interview/ with ANDY HARGREAVES

Broader purpose calls for higher understanding

Teachers who are intellectually able can help bring everyone into the knowledge economy

BY DENNIS SPARKS

JSD: The ideas you express about professional development in Teaching in the Knowledge Society: Education in the Age of Insecurity (Open University Press, 2003) are closely linked to your views about the broader purposes of public education and the nature of teaching. In this book, you argue that to function in a knowledge society and knowledge economy, students must have deep understanding, be creative and ingenious in their approaches to problem solving, be able to function in teams as well as independently, and care about others so that they can make meaningful contributions to the public good as well as to their own welfare.

Likewise, you want teachers to pursue deep and continuous professional learning, regularly exercise professional judgment, work in networks and teams, establish sustaining relationships with students and other teachers, draw on research and make decisions based on shared data, engage in “respectful and sometimes spirited disagreement and debate about the best ways to do things,” experience creativity and flexibility in their work, and view teaching as a life-shaping, world-changing social mission.

Hargreaves: A fundamental issue we have to address is whether we are serious about all young people having the kind of learning that enables them to participate at the highest levels of the knowledge economy. It’s a matter upon which this country’s economic future depends.

The first challenge is whether we want deep learning and creativity for all our students, not just for those from the most affluent and privileged environments. Then there has to be consistency between what we want for students and what we want for teachers. If we want high-level, deep learning for students we have to have high-
ly skilled and intellectually able teachers. That means attracting, developing, and retaining teachers who have those qualities and giving them the working conditions that inspire them and offer them a chance to soar.

I’ve worked in countries that have had 10 to 15 years of experience with standards and standardization in education and who are now saying it has been overdone. Countries including the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand are now retreating from standardization, testing, inspection, and evaluation. They are not abandoning standards, but are recognizing that the standardization agenda is reducing creativity and flexibility among teachers. Teachers are complying with scripts that are preset for them and feel constrained in helping their students do their best learning.

This does not mean teachers can teach anything they like, nor that they be given a carte blanche to respond to their students in any way they wish. The idea of standards is important. The most important issues concern what children should be learning, how they learn best, and how we develop the teaching that produces it. The best answers are not standardized, prescribed, or inflexible. They are ones that communities of teachers drawing on the research evidence and on each other’s experience develop and continually review over time.

Teaching is not only about being with students in classrooms. It also has a much larger social mission because schools are the only institutions in our society through which everyone passes. Schools create future generations. That means teachers must see themselves as intellectuals who possess a public purpose and a social mission.

TEACHERS NEED TO TALK

JSD: Some observers would claim

Andy Hargreaves
that that is an unrealistically high expectation given the challenges of attracting and retaining outstanding teachers, particularly in hard-to-staff schools serving impoverished communities.

Hargreaves: Schools with those qualities already exist in some places. However, they are often isolated and temporary in nature. In work we have done with the Spencer Foundation looking at educational change over 30 years in the United States and Canada, we found that in the past when schools were smaller and reform demands were not so great, there was more interaction and sense of community. That community, however, was largely focused around social connection and talk about teaching rather than serious discussions about student learning.

Teachers today are busier, so they seldom have time to talk informally in the ways they once did. And the conversations they do have are not deep enough and sufficiently powerful to adjust to differences in learning in the increasingly diverse student populations for whom we hold much higher expectations. Professional learning communities are trying to amend this absence by bringing teachers together to talk about how they can improve the learning of all students as they challenge and question each other’s practice in spirited but optimistic ways.

LEARNING COMMUNITY

JSD: You say that creating learning communities means paying attention to relationships as well as to academics. “Teaching is not only an intellectual or cognitive practice of conveying knowledge or developing skills among students. ... Teaching is also and always an emotional practice of engagement with learning, relationships with students and adults, and attachment to the purposes and the work that teaching achieves” (p. 117). I’m curious about what you are learning about how schools create communities that are both intellectually demanding and caring places in which to work and learn.

Hargreaves: There’s a great deal of discussion at the moment about professional learning communities. Some of the most popular writing describes teams of teachers looking at data and other evidence as a means to improve practice and student learning. While that’s important, it creates the impression that a professional learning community is simply a collection of teams.

Our work has demonstrated that a professional learning community is an ethos that infuses every single aspect of a school’s operation. When a school becomes a professional learning community, everything in the school looks different than it did before ...”

ANDY HARGREAVES

POSITION: Andy Hargreaves is the Thomas More Brennan Chair in Education at Boston College. The Chair, renamed after the donors’ son who died on the 104th floor of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, is to promote social justice and connect theory and practice in public education.

