

“LEAVE ME ALONE SO I CAN TEACH BETTER”: COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE AS THE FOUNDATION TO GREAT TEACHING

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RESUMEN:

Un paradigma alternativo para la organización de las instituciones educativas y la práctica docente, el cual no se ha divulgado suficientemente, se explora aquí con el fin de comprender lo que significa enseñar siguiendo este enfoque. En oposición al paradigma dominante, que define a los docentes como artistas solitarios, este nuevo enfoque ubica la actividad docente dentro de una *comunidad* que requiere coordinación y cooperación. Asumiendo este postulado como idea central, lo que le permite a una institución educativa alcanzar la excelencia es la conciencia de unidad, coordinación, colaboración en cuanto se refiere a las mejores prácticas educativas, ordenamiento de valores en torno al servicio al estudiante, y la comprensión de su misión en cuanto a convertirse en ejemplo para otros educadores e instituciones. Teniendo en cuenta que el concepto de “comunidad en la práctica” ha sido explorado a fondo por el sector de los negocios y la academia, se estableció que aquello que hace a una empresa resistente al fracaso y productiva, es su habilidad para aprender y divulgar el conocimiento; es decir: aprendizaje organizacional y transferencia del conocimiento. ¿Qué determina un servicio efectivo al estudiante? Las unidades exitosas discutieron entre los miembros los problemas inmediatos mientras que los menos exitosos manejaron sus dificultades individualmente. La noción básica de este enfoque es que la grandeza de una organización es más que una sumatoria de desempeños individuales. Una comunidad de práctica docente se vislumbra como un ambiente psicológico seguro en el cual la docencia es valorada por la comunidad y el conocimiento docente se transfiere tanto por medios formales como informales. No hacer nada con respecto a la docencia, no es —entonces— una opción.

ABSTRACT:

An alternate paradigm to school organization and teaching

practice, which is not widely known, is to be explored to understand what it is to teach under this approach. In opposition to the dominant paradigm—regarding instructors as solo artists—this other conception views the teaching task placed into a *community*, requiring some coordination and collaboration. Regarding this as its core idea, what sets a great teaching school apart is the self-awareness of cohesion, coordination, exchange of best practices, alignment of values around service to student learning, and sense of mission about being a good example to other instructors and schools. With the concept of “community of practice” being widely explored by both business and academia, it was established that what made a firm resilient and profitable was its ability to learn and spread knowledge, that is to say: organizational learning and knowledge transfer. What distinguished the more successful service people? They called one another when they encountered fresh problems, whereas the less successful people were loners. The core notion of this field is that greatness in an organization is more than a collection of solo performances. A community of teaching practice looks like a psychologically safe environment where teaching is valued by the community and teaching knowledge is transferred by both formal and informal means. Doing nothing about teaching is not an option.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Paradigma alternativo, artistas en solitario, comunidad, “comunidad de práctica”, habilidad para aprender, propagar el conocimiento, aprendizaje organizacional, ambiente psicológico seguro

KEY WORDS:

Alternate paradigm, solo artists, community, “community of practice”, ability to learn, spread knowledge, organizational learning, psychologically safe environment.

Hell is other people.

Jean Paul Sartre¹

What life have you, if you have not life together?

There is no life not lived in community.

T.S. Eliot²

One of the great dilemmas in higher management education regards how a school should organize its teaching activities. The dominant paradigm is to view instructors as solo artists who need only to affiliate themselves with other experts in a discipline—this for administrative purposes. The scholar teaches the way he or she does research, as a relatively independent actor. Under this paradigm, learning to teach is also a solo effort, producing a relatively wide variance in student evaluations and satisfaction. Instructors, who don't meet expected standards of teaching, are washed out. The toll in human capital as instructors learn, by trial-and-error, can be large. The faculty was virtually invisible: the faculty meeting was sparsely attended; most instructors worked at home; when on the premises, they worked behind closed doors. Generally, they just

showed up to teach and then departed. Junior faculty members were excited about their research. Senior faculty members were focused on teaching and administration.

An alternate paradigm is to view the teaching task as part of a community effort, requiring some coordination and collaboration, and at the very least, a pool in which instructors can learn their craft from each other. It is less well-known. Since the dominant paradigm is well-known, the purpose of this note is to explore what it is to learn to teach under the alternate paradigm.

