PART ONE

Engagement

Introduction

The metaphors we use to frame discussions reveal much about the mental models we hold regarding the subject being discussed. The metaphors commonly used to frame discussions about teaching almost always suggest the ideas that the teacher is a performer and that teacher performance is a key explanatory variable in the quest to understand what students learn in school. Indeed, the idea that the teacher is a performer and that the way the teacher goes about his or her work is a matter of central importance shapes much theory and practice in the study of teaching and the evaluation of teachers. Few educators have not heard of teacher performance appraisal systems, and few are unaware of the fact that a key element of such systems is the observed behavior of the teacher in the classroom.

Who the teacher is and what the teacher does is important to what students learn, and to suggest otherwise is foolish. I do, however, take serious exception to the notion that teacher performance is a cause and student learning is an effect. Teachers do perform, but it is not their performance that "causes" students to learn. Rather, it is the performance of the student that should be the assumed cause of learning. Instead of thinking of teachers as performers, I prefer to think of them as designers of experiences for students. I assume that the essential skills that teachers need are those associated with designing work for students that students find engaging. These skills include those that are essential to ensuring that the work is designed in a way that results in students' learning what it is intended that they learn.

In my view, it is much more important to assess the quality of the experiences teachers provide for students than it is to assess the quality of a teacher's performance. Indeed, I would argue that the assumption that the teacher's performance is the critical variable in student learning does great harm to both students and

those who teach them. Teachers are leaders, and like all other leaders, they are best judged by what they get others to do than by what they do themselves.

Even if the assumption that test scores are fair representations of student learning is granted, which I do not grant, much more is involved in the scores students produce than those things the teacher does or fails to do. Teachers do not produce test scores; students produce test scores. Much that students learn and much that shows up on their completed tests they likely learned outside school, including at home where students and parents may actually talk, or fail to talk, about what the student is or is not learning. Should the teacher who has the good fortune of having parents who educate their own children be credited for being so lucky, and should those who have fewer of these parents be blamed? Nonsense!

There are really only two things that have the prospect of having a direct impact on student performance over which the teacher has any real control. First is the relationship that teachers have with their students and the way teachers, as leaders, treat their students. Second is the work teachers assign to students or encourage them to undertake. These two things, rather than the teacher's performance, should be central in our concern about the effect of teachers on student learning, for they determine what students do, and fail to do, as they carry out their lives in school. Effective teachers get students to do the right things, and they design things for them to do that are right for the students they teach.

Students do not learn from the performance of teachers; they learn from their own performance. The teacher's job is then to ensure that the students' performance optimizes the prospect that they will learn what they need to in order to participate effectively in American cultural, economic, and civic life.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This book was initially intended to be a modest revision of an earlier book I wrote: *Working on the Work: An Action Plan for Teachers, Principals, and Superintendents.* As I got into this task, it became clear to me that rather than a simple revision, what was required was an almost total rewrite, and thus a different book entirely.

Readers who are familiar with the earlier book will find much here with which they will be familiar. For example, in Chapters Seven to Nine, there are only slight revisions of three earlier chapters. Chapters Two through Five and

Chapter Ten, however, contain much new material as well as elaborations and expansions of ideas I presented in *Working on the Work.*

This does not mean that I have abandoned the ideas I set forth in the earlier book. I have not. Rather, my experiences over the past decade have helped me to clarify what I once said and caused me to rethink how to position what I suggested in the context of school reform initiatives today. Two matters have been especially significant in shaping my thinking about the issues I address in this book. First, as the original *Working on the Work* framework has become more widespread (the original version of the book has sold nearly 150,000 copies), it has become clear that what I wrote and what some people think I wrote are not always congruent. As the author, I accept responsibility for these misunderstandings. As I often said to some of my students, "You never know what you have said or written until someone tells you. All you know is what you intended to say or to write. The message received is more important than the message sent."

