



BY DENNIS SPARKS

The Importance of “Reframing”

One of the fundamental findings of cognitive science is that people think in terms of frames and metaphors. . . . The frames are in the synapses of our brains, physically present in the form of neural circuitry. When the facts don't fit the frames, the frames are kept and facts ignored. . . . Frames once entrenched are hard to dispel.

—George Lakoff

Early in my career, my principal sought me out to schedule a classroom visit to complete the observation portion of my annual evaluation. “Remember to choose a day when you will be teaching,” he reminded me. What he meant, of course, was that he wanted to assess my teaching “moves” to determine my effectiveness. What he didn’t want to see was students spending most of the period working by themselves at their desks or in small groups. I didn’t know it then, but I was being introduced to the “teaching is performance” frame, one of a small number of frames and metaphors about teaching, learning, and leadership that fundamentally shape educational practice without our conscious awareness of their influence.

Put simply, frames are the mental frameworks we use to think about things. Our thinking, and hence our ability to change, is limited by these deeply rooted, beneath-the-surface systems of beliefs and ideas. While difficult to dispel, frames can be changed. The process begins with awareness of the dominant frame and its influence on practice and the ability to conceptualize alternative frames that better

serve student learning. (My next column will address ways to reframe important ideas.)

Here’s an example: The widely held and seldom questioned “teaching is performance” frame places teachers on stage. Teachers receive performance evaluations and their dynamism and charisma are particularly valued. At its extreme, this frame leads students to view their teachers as entertainers. While the “teaching is performing” frame highlights several important qualities of effective teachers, it is also limiting.

An alternative frame provided by Phil Schlechty offers another perspective. In this frame teachers are leaders of knowledge workers and inventors of knowledge work. I supplement Schlechty’s frame with these ideas: Teaching is teamwork. Teaching is learning. Teaching is relationships with students and colleagues.

If accepted, this frame holds incredible potential to alter how educators think about and practice significant aspects of schooling. For example, teachers would become more skillful in providing engaging and meaningful knowledge work for students. They would be assessed based on the quality of the knowledge work they provide to students, on their ability as leaders to motivate student engagement with that work, on evidence of their continuous learning (not seat time spent in workshops), and on their contributions to ongoing teams.

When leaders create new conceptual frames with others, they lead through learning.

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