TEACHING AS A COMMUNITY EFFORT

In 2004, the U.S. Olympic Team in Basketball slunk home with the bronze medal, having lost to Lithuania, Puerto Rico, and Argentina. Previously the U.S. Olympic basketball team had lost only one game in its history. Initially, the team had been composed of NCAA stars. Then, when the going got tough, the U.S. got the rules changed so that NBA professionals could be qualified for the team. One observer said, "Star for star, the basketball teams from places like Lithuania or Puerto Rico still don't rank well versus the Americans, but when they play as a team—when they *collaborate* better than we do—they are extremely competitive."³

The late experience of the U.S. Olympic basketball team is a metaphor for the challenge facing many business schools. Academic appointments tend to attract loners, introverts who succeed at concen-

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1. *Closed Doors* (1944)

2. *Choruses from the Rock* (1934)

3. Quotation of Joel Conley in Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat*, New York: Farrar Straus, and Giroux, 2005, page 251.

trating their own energies in solitary pursuits of research reputations. Yet scholars are thrust at the front of classes where they must exercise sufficient social skills to engage students, lead discussions, and help people learn.⁴ Those who survive the tenure process do so by amplifying the attributes of solo performance. Thus, many schools have a cadre of newly-tenured faculty who need to assume leadership for courses and programs but aren't ready yet. And as the schools attract better students, the requirement for teaching competence just keeps getting higher.

LEARNING TO TEACH AS A COMMUNITY EXERCISE

The core idea, the *sine qua non*, of creating a great teaching school is community—T.S. Eliot got it right. *Any* school can have great teachers, solo artists to whom everyone can look for reassurance that the school is up to snuff in the teaching dimension. The issue is whether the whole of the teaching faculty is greater than the sum of the parts. What sets the great teaching school apart is the self-awareness of cohesion, coordination, exchange of best practices, alignment of values around service to student learning, and sense of mission about being a good example to other instructors and schools.

Great teaching schools are communities of teaching practice.

The concept of “community of practice” commands a large literature in both business practice and academia. Starting in the 1980s, scholars of organizational design began to recognize that what distinguished the more resilient, innovative, and pro-

fitable firms was their ability to learn and spread knowledge. Since then, the learning organization has been one icon for corporate transformation. Certainly the concept emphasized that not only was what you learned important—so was *how* you learned. Thus was spawned a mini-industry in organizational learning and knowledge transfer.

One of the most interesting aspects of knowledge transfer is that it tends to become self-organizing, assuming the right incentives and the right assist from infrastructure. John Seely Brown, formerly Chief Scientist of Xerox Corporation, told me this example. When strong competitors began to enter Xerox's competitive space in copiers, the company resolved to beat the competition with superior product design and service. So it designed ever more complex and sophisticated products and trained and fielded a sophisticated service corps.

The problem was that many of the repair problems that the solo service people encountered were idiosyncratic and the service manual was quite thick. Some service people were getting bogged down while others made several successful calls per day. What distinguished the more successful service people? They called one another when they encountered fresh problems—with the aid of telephones, the service people formed a network of best practice, exchanging tips and creative ideas as the need arose. The less successful people were loners who tried to conquer the repair problems on their own. Part of Xerox's solution was to give walkie-talkies to the service people to help promote the conversations.

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4. For more on the challenge of engaging students warmly, see my essay, “Do you expect me to pander to students? The cold reality of warmth in teaching” www.ssrn.com/abstract=754504.

LADDER OF COLLABORATION

In some organizations, the problem of knowledge transfer is acute. Looking ahead to the wave of Baby Boom retirements, organizations may experience a dramatic loss in what Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap⁵ call, “deep smarts.” This kind of knowledge is *tacit* (as opposed to objective), is learned by doing rather than studying, and is best gained in context with someone else. Leonard and Swap identified four techniques for transferring deep smarts across an organization:

- Guided practice: practice under guidance of someone who can lead reflection and give performance feedback.
- Guided observation: “shadow” a skilled colleague and arrange for the two to meet afterward.
- Guided problem solving: transfer know-how rather than know-what.
- Guided experimentation: deliberate but modest experiments.

Certainly, the trainee has to be ready and willing to participate in processes such as these.

Another aspect of self-organizing networks for knowledge transfer is the important role played by a few individuals who prove particularly adept at connecting those who need best practices with those who know them. Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *The Tipping Point*, called these people,

“mavens.” Morten Hansen and Bolko von Oetinger⁶ call them “T-shaped managers,” people who reach across an organization as well as up and down a hierarchy. They discuss how some organizations develop mavens internally:

- Incentives
- Formalize cross-unit interactions
- Connect to bottom-line results.
- Use human portals.