A second matter of considerable importance is the direction and development of the current government-sponsored efforts to improve education in the United Sates. When I wrote *Working on the Work*, the test-based accountability system that emerged out of the No Child Left Behind legislation was not yet fully developed. Standards-based accountability was being talked about, but standards had not yet morphed into scores on standardized tests. Clearly the standards that the early proponents of standards-based school reform envisioned (standards to which I had some attraction) are no longer the standards of concern. Rather than asking, "What should students know and be able to do?" we now ask, "What do students need to know and be able to do to reach a given cutoff point on an easily scored, relatively inexpensive standardized test?" The answer to this latter question becomes the standard of concern.

I have always believed that well-articulated curriculum standards are essential to the proper education of children. They both provide direction and impose needed discipline. Nevertheless, there is a difference between student performance standards—that is, standards regarding what students should be able to demonstrate that they know and can do—and curriculum standards.

Curriculum standards have to do with conceptions of the purposes of schooling and the ends of education. Student performance standards have to do with the immediate and the measurable. Curriculum standards and student performance standards are—or should be—related, but they are not synonymous.

Curriculum standards have to do with the desired and the desirable. Student performance standards have to do with the observable and the acceptable.

We do need clear and powerful curriculum standards. Indeed, I do not see how a school faculty can proceed without some agreement on what the curriculum standards are and without some means of enforcing these. However, I do not believe these standards necessarily flow from some state or federal bureaucrat's office and that the means of enforcement are the bureaucratic means available to governments. Standards, if they are to have meaning in a democracy, must be developed by local communities and enforced by them as well. Moreover, the means of enforcement must move beyond the formalized structures suggested by testing and into the arena of continuous examination of student learning outcomes and the work that students are provided in pursuit of these standards. If standards are to count, they must be embraced by people who count to students—and in the accounting of students, their peers, families, and teachers count for more than do governors, education bureaucrats, or even business leaders and foundations. To have standards-based schooling, therefore, one must seek as well a common core of standards in the community that the school or schools serve.

A GREAT MUTATION

In 1962 historian Carl Bridenbaugh, in a presidential address to the American Historical Association, coined the phrase *great mutation* to characterize a development he wanted to discuss. He said:

> The Great Mutation, or historical change, has taken place so rapidly, and life has sustained such sudden and radical alterations (in the long course of time) that we are now suffering something like historical amnesia. In the present century, first Western civilization and now the entire globe have witnessed the inexorable substitution of an artificial environment and a materialistic outlook on life for the old natural environment and spiritual world view that linked us so irrevocably to the Recent and Distant Pasts. So pervading and complete has been this change, and so complex has life become— I almost said overwhelming—that it now appears probable that mid-nineteenth-century America or Western Europe had more in common with fifth-century Greece (physically, economically,

socially, mentally, spiritually) than with their own projections into the middle of the twentieth century. Is it possible that so short a time can alter the condition of man?[1]

A member of the 1962 audience looking back over the past fifty years might well have said, "Carl, you ain't seen nothing yet." The changes that have occurred since 1962 make those that Bridenbaugh describes pale in significance.

Public schools as we now know them were established in the nineteenth century to fulfill for the masses an educational function that had heretofore been fulfilled by families, private tutors, and academies. The assumption underlying the early American school—usually referred to as the "common school"—was that the job of the teacher is to pass on the knowledge and lore of the "tribe." In this view, adults control children and what they will learn because adults control the information children will receive as a part of their education. The teacher is the master of this information and the primary point of access to the information. The student is a supplicant and a subordinate. Students are obliged to comply with their teachers' directives because parents, teachers, and schools represent the primary point of access to the collective wisdom of society. This view is deeply embedded in the tradition and lore that surround schools in the United States.