EDUCATION: Hargreaves received his doctorate in sociology from the University of Leeds in England. He has a bachelor of arts degree in sociology from the University of Sheffield and a postgraduate certificate in education from Sheffield City College of Education.

PROFESSIONAL HISTORY: He was a primary school teacher and taught at several universities, including Oxford in England. Hargreaves then moved to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Canada in 1987, where he co-founded and directed the International Center for Educational Change until his move to Boston in 2002.

PUBLICATIONS: He has published more than 20 books in education, including Changing Teachers, Changing Times, which received the 1995 Outstanding Writing Award from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education; the What’s Worth Fighting For series with Michael Fullan, and his most recent, Teaching in the Knowledge Society: Education in the Age of Insecurity. He is the initiating editor of the International Handbook of Educational Change and editor in chief of the Journal of Educational Change. He currently is writing a book on the emotions of teaching.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Among his many awards, Hargreaves has received the 2000 Whitworth Award for outstanding contributions to educational research in Canada, a writing residency in Bellagio, Italy, with the Rockefeller Foundation, and visiting professorships and fellowships in Spain, Norway, England, Hong Kong, Canada, and Japan. He speaks and consults widely in America and across the world, and his work is available in many languages.

PERSONAL: Hargreaves has been married for 30 years to Pauline Hargreaves, a school administrator in Boston. They have two children, Stuart, 25, who currently is studying law, and Lucy, 24, an environmentalist working with UNESCO in Asia.

TO CONTINUE: this conversation with Andy Hargreaves, contact him at Lynch School of Education, Boston College, 140 Commonwealth Ave., Campion Hall, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467-3813, (617) 552-0680, fax (617) 552-6989, e-mail: hargrean@bc.edu.
as learning opportunities rather than a chance to find fault and place blame.

While professional learning communities can be difficult and challenging, they also inspire. Within them, teachers give endless effort to tasks such as curriculum development and data analysis. But because learning begets learning, teachers are energized by these activities rather than drained.

**PROFESSIONAL APARTHEID**

**JSD:** You maintain in *Teaching in the Knowledge Society* that misguided policies are creating “a system of professional development apartheid where the rich and successful will enjoy the privilege of professional learning community, while most of the poor and unsuccessful are subject to sectarian performance training ...” (p. 7). You go on to say that such training is based on prescription, compliance, and low-level learning.

**Hargreaves:** This term crystallizes a huge looming danger. Professional learning communities thrive best in more affluent communities where there is stronger teacher capacity and more resources and support in the system. These schools are already meeting prescribed standards in large part because of the social backgrounds of their students. In these schools, teachers are free to move beyond the standards.

In schools where many teachers are unqualified and where social and financial resources are lacking, school districts often prescribe a curriculum and give teachers of lower capacity a strong supportive structure of texts, materials, training, and coaching. On the face of it, it appears to be a perfect combination of what Michael Fullan calls pressure and support.

This begs the question, though, about which forms of pressure and support are most effective. Some well-known literacy programs raise basic standards, narrow the achievement gap, and bring about a shift in teachers’ belief systems about the capacity of their students to learn. This approach is beneficial if we see it as a floor upon which other development can be added. The problem is that it is often the ceiling. It is viewed as the end of development, not as its beginning.

It’s not that teachers won’t like this approach. The risk is that many will prefer it because it takes away the difficulty and responsibility of exercising their own discretion, and they will become dependent on an external system in which professional judgment is exercised by others.

I use the term performance training sects to describe such prescribed approaches because they meet a number of the classic defining criteria of religious sects — the view that their originators have a monopoly on truth, the presence of a kind of group-think based on total allegiance and compliance, and a belief that learning is a serious business and hard work, not a pleasurable, expressive activity, among others.

I fear having two kinds of professional learning in schools. Within the professional learning communities provided in affluent schools, students are developing knowledge economy and society skills. Students in poorer communities, on the other hand, will develop only the basics of achievement as their teachers follow the bouncing ball of the script in karaoke fashion — doing better perhaps than they might have done before — but still lacking sophisticated capacities and the deeper learning necessary for success in the knowledge economy. As a result, these students will cater to those who are successful in the knowledge economy by working for them in hotels, spas, and other service industries. We could be building a world of those who will create and those who will cater, and who will do what will depend on where they went to school. That is my worry.