Simply sharing knowledge for knowledge’s sake was only marginally productive.

One finds a large literature on the community of practice concept and on knowledge transfer.⁷ To the uninitiated (e.g., readers without a background in behavioral or organizational research) the evidence and arguments of this literature will seem foreign. The core notion of this field is that greatness in an organization is more than a collection of solo performances. *Community* defines best practice and knowledge transfer. And given in the literature is ample anecdotal evidence that high performance organizations wittingly or not implement the attributes of communities of practice.

WHAT DOES A COMMUNITY OF TEACHING PRACTICE LOOK LIKE?

First and foremost, a community of teaching practice is a psychologically safe environment. A concern for the quality of teaching is valued by the community; it is in

5. See, for instance, “Deep Smarts,” by Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap, *Harvard Business Review*, product 7731, www.hbr.org.

6. See Morten Hansen and Bolko von Oetinger, “Introducing T-Shaped Managers,” *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 2001.

7. For an introduction to the literature and concepts, one can start with the foundational writings of Etienne Wenger (1998, 2002).

the atmosphere, a safe topic for casual conversation that won't lead one's colleagues to conclude that you are not a serious researcher. In part, this means that it is OK to discuss classroom successes *and* failures.

Second, because teaching is valued by the community, the systems of the school are organized in ways to promote good teaching. Classroom infrastructure, course design, course evaluations, mentoring, recruitment, promotion, compensation, and research are all touched by the community value of good teaching. It is organic: taking the piecemeal approach (such as hiring instructors with good teaching potential, but doing nothing about infrastructure, mentoring, etc.) will likely end in mediocre results. Thus, to implement a community of teaching practice requires a comprehensive approach, necessarily starts with the Dean and senior faculty, and may require fundamental changes in the way the school does business. My earlier columns contain specific discussions about mentoring, classroom observation, course design and evaluation and so on.

Third, teaching knowledge is transferred by both formal and informal means. Informal exchange is probably the most powerful—this is emphasized in the literature on communities of practice. Formal mechanisms are probably important contributors to the effervescence of knowledge transfer, but I doubt that these alone can achieve the desired results. Among the possible formal mechanisms one might conceive of:

- A teaching fellows program to foster exchange of ideas. This program could bring strong teachers from

other schools into your community to observe and work with your faculty on classroom execution. *And* the program could send your faculty to other schools to observe strong teachers at work in their own environment.

- A seminar on teaching. The seminar should invite the strong teaching faculty and a few outsiders to present at the seminar. The seminar could video record the sessions and produce CD-ROMs of the collected presentations. None of the presenters will want to look foolish for posterity, so the presentations will likely be better than the shoot-from-the-hip recounting of classroom war stories. This gets your school a repeatable public forum that legitimizes a regular conversation on teaching.
- A center for teaching that would administer the seminar, fellows program, course evaluations, teaching awards, mentoring, classroom observations, and all the other activities mentioned here. The kiss of death to the center is for it to become a sleepy backwater, a Potemkin village to which everyone points for progress on teaching but which has no influence, engagement, or impact in the teaching community at your school. Make your biggest star teacher the center's director—since the center derives stature from the people it engages, the director's *gravitas* is of the utmost importance. Fund the center sufficiently to support a very substantive stream of activity and plain old hoopla (such as receptions, free lunches, and quarterly newsletter to the faculty). Measure the success of

the center against the implementation of planned activities to promote knowledge transfer and against the success rate of engagements with specific faculty members and their evaluations of the engagement after the fact.

- A visiting committee of prominent outside faculty members to assess the center and the record of improvement in teaching. For this to have any sway with the faculty, they should be engaged in the selection of the visiting committee.

Some faculty members will scoff at these activities and question whether the time and money aren't better spent on research,

facilities, or faculty salaries. Virtually none of these activities, viewed on their own, will build a community of teaching practice. Community is an elusive quarry. But the odds are that it begins with a recurring conversation motivated by sincere interest.

Here's where senior faculty and leaders of a school need to make a very strong pitch in favor of strengthening the community of teaching practice. Doing nothing about teaching is not an option. The expectations of applicants, students, recruiters, and the business community are steadily rising. You can invite the scoffers to give their own suggestions, but the odds are that after the smoke clears, they won't vary much from the ideas here.

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