Such a view of the relationship between teacher and student has served tradition-based societies well. But it has become difficult to sustain this view in contemporary America where traditions are eroding and being replaced with new practices and new fads on a regular basis. And one of the most fundamental changes is that adults no longer control the access the young have to information. In the world of the Internet and mass media, students often learn things before their teachers or their parents are even aware of them. Sometimes what students learn is consistent with what adults want them to learn and sometimes it is not, but whatever the case, they do learn, and what they learn shapes the way they will live their lives.

Adults, whether parents or teachers, can no longer control the information students receive. (Even closed communities like the Amish are having difficulty in this regard.) Therefore, if schools and teachers are to continue to have a major impact on what students learn, teachers are going to need to learn to direct the learning of their students rather than attempt to control it. This means that

[1]C. Bridenbaugh, "The Great Mutation." *American Historical Review,* 1963, *68,* 315–331.

teachers need to rethink the way they have traditionally related to students. They can no longer depend on the superiority of their knowledge and wisdom (which still may be quite real) to help reinforce the authority that tradition has bestowed on them.

One way to help reconceive this relationship is to think of the student as a customer for work and the teacher as the designer of that work. Properly viewed, customers are at the center of any enterprise. Without customers, businesses do not exist. As Peter Drucker has observed, the primary goal of any business should be getting and keeping customers.[2]

Similarly, students are, or should be, at the center of schools and schooling. Engaging students in work that results in their need to learn material that is essential to their education as citizens in a democracy and to their right to claim to be well-educated human beings is the primary business of schools.

Students do not volunteer to go to school; they are compelled by their parents and the law to attend. Like it or not, however, students do control those things the teacher needs from them to ensure that the students will learn those things it is intended that they learn. Students control the effort they are willing to invest and the attention they are willing to pay. Sometimes it is possible to bribe students to "pay attention" and to invest effort, and sometimes they can be coerced to do so. However, if the attention they pay and the effort they invest is to result in quality learning, they must do more than comply. They must be committed to the work they undertake—so committed that they will stick with it even when they fail on initial tries and experience difficulties along the way. This means that they must be engaged in the work rather than simply compliant with its demands, and that means that the work must have inherent meaning for them. I wrote *Working on the Work* in an effort to help teachers become increasingly successful in designing engaging work. This book pursues the same end.

A WORD ABOUT CONTEXT

I wrote my first book on schools and schooling in 1975 and published it the next year. Even then I had concluded that instruction could not be improved until schools changed in fundamental ways. These changes must occur in the boardroom as well as the classroom, in the statehouse as well as the schoolhouse.

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[2]See, for example, Peter Drucker, *The Essential Drucker: The Best of Sixty Years of Peter Drucker's Essential Writings on Management* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

In the years since *Working on the Work* was published in 2002, I have become much clearer about the nature of the changes needed.

Between 2005 and 2009 I wrote and rewrote a manuscript for a now-published book, *Leading for Learning*, in which I describe in considerable detail the kinds of changes I believe are necessary. *Leading for Learning*, however, is about redesigning schools and school districts, not about designing work for students. That book does not enter the classroom door other than by inference. Instead, it is an effort to set forth a set of propositions regarding the type of system that needs to be created if teachers are encouraged to work on the work.

Working on the Work was written before *Leading for Learning*, but *Leading for Learning* provides the context for that earlier book and probably should be read before turning to this one. Indeed, I believe that reading *Leading for Learning* can relieve some of the angst teachers sometimes feel when they first see clearly the kinds of changes they are going to confront if they take seriously the suggestions I make in this book.

Indeed, as I have watched bureaucratically mandated school reform initiatives play out, I have gained a new appreciation for the pressures these changes put on teachers and principals. All of this has served to reinforce something I have long understood to be true: the way schools are organized affects what teachers do in classrooms. So long as schools are organized as rational bureaucracies, teachers who are committed to creating engaging work for students will find it difficult to operate in the context of schools, and students will suffer because this is so.

