Teachers
change all the time

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CHANGE

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# How Teachers Change

**by Virginia Richardson**

***What will lead to change that most benefits student learning?***

*Teachers don't change. They resist change. They just get in a groove of doing what they have always done and what they are comfortable with." The notion that teachers don't change does not match my experiences. I have been a teacher, a teacher-educator, a supervisor of student teaching, and a researcher, and have spent considerable time observing teachers in their classrooms. I have observed teachers in such diverse locations as Syracuse, NY; Tucson, AZ; Vancouver, British Columbia; Malawi; and Hong Kong. The teachers I worked with in these places were not teaching exactly the same way they did the previous year; nor do I as a teacher-educator. In fact, teachers change all the time.*

Where, then, did the view come from that teachers resist change? And how can this view co-exist with the notion that teachers change all the time? This article explores the following thesis: The differences between these two views of teacher change may hinge on who is directing the change. Teachers often resist change mandated or suggested by others, but they do engage in change that they initiate: what I call voluntary change. In this article, I lay out and compare the two views of teacher change. I then examine two approaches to staff development, the training model and the reflective and collaborative model, and relate them to the differing views of teacher change. Finally, I suggest that the best teacher change is carried out in a way that involves teachers in the process, and promotes coherence among teachers in an organization. This article draws on my personal experiences, research that I have conducted, and the broader research literature. The literature I review is primarily focused on the K-12 system, but has much relevance for adult basic educators.

## Change Hurts

As I looked into the literature on teacher change, the sentiment I found expressed was that teachers do not change, that change hurts and that is why people do not change, and that teachers are recalcitrant (e.g., Duffy & Roehler, 1986; Fullan, 1991). The literature suggests that teachers resist doing whatever is being proposed because they want to cling to their old ways. Change makes people feel uncomfortable.

This view of change in teaching practice dominated the educational literature until the early 1990s. It focuses on the failure of teachers to adopt teaching activities, practices, and curricula that are suggested or mandated by those who are external to the setting in which the teaching is taking place: administrators, policy-makers, and staff developers. The view of the teacher as reluctant to change is strong and widespread, and is one I have heard expressed by many teachers as well. It is promulgated by those who think they know what teachers should be doing in the classroom and are in a position to tell them what to do. In that sense, it relates to issues of power (e.g., Wasley, 1992). As pointed out by Morimoto (1973): "When change is advocated or demanded by another person, we feel threatened, defensive, and perhaps rushed. We are then without the freedom and the time to understand and to affirm the new learning as something desirable, and as something of our own choosing. Pressure to change, without an opportunity for exploration and choice, seldom results in experiences of joy and excitement in learning" (p. 255).

From the change hurts' perspective, teachers don't change' really means teachers aren't doing what I (or someone else) tell them to do.' As pointed out by Klein (1969) a number of years ago, " studies of change appear to be taken from the perspective of those who are the change agents seeking to bring about change rather than of the clients they are seeking to influence" (p. 499). I felt that it was time to look at change from the standpoint of teachers themselves. Do they change? And if they do, why?

## Voluntary Change

In my work with teachers, I noticed that they undertake change voluntarily, following their sense of what their students need and what is working. They try out new ideas. These changes, while often minor adjustments, can be dramatic (Richardson, 1990). In a long-term collaborative study of teacher change, my colleagues and I found that when a teacher tries new activities, she assesses them on the basis of whether they work: whether they fit within her set of beliefs about teaching and learning, engage the students, and allow her the degree of classroom control she feels is necessary. If she feels the activity does not work, it is quickly dropped or radically altered (Richardson, 1994).

The decision as to whether a new activity works is often unconscious and may be based on experiences and understandings that are not relevant to the particular setting in which instruction is taking place. In other words, a teacher may try an activity that worked with another group of students and fail to notice that it is inappropriate for the new group. Thus, while voluntary change is what teachers actually do in their classrooms, it does not necessarily lead to exemplary teaching.

## Laissez Faire?

If teachers make voluntary changes all the time, perhaps they do not need help, direction, or encouragement to make change. According to Cuban (1988), the changes teachers make in their classrooms are minor and inconsequential. Therefore, one could argue that teachers need outside mandates and help to make major changes. This view can certainly be debated. We found that teachers sometimes do make major changes on their own

(Richardson, Anders, Tidwell & Lloyd, 1991).

Teachers may, however, make decisions about change that are spur-of-the-moment and based on unwarranted assumptions. Without examining the beliefs underlying a sense of what does or does not work, teachers may perpetuate practices based on questionable assumptions and beliefs. This suggests that some direction would be helpful.

And, the question arises: do learners benefit from teachers acting alone, making changes as they see fit within the confines of their classrooms? If all teachers make decisions autonomously, the schooling of an individual student could be quite incoherent and ineffective. This, too, suggests that help, direction, or encouragement provided to staff rather than to individuals could be necessary to promote change that is valuable to the learner. I will come back to this later.

