

## **A Response to Peter's Question**

So what is innovation? I define innovation as a perturbation to the system that results in change in the way the work is done and in the mental models of those involved in doing the work. Both of these elements are critical— if mental models are not influenced by the innovation, then nothing really changes for very long. I would also add that effective innovation is robust in terms of generating other innovations. This being said, most effective innovation strikes me as more organic than linear—something that stands in direct contrast to the way many schools approach change.

### **A Very Small Case Study**

At MRH several years ago we implemented “looping” in grades kindergarten through eight. Our study of the research of Ron Ferguson and others suggested to us that keeping students with the same teacher for two years offered potential for improved achievement. We felt the power of relationship had not been mined in our industrial age schools where teachers were given 36 weeks to make a difference in the achievement of children who came to us from incredibly diverse environments. The model of the assembly line and student as product minimized our impact on both children and their families.

### **Why We Proposed the Innovation**

With the year-to-year movement of students to new teachers, by February of each year the teachers were already looking toward the end of the year and handing off problem students to next year's teacher. If a teacher found a parent difficult, she just avoided communication as much as possible for the remainder of the year. With the practice emerged a tacit agreement between parents and teachers—put up for the short term and the problem will go away. This approach encouraged teachers to avoid rather than problem-solve issues with students and parents. Parents also often “made do” with a teacher. As one parent commented to me, “You can grit your teeth for a few months.”

### **Obstacles**

There were several obstacles standing in the way of what sounds as if it should have been a small and fairly easy innovation to implement. First of all, we faced the teachers' union that felt it unfair to expect teachers to master two years worth of curriculum. Secondly we had parents who were very uneasy with the idea—what if they or their

child did not get along with the teacher—how could they deal with that for two years? Parents also knew there were ineffective faculty members on our staff. They were willing to put up with the occasional bad teacher for a year, but they worried their child would be assigned to an ineffective teacher for two years.

### **Implementation**

We outlined a three-year plan with staff and parents to move to full implementation. In year one, any teacher who wanted to loop and was in a situation where it was possible, did so. In the second year we worked hard to increase the number of loops, and by the third year we aimed for full implementation. We changed our curriculum design process to insure that curriculum revision involved all teachers in the two-year loop. In order to minimize the union's concerns, and to increase our teachers' content knowledge we began to departmentalize for math and inquiry (science and social studies) all the way down to second grade. As the program moved forward, we added two home visits by teachers during the two-year loop for parents who wanted them. Teachers were paid for the visits and trained in effective parent-teacher communication. By changing the time teachers, students, and their families stayed in relationship, we began to undermine pieces of the factory metaphor.

### **Results**

Now, six years from year three of the implementation we see the following:

- The implementation of looping took the full three years and the time was critical to the eventual success.
- The practice has altered the mental models of teachers and parents. Both get frustrated now if a loop is broken for some reason and see the relationship they build over two years as critical to the students' success.
- The practice has increased accountability among teachers. We now use student achievement data more effectively as we track it over two years with each teacher. Interestingly, this also increases teachers' sense of efficacy because they can better see the impact of their work. There is a sense of ownership of the work that never existed in the traditional model.
- Many teachers we identified as least effective left the school during the three year implementation. We have our hypotheses about this—parents became more vocal about good and bad

teachers because of the two-year term; increased accountability highlighted weak teachers; and learning two year's worth of curriculum seemed like a lot of work. In some ways, looping created a positive perfect storm in terms of shedding bad teachers.

- The full implementation of looping brought with it several important additional changes to the school: e.g. home visits, data analysis tied to individual teachers, cross grade team-designed curriculum. etc.