**TEMPER VIEW OF RESEARCH**

**JSD:** To continue with this theme, you wrote that “even for the best teachers, changing successfully is hard intellectual work. ... Learning to teach better, to be a continuously improving professional, involves more than implementing other people’s ideas and agendas compliantly” (p. 108). You are emphasizing both the intellectual nature of teachers’ work and the importance of professional judgment, both of which are often absent in professional development.

You also express strong concerns about teachers’ dependence on and submission to “allegedly incontrovertible scientific research” (p. 181).

**Hargreaves:** I come from England, where the professional culture was for many years based on a craft view of teaching in which teachers know best and researchers know little. Research was disparaged as irrelevant and esoteric with no relevance to the classroom. In moving to America, I found the opposite problem in which there’s a tendency not only to respect but to revere research and researchers, to give them too much of their due, and not to challenge them enough from the wisdom of practice. Both of these extremes are undesirable.

The challenge is to bring the wisdom of practice into critical dialogue with the wisdom of research provided by both large-scale studies that include samples across large numbers of schools and by small-scale research generated in schools and districts based on their own students and teachers. The most intelligent way forward is to have thoughtful conversations based on all the knowledge we have available applied to determine what works best with our own students. All research is important, but its effective use requires critical
engagement rather than slavish dependency.

**LET MONITORING WAIT**

**JSDF: You write, “Professional learning communities are hard to create. They presume and demand qualities of leadership and levels of teacher capacity that are not always available, especially in schools in poor communities with long legacies of failure and helplessness” (p. 204). I’d like to know more about your views of the type of leadership that’s required to create such communities and how that leadership can be developed, particularly in settings where helplessness and hopelessness are dominant feelings.**

**Hargreaves:** I believe we need to create a more developmental view about how we move schools out of failure and keep them there over time. Two years ago, I worked with four state education agencies and their education commissioners to review their policies regarding failing schools. What was clear was that the systems they currently had — which included appointing highly skilled educators to work in these schools and replacing the principal — could temporarily bring schools out of failure, but that within a couple of years the schools were falling back because no attention was given to building long-term capacity.

When we think about schools developmentally, we realize that the strategies that get a school out of failure may not be the same strategies that keep the improvement going over time. A principal who gets a school out of failure, for instance, may not be the principal who can help the school grow over time by building trust, community, and collaboration among staff members.

So, the first thing that’s necessary is a clear, developmental model of the different stages that improving schools move through. Second, it’s important to recognize that this effort can’t rest solely on the shoulders of one person but will require the participation of many people over time. This means developing leadership capacity among staff and community members instead of placing it solely on the shoulders of one heroic or charismatic individual.

Another thing to rethink is the commonsense wisdom of the moment that says that if a school fails, the answer is intrusion and inspection. Schools that are continually inspected find it harder to attract outstanding teachers and leaders who will find themselves constantly under the eyes of watchdogs and always in fear of their jobs and their futures. These same individuals could just as easily go to an affluent community where no such restraints exist.

Paradoxically, if we want to bring really good people into our poorest communities and keep them there, we must provide opportunities to innovate and experiment so that we tap teachers’ and students’ deepest motivations to learn. When we think about schools developmentally, we realize that the strategies that get a school out of failure may not be the same strategies that keep the improvement going over time. A principal who gets a school out of failure, for instance, may not be the principal who can help the school grow over time by building trust, community, and collaboration among staff members.

**RE-ESTABLISH TRUST TO SUCCEED**

**JSDF:** “Our schools, teachers, and students need massive injections of social ingenuity and the courage to reactivate their educational integrity,” you write in *Teaching in the Knowledge Society* (p. 207). Those qualities often seem in short supply, not only in schools, but also in social institutions generally.

**Hargreaves:** One of the greatest issues in our society is the collapse of trust in institutions. A primary reason for this collapse is a decreased sense of community caused by people spending less face-to-face time with each other. As communities have become stretched, we’ve replaced community accountability through a shared culture — that is, the things we believe and the standards we agree upon — with contracts defined and imposed by outsiders. While such contracts can have value, when they diminish trust within communities, they lead to a sad and empty life.

Trust has been replaced with written performance standards, standardized tests, managerial supervision, and government requirements and legislation. Today there’s massive distrust of schools, of the education profession, and of the ability of poor communities to improve. The consequence, as Tony Bryk’s work in Chicago demonstrates clearly and persuasively, is that this distrust is a major barrier to quality teaching and student learning.

While it’s fine to be serious about standards, let’s make certain every teacher and student has a genuine opportunity to participate at the highest levels of the knowledge economy. Ultimately, that means trusting in people, committing resources to develop teachers’ capacity, and sustaining dialogue with the research community and other vital parts of the education community.