## Vision of Teachers

Over the course of this century, our concept of teaching has shifted from an industrial model teachers replicating a specific set of instructional tasks to a "complex, dynamic, interactive, intellectual activity" (Smylie & Conyers, 1991, p. 13). This shift occurred for many reasons, including a change to a much more diverse student body (Devany & Sykes, 1988) and changes in our economy. We therefore need teachers who approach their work with a change orientation: an orientation that suggests that constant reflection, evaluation, and experimentation are integral elements of the teaching role. We now expect teachers to alter curricula on the basis of new knowledge and ways of knowing, to change styles of teacher-student interaction depending on needs of the student population, and to change methods when research indicates more effective practice.

This requires teachers who are inquirers, questioning assumptions and consciously thoughtful about goals, practices, and contexts. Gary Fenstermacher (1994) suggests that reflecting on one's work as a teacher must be undertaken within the framework of a clear sense of purpose in relation to the learner. He quotes Isr‘l Scheffler's view of the purposes of education: "the formation of habits of judgment and the development of character, the elevation of standards, the facilitation of understanding, the development of taste and discrimination, the stimulation of curiosity and wonder, the fostering of style and sense of beauty, the growth of a thirst for new ideas and visions of the yet unknown" (Scheffler, 1976, p. 206).

Scheffler's notion of teacher, however, is quite individualistic. The autonomous, individual teacher works with her students in the classroom, and is reflective about what goes on in that classroom. As I suggested earlier, however, there is more to consider: the nature of the educational program through which students pass. The sense of teacher autonomy must be broadened beyond the individual teacher to the group of teachers who are working, over time, with a given student or set of students. Shirley Pendlebury (1990) suggests that we should think of schools or programs as communities of practice whose members are granted equal respect and concern. This requires an agreed-upon understanding of aims and purposes. Thus autonomy should be considered within a community of practice in which there is continual critical discussion about aims, standards, and procedures.

In sum, the description of the teacher that I prefer is one that balances autonomy with community. The teacher is an inquirer, working within a community of practice in which fellow teachers engage, with each other, in critical discussions concerning aims, goals, procedures, and practices. How do we support change compatible with this? What staff development program permits the development of individual autonomy but also fosters a community of learners within a school or program? An examination of the staff development literature is helpful in addressing these questions.

## Training Model

The more traditional form of staff development begins with someone from outside the school determining that a process, content, method, or system should be implemented in the classroom. The form of staff development most suitable for achieving change mandated by outside forces is the training model, which can be a deficit model. The training model has a clearly stated set of objectives and learner outcomes. These outcomes can be teaching skills, such as using learner-generated material or teaching critical thinking processes. Sparks & Loucks-Horsley (1990) identified a number of important assumptions inherent in the training model. Two of these assumptions are 1) that there are behaviors and techniques worthy of replication by teachers in the classroom, and 2) that teacher-education students and teachers can learn or change their behaviors to replicate these techniques in their classrooms (p. 241).

Many of the staff development programs that employ the training model are relatively short term, involving teachers in several hours or several days of workshops, with limited follow-up activities. Such programs have a chance of succeeding with those teachers whose beliefs match the assumptions inherent in the innovation; even these teachers might not try out the innovation. It is estimated that such staff development garners an implementation level of only 15 percent (Meyer, 1988).

On the other hand, not all training models result in such limited change. A substantial body of research has identified characteristics of reasonably successful training models. These qualities have been summarized by many (e.g., Griffin, 1986) and include the following:

- The training process should be school-wide and context-specific.
- Principals (or program directors) should be supportive of the process and encouraging of change.
- The training should be long term, with adequate support and

follow up.

- The training process should encourage collegiality.
- The training content should incorporate current knowledge obtained through well-designed research.
- The process should include adequate funds for materials, outside speakers, and substitute teachers to allow teachers to observe each other.

Even if the staff development process is successful as determined by the percentage of teacher participants who immediately implement changes in their classrooms, the longer-term effects of training models are questionable. For example, in a four-year study of a very popular staff development program, developed and conducted by Madeleine Hunter, which trained teachers in a structured approach to instruction, Stallings & Krasavage (1986) found that in the third year teachers implemented the desired behaviors much less often than they had in the first two years.

Several hypotheses are used to explain the disappointing long-term effects of Madeline Hunter's training model. One is the following: "We believe that the innovative practices teachers learn will not be maintained unless teachers and students remain interested and excited about their own learning A good staff development program will create an excitement about learning to learn. The question is how to maintain momentum, not merely maintain previously learned behaviors" (Stallings & Krasavage, 1986, p. 137).

This leads to the question of long-term goals of these staff development programs. Do we want teachers to continue using a process, method, or approach into the distant future? Probably not. Many of us assume that something new and better will come along that will be more appropriate for teachers to use. This discussion of long-term goals leads to the second form of staff development.

