



TO TACKLE NEW
PROBLEMS,
WE'RE
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TO
NEED
NEW
SOLUTIONS

By Robert Davidovich

More and more, the educators I work with recognize that schools will need to become different, not just better, to help students meet the challenges of the future. These educators are trying to respond to an imperative to innovate as well as improve. The depth of change required to move from creating improvement to

fostering innovation is great. District leaders have found that a change in perspective about professional learning can help their schools shift the focus from improvement to innovation. The good news is that a similar shift already happening in our daily lives can guide us all. A synergistic combination of three concepts — information, identity, and networked relationships — is reshaping how things get done today. A better understanding of the dynamics created by these concepts can have a profound impact on transforming professional learning and, as a result, student achievement.

EVOLUTION OF NEEDS

Many educators I speak with understand that the Industrial Age model of schooling is not well-suited to today's challenges. The model's intent was to prepare students for a very structured work environment that didn't necessarily call for independent thinking or complex behavior. Today's workplaces and employers value people with abilities to solve complex problems, adapt their learning to untested situations, and collaborate productively with others. This need creates an increasing sense of urgency to transform our current design of schooling to better meet 21st-century demands. As we consider how to nurture these characteristics in students, shouldn't we also expect our system to foster the same for its professionals?

Across the country, districts are trying new education approaches to help students be better prepared. These are thoughtful, well-intended attempts to respond to the challenges all schools face. Some of them will make a difference for some students. However, the aim of transformation and innovation is not just to do something new. Pockets of new things will not change the fundamental thinking at the root of our system. The true outcome of transformation and innovation is to build the capacity to do things in new ways — the capacity for ongoing, adaptive change.

THE CHALLENGE

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) describe two categories of challenges that leaders face: technical problems and adaptive challenges. To solve technical problems, people apply current knowledge to develop solutions. In schools, for example, educators may look to apply what are termed "best practices." In these circumstances, educators attempt to understand and then apply someone's current knowledge to their specific context or challenge. In reporting on recent allocations of the Investing in Innovation grants, McNeil (2010) states that the "U.S. Department of Education decided to invest heavily in big-name teacher-training and school turnaround organizations" (p.1). Initiatives based on a belief that a proven procedure exists and that others can learn to apply that procedure are approaching a situation as a technical problem.

Adaptive challenges are those where someone learns or creates a new strategy for solving the problem. For these challenges, people have to create the knowledge for how to solve them while they are working on them. For example, if we want to assess students' abilities to exercise sound reasoning in an authentic performance that requires syn-

thesizing learning across disciplines, there may be no expert available to tell us how to do it — we need to figure it out as we go. Transforming our design of schooling from the Industrial Age model to one suited for 21st-century needs creates challenges without proven solutions. This means many of the challenges schools face today are adaptive challenges.

Adaptive challenges open the door to transformation. To solve them, tried-and-true approaches must give way to new, untested approaches. Understanding the differences between technical problems and adaptive challenges is critical for today's leaders. As Heifetz and Linsky (2002) warn, "The single most common source of leadership failure we've been able to identify — in politics, community life, business, or the nonprofit sector — is that people, especially those in positions of authority, treat adaptive challenges like technical problems" (p.14).

In the past, our schools relied on school district leaders to create meaning for the changes in our world and then to develop action plans and drive implementation down the organization. This approach will not help educators address adaptive challenges. To face adaptive challenges, all educators in a school or district will need to be alert to the need for responsive change and to fully internalize the context of a school system's work with students so that they can address the challenges in front of them. Then they will be responsible for helping the whole system learn what they have learned. Addressing adaptive challenges is the role that professional learning must fill in our schools. It is the best hope we have for transformation.

How does this shift in thinking happen? Education leaders can begin by understanding the combination of information, identity, and networked relationships driving the world today. The abundance of these elements is causing a global shift from leader-centric organizations to idea-centric organizations. The potential for the future of professional learning is to understand this shift and use it to the advantage of adult and student learning.

INFORMATION, IDENTITY, NETWORKED RELATIONSHIPS

Thanks to continuing advances in technology, infor-



A combination of three concepts — information, identity, and networked relationships — is reshaping how things get done, says education consultant Robert Davidovich.

mation is available in abundant amounts and widely accessible. Information is power — once people have access to it, they are free to make informed decisions in their best interests. People use this information to assist with all kinds of personal decisions and enhance relationships. Personal access to unfiltered information is having a profound impact on how things get done, from socializing to entertainment to instant access to news to shopping to learning to political upheaval.

People process information through their identity or sense of self. They notice and connect with information that supports who they are: the music they like, the causes they champion, their pets and hobbies, and every other facet of their lives. In this age, who we are is increasingly defined by our interests and the associations we make because of them. Our identity is enhanced by the information we access.

The combination of information, shared identity, and networked relationships has become the most potent form of organizing in the world today.

Because of technology, people have the ability to form broad networks with others who are like-minded. In the past, neighborhoods often defined our identity. Today, our identity defines whom we connect with — we find our “neighbors” by sharing common concerns with others across the globe. People find information of importance to them, react to it, share it with others, and act collectively. They form relationships around information as they participate in social networks such as Twitter and Facebook and through user-created content such as blogs and wikis. Technology gives people the ability to form relationships with like-minded people all over the world.