## **Reflections on Innovation**

1. James March coined the phrase "loosely coupled systems" to describe organizations with work units that have tenuous connections and function largely independently. The term is apt for the traditional school. It strikes me that the looping innovation addressed "looseness" by leveraging time. By stipulating that students (and their parents) remain with the same teacher beyond the traditional 36 week school year, contact between student, parent, and teacher increased. The probability, therefore, of alignment of purpose and means of educating the child also increased. School reformers often mouth the importance of the home and school connection, but too often fail in efforts to improve it. This restructuring of the time factor helps in bridging the home-school disconnect.
2. The case study also suggests another aspect of innovation: it spawns other complementary change. Teachers were more responsive to the home visit initiative because they saw it as supporting the looping structure.
3. Our embryonic definition of innovation focuses on "how the work is done" and how the workers think about what they are doing (what mental models they have). It seems to me that both of these attributes of school improvement have been lost in most of what is currently called educational reform. Both the standards movement and the mania of testing really do not address either of these attributes. On the one hand, reformers assume that if standards are explicated and promulgated, school districts, schools, and teachers will change what they are doing. On the other hand, those who call for more testing assume the school staff will likewise successfully alter their

work behavior and beliefs. Some have called this the “black box” theory of educational change. It changes expectations and the means of accountability but does not address what is going on inside schools and classroom, and it assumes that those inside the “box” know how to respond to these external pressures. In short no attention is given to process, i.e. how the work is done or what attitudes and belief those working in the school have. Supposedly we learned from Deming that successful organizational change has a strong process focus. This lesson has largely been lost in state and federal efforts at improving public schools.

4. This case study prompted me to re-read my Michael Fullan<sup>i</sup> (He borrows Larry Cuban’s classification of innovations as “first-order” and “second-order.”<sup>ii</sup> I quote Fullan at length because he describes well the key features of what I mean by innovation:

First-order changes are those that improve the efficiency and effectiveness of what is currently done “without disturbing the basic organizational features, without substantially altering the way that children and adults perform roles” (quoting Sarason, p.342). Second-order changes seek to alter the fundamental ways in which organizations are put together, including new goals, structures, and roles (e.g. collaborative work cultures).

As I think about this, I don’t believe that these are two separate continua. In my mind the looping process is a first order change that is leading us to second order change by helping us to rethink and reinvent the way we do our work.

5. It should also be noted that the success of looping (in that it became a preferred practice), was a function not just of its obvious advantages, but because it was part of a constellation of other complementary changes. The district concurrently made student assessment data more readily available and reutilized its use to modify instruction. The district also invested heavily in professional development that was keenly focused on curriculum development and instructional improvement. Without these complementary changes, the looping effort could have well been disruptive in that it would have increased parent expectations and teacher knowledge of their students without the tools to successfully respond. In short, the innovation’s success both required other changes and contributed to the success of yet other innovations.

6. The looping case study is an instance of focusing on what Richard Elmore has labeled “the instructional core.”<sup>iii</sup> It was about altering the critical teaching and learning that goes on at the classroom level of the organization. While it seems obvious that school reform should be about teaching and learning, it is amazing how many “reform” efforts have avoided what goes on in the classroom.
7. Judith Viorst notes that “change involves loss,” and with loss often comes sadness and anger. This was certainly the case with the looping innovation. As mentioned, teachers retired or left the district. Some grew anxious about their ability to master a two-year curriculum, and others worried about dealing with some parents for two years. Managing this range of emotions was imperative. Leaders must lend support, acknowledge and celebrate implemental steps, and acknowledge the losses.
8. Peter also asked us to define evidence that is meaningful in assessing innovation. The last paragraph hints at a possible avenue of evidence. When you disturb a system it reacts. People’s reaction to the change, how they deal with loss and how the system supports them in making the transition are possible indicators that a “second-order” innovation is in the works.
9. Peter’s last question regarding “allowing for inefficiencies” is equally difficult. Calling the effort “The Race to the Top” is not promising. The metaphor evokes images of runners. My own experience is that educational change is a deeply social and organic process. And of course the expectations need to shift to process goals not just outcomes. I believe building organizational capacity to support innovation at the “instructional core” should be the goal. The metrics follow from there and should be co-created by the teachers implementing the innovation.

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<sup>i</sup> Michael Fullan .*The New Meaning of Educational Change*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1991. p 29.

<sup>ii</sup> Larry Cuban. “A Fundamental Puzzle of School Reform” in *Phi Delta Kappan*, 70(5) 1988, pp. 341-44.

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<sup>iii</sup> Richard Elmore et.al. “How to Manage Urban School Districts” in *Harvard Business Review*, Nov. 2006, pp.55-68.