## Reflective, Collaborative Models

The second form of staff development is designed to support the voluntary view of change described in the beginning of this article. It attempts to develop in teachers a more systematic and reflective approach to their own change process. Gallagher, Goudvis, and Pearson (1988) called the approach "mutual adaptation," which, they suggested, is the best approach to use to create dramatic change such as shifts in orientations and beliefs. An example of mutual adaptation is a program developed by Patricia Anders and myself (Richardson, 1994). This was a long-term process in which we met with teachers in groups and with individual teachers in their classrooms. We helped teachers explore their beliefs and practices through videotaping their classrooms, and talking about their practices with them while viewing the tape.1 As staff developers, we did not have specific practices in mind that we wanted teachers to implement. Instead, we worked with teachers as they explored their own practices and determined their own directions for change. New practices were sometimes introduced by us in response to requests from the teachers, and often by other teachers. This process required time to meet, exposure to new practices, and time and opportunity to experiment with new practices and to reflect.

Reflective and collaborative staff development models such as the one in which we engaged have a set of similar characteristics. They are not based on a deficit model of change. They assume that reflection and change are on-going processes of assessing beliefs, goals, and results. They are designed to help develop and support a change orientation. The desired outcomes of such models are not pre-specified behaviors and skills. The purpose is procedural: to create an ecology of thinking, deliberation, and experimentation. The goals, therefore, may be unstated at the beginning of the process. In these models, change is not consider to be static. That is, a change made by a teacher during the staff development process may not be in place the next year. In fact, it is hoped that teachers will continue to change after completing the staff development. Each teacher is free to follow her own lines of inquiry and change. The group is not necessarily expected to decide on the same change. The outcomes of interest are not just changes in behaviors and actions, but also changes in the rationale and justifications that accompany the new practices. Thus, a measure of success is the degree to which teachers take responsibility for their actions,2 assume ownership of their practices, and are able to articulate these actions and their justifications to another person.

Over the three-year period in which we worked with teachers in this way, the teachers changed their beliefs and practices in directions that related to the various dialogues we had with them. Many of them, for example, moved away from the textbook or basal approach to teaching reading toward the use of literature. Bos & Anders (1994) evaluated our project and found that the students of the teachers who participated in the staff development process achieved more in certain aspects of reading comprehension than did the students in contrast classrooms. In a follow up two years later, we found that the teachers had continued to engage in reflective change (Valdez, 1992). It would appear that the teachers had developed a change orientation that led them to reflect continually on their teaching and classrooms, and experiment thoughtfully with new practices. The teachers had become confident in their decision-making abilities and took responsibility for what was happening in their classrooms. Thus they had developed a strong sense of individual autonomy and felt empowered to make deliberate and thoughtful changes in their classrooms.

While the reflective and collaborative model of staff development works well with individual teachers, it does have the possibility of creating, within a given program, a number of effective, autonomous, change-oriented teachers who have very different beliefs about what should be taught and how. A student progressing through the program may become very confused with these different approaches. How can we shift elements of this approach to these considerations?

## Community of Practice

What is necessary is the creation of a sense of autonomy and responsibility that goes beyond the individual class and moves to the school, program, and community levels. Judith Warren Little (1992) describes this as civic responsibility, but cautions against "formally orchestrated" collaboration that becomes bureaucratic and contrived. Little suggests that a solution to the individual autonomy versus civic responsibility tension is the development of "joint work" that brings teachers together and creates interdependence among them.

One way of bringing teachers in a program together in a non-bureaucratic and unforced way is to focus attention on what happens to students over the course of their program or school career. Our current approach to testing and assessment is cross-sectional and grade- or classroom-level based. This tends to focus administrators' and teachers' attention on the individual classroom or grade level rather than the institution. If we concentrate on what happens to students as they move through a program, the focus for teachers might shift from the students in their classroom to students within their program. This shifts responsibility, in part, to the collective, and requires consideration of both individual and organizational change. Teacher autonomy would not, then, be an individual right and responsibility, but would be earned and assumed within a community of practice.

## Conclusion

My interest in teacher change grew out of what appeared to be two competing concepts. One proposed that teachers resist change, and the other, based on my own experiences as a teacher, teacher educator, and teacher observer, suggested that teachers change all the time. My inquiry into this discrepancy was part of a movement that led to ways of thinking about teacher change as a voluntary process, and to staff development programs that take advantage of the voluntary nature of change. I discovered, however, that these staff development approaches may lead to an individually autonomous change process and thereby to incoherent educations for students. The suggestion I have arrived at so far is that the individualistic and empowering form of staff development be extended to the group level, involving all teachers in a given school or program. In such communities, individual members are granted equal respect and concern, but the focus is on developing and agreeing upon the longitudinal goals and concerns for all students as they pass through the various classes in the school or program.

## Endnotes

1. This aspect of the staff development program relied on a form of dialogue called Practical Arguments (Fenstermacher, 1994).

2. At the beginning of the study, many teachers suggested that the practices they used in the classroom were dictated by forces

outside the classroom, e.g., "I use the basals in teaching reading because the School Board insists on it." Following the staff development, very few teachers' statements attributed their practices to forces outside the classroom. The practices were justified by their own beliefs and understandings of the classroom and of teaching.

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