The combination of information, shared identity, and networked relationships has become the most potent form of organizing in the world today. This combination fuels open-source collaboration, political action, and disaster relief efforts, and can also help to keep public figures honest, create overnight business successes or failures, and fuel terror networks. The world organizes more around ideas than it does around formal leaders. As evidence of this paradigm shift, consider that our country is involved in an ongoing war, not against countries but against ideology. Or consider that much recent political fervor comes from essentially leaderless, networked, grassroots efforts such as the Tea Party movement or MoveOn.org.

Creating the conditions for professional learning to focus on adaptive challenges is making a difference for student learning in the schools where I work. There, leaders have begun to foster innovation by leveraging the power of information, identity, and networked relationships to their advantage. Following are three shifts that they are making to create this leverage.

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CHALLENGES

To shift professional learning toward addressing adaptive challenges:

1. People need more unfiltered information as soon as it is available and less groomed information disseminated on a need-to-know basis.

In the past, those at the top of an organization shaped and processed information before they passed it along on a need-to-know basis. To meet today’s challenges, leaders are working to increase the information flowing through their organization. Additionally, they are trusting people to process raw forms of information of all types — information about student learning, trends that affect what students will need to learn for the future, and impending economic difficulties. They create the expectation that all educators, not just those at the top of the organization, interact with information to determine its meaning in reference to the context of their shared purpose. They find that when information flows more freely through their school or district, many eyes and ears interact with it and everyone involved creates new perspectives. From that, educators generate new understanding about what the information means for accomplishing shared goals.

2. People need more context information and fewer directives.

Educators create and understand their organizational identity when they work within a context of well-articulated, commonly shared purposes and principles. Leaders in the districts I work with are diligent in ensuring that the identity of their district or school lives in the hearts and minds of people, rather than just being posted on a wall. Just like online communities, these schools’ identities are creating the context for processing information to solve adaptive challenges.

Transformation comes when people work together to address challenges and share their learning in the process. These leaders find that people are more committed and more inclined to do meaningful work when they understand a clear context and have the latitude to learn and make decisions within that context. We never know where the next great innovation will come from, but it is far more likely to come from people freed to do meaningful work within a commonly shared purpose than it is from a mandate or directive.

3. People need more opportunities to network across boundaries with those who share their interests and fewer structured, formal meetings.

The vision for professional learning must encourage conditions where networks of relationships can form around common interests. Leaders who support transformational approaches encourage networks that do more than just share practice; they encourage networks that create the next teaching and learning innovations. Creating rigid structures to organize all of a school’s work efforts is helpful for consistency and for maintaining the status quo, but such rigidity extinguishes innovation. Transformational leaders provide people with the flexibility to

interact with others and organize around their strengths. They allow people the freedom to take on new challenges and projects they feel passionate about. They also give people from all over their school the chance to interact with others they might otherwise never talk to, creating the potential for new sparks of innovation in every interaction. These leaders are finding that people can often self-organize into more highly productive relationships with a greater sense of commitment to outcomes than the work teams they try to orchestrate.

Forces within and beyond our schools are creating expectations for transformation to encourage 21st-century learners. To meet such expectations, we first need to create the conditions that compel professionals to become 21st-century learners themselves. Aligning our thinking about professional learning to create an understanding of forces that are changing our daily lives will help schools foster innovation as well as improvement.

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developers?" In many ways, the experience reinforced what we already knew about best practices in staff development. Knowing your audience, incorporating hands-on activities that engage the adult learner, using modeling and coaching, and translating theory into practice will continue to be critical elements in our work with all educators. As part of our professional growth, we also gained an understanding of being culturally responsive. It is not enough to be aware of cultural differences; we need to embrace those differences to become change agents. In Bhutan, it was incumbent upon us to facilitate the process of "Bhutanizing" American special education practices and processes. We recognized the importance of planning with the input of key stakeholders as well as the need for trust and buy-in from key decision makers. We also affirmed that, as staff developers, we could provide valuable technical assistance and information. Ultimately, however, we must assist any audience to adapt these concepts to their own cultural context. Throughout our experience, we reinforced our belief that cultural differences exist in all environments; they are not exclusive to different countries. They reveal themselves school to school and classroom to classroom.

What we learned professionally was important; however, the experience also changed us personally. Like their American counterparts, Bhutanese teachers are passionate about and dedicated to their craft. However, the Bhutanese teachers we worked with had an inner peacefulness and calm that we often do not see in America. We left Bhutan with a renewed commitment to re-establish balance in our own lives. Given our fast-paced American society and our multifaceted roles in life, we need to remember to slow down. By listening more effectively and being more present in the moment, we believe we will be more sensitive to our audiences' needs, more focused in

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Lessons from Bhutan

our presentations, and overall, more effective staff developers.

In this age of Race to the Top accountability, we want to share this thought from the Bhutanese Minister of Education: As a nation, we need to have high expectations for all children, but we should never forget the soul of the child. For the four professional development specialists from the U.S., this was our "aha" moment.

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