As a result of these reenergized appreciations, I am now more firmly convinced than ever before that if teachers are to design more engaging work for students, those who control schools and the way schools operate must be prepared to design schools and school districts in ways that are supportive of this activity. Principals, superintendents, and school boards need to understand it. Most of all, policymakers bent on improving education through bureaucratization of processes and bureaucratized forms of assessment and accountability must understand it and stop doing some of the silly and misguided things they are now doing. They must, for example, abandon test-based, punishment-centered accountability and embrace the notion that sound pedagogy is based on beliefs and that standards are best thought of as sources of direction rather than weapons for maintaining control.

Rather than viewing schools as teaching platforms, schools must be viewed as learning platforms. Rather than seeing schools as knowledge distribution

systems, schools must be seen as knowledge work systems. Rather than defining teachers as instructors, teachers must be defined as designers, leaders, and guides to instruction.

Just as Gutenberg's printing press made the role of scribes obsolete, e-learning and all that surrounds it are on the way to making the role of teacher as instructor obsolete. This most assuredly does not mean that teaching and teachers are obsolete or can be replaced by computers. Rather, it means that the role of the teacher as instructor is obsolete. But at the same time this information technology is creating an even greater need for teachers to embrace the role of leader, guide to instruction, and designer of work for students.

A personal story may make my meaning more clear.

My eight-year-old grandson is familiar with computers and how to access Google. One evening he and his mother were watching a television show featuring a trip to Belgium. After the show, Daniel went to his computer and looked up Belgium on the Web. Though it is not clear what he read, when his mother asked him what he learned, he responded, "Well, one of the things I learned was that the Belgians were very busy during World War II." When his mother asked him what made him think that, he said, "Well, the article said that during World War II, the Belgians were occupied by the Germans, so I just figured the Germans were keeping them busy."

Clearly Daniel had received instruction without the benefit of a teacher, but without a teacher (in this case, his mother) to guide him to understand what he had learned from his faceless instructor could well have been misleading indeed. Much of what I present in the pages that follow is aimed at helping teachers and those who work with them to think through the implications of this brave new world for teachers and teaching in the hope that that which is occurring even now will not result in an Orwellian nightmare and the loss of our precious democratic heritage.

THE ISSUE OF REDUNDANCY

For readers who are concerned about editorial matters, I want to point out at the start that this book contains considerable redundancy and that the redundancy is intentional. What I write in one chapter I repeat in a slightly different form in another. For example, in Chapter Two I present the Working on the Work framework and the language it suggests as a set of assumptions regarding the

characteristics and attributes of work that teachers must take into account in the design of engaging work. In Chapter Five, I use the same framework as a structure for discussing ideas about prototypes and design specifications. Sometimes I discuss these ideas simply as design qualities, but at other times I move the discussion of these qualities well beyond that which will be known to those familiar with my earlier work on this subject.

There is a risk that in this way, I will add to confusion rather than bring greater clarity to my intentions. I believe, however, that the redundant use of some of these categories will better explain some of the subtle differences between designing work and planning lessons. Moreover, I am convinced that until teachers understand the difference between designing engaging work for students and planning interesting lessons, they are more likely to play at working on the work rather than work at it.

Finally, I want to acknowledge that I am aware that I make frequent and sometimes redundant commentary regarding the direction of government-sponsored efforts to reform schools. If I seem obsessed with this problem it is because so many of the teachers and principals with whom I work are so fastened on test scores that they find it difficult to think about working on the work and I want them to know that I understand the source of their distress. I am, however, convinced that unless teachers come to focus on engagement as much as so many now focus on test scores, there will be little improvement in our schools. Unfortunately, too many teachers believe that as long as they must contend with the ham-fisted use of standardized tests to ensure accountability, the expectation that they can also work on the work, though perhaps desirable, is unrealistic. I am not unaware of the problems my proposals create for teachers but I have confidence that much good can be done even now to change the course of school reform in this nation. One of the things that can be done is to help teachers articulate the problems they feel. I hope my commentary can be of use in this regard.