe*...that they were, in fact, the "system" -- their children's first, and continuing teacher. And now they were beginning to act on it.
