Without heart and spirit nourished by cultural ways, schools become learning factories devoid of soul and passion.

Terry Deal and Kent Peterson

Eight years ago I accepted the superintendency of Maplewood Richmond Heights (MRH), a small urban district nestled next to St. Louis. As an assistant superintendent in a neighboring district for ten years, I had watched MRH flounder from one crisis to another. It seemed that in spite of serving only 1,000 students, the district consistently suffered all of the crises of large urban schools. In 2000, when the superintendency opened for the fourth time in five years, I decided to test my theories about school culture and systems thinking in what appeared to be a broken system. I applied, and the next thing I knew I was moving from an upscale suburban district with a great reputation to a district that couldn’t seem to get it together.

An Informal Ethnographic Study

Because my new assistant superintendent and I were hired in January and didn’t officially start work at MRH until July, we approached the district for six months as an ethnographic study. During several evenings and on Saturdays we “opened shop” in a nearby coffee house and invited any staff member who wished to talk to us about MRH to join us. We promised a free cup of coffee, a listening ear, and complete confidentiality. Over the course of the six months we had individual conversations with almost forty staff members, all of the MRH board members, the mayors and city managers of the two towns served by the district, and individuals identified by my new Board of Education as important to the life of the community. We also talked with close to a dozen graduates and students of the district.

What became clear in those conversations was a school culture rooted in negative images of the students, the staff, the school itself and the broader community. Maplewood, one of the towns we served, was identified by several of the speakers as “Maple-hood.” A teacher commented, “For most of the county we are considered the unwashed hordes from the south.” The myth of the victim played itself out in many of the conversations in statements such as, “We do the best we can with the students we have.” Others commented that
resources weren’t available to meet the intense needs of many of their students—over half of whom lived in poverty. The city manager of one of the cities described the district as an albatross that hung around the city’s neck.

School Culture

In discussing the impact of school culture in determining what people pay attention to, Deal and Peterson comment, “A school’s culture sharpens the focus of daily behavior and increases attention to what is important and valued.” Culture, they note, is “manifested in patterns of behavior and mental maps,” and perhaps is best defined as “the way we do things around here.” The negative mental maps of MRH held by those involved in the work of the school shaped the teaching and learning, the interactions of individuals and groups, and the sense of self worth of the adults and children in the district.

Prevalent Beliefs at MRH in 2000

- The children who come to us have so many problems that we can not expect to produce the same results of other schools.
- These students need the basics: drill and practice is the best way to help them.
- Teachers and administrators have different goals and can work together only with union monitoring and formal agreements.
- MRH is not a place where you build a career.
- Schools within the district must fight each other for community respect.
- Parents are the enemy.
- Resources can be pulled away at any moment. It is every teacher for himself.
- Improvement efforts are primarily about fulfilling state mandates rather than about real change. Wait awhile and the initiative will be gone.
- I do the best I can in my classroom—what goes on in the rest of the district is not my responsibility.

As I reflected on the interviews and the initial months of work I was struck by a culture that was often toxic—for the children and for the adults who worked there. A full one third of the high school students were diagnosed as needing special education. The school teetered on the verge of being labeled academically deficient by the state. The teachers’ association was in continual conflict with the School Board and administration, and staff turnover was over 25%. Fifty percent of the students who could attend the school chose not to—choosing instead private schools, parochial schools, or home schooling.
A school’s culture emerges in part from the metaphors that shape attitudes and behaviors. The seminal work on metaphors completed by Lakoff and Johnson define metaphor as “experiencing one concept in terms of another.” The brain abstracts experiences into concepts and then connects these with other concepts in order to build understandings. Metaphors frequently emerge from historical experiences that become part of the unconscious daily life in an organization. The ability to link schooling to other images suggests metaphor has potentially powerful implications to influence school life, and exploring the linked concepts might support school reform by influencing attendant behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. At MRH in the absence of any other coherent vision, the metaphor of the factory dominated the lives of teachers and learners alike.

**School as Factory**
The impact of the machine metaphor has been well documented in social, scientific, and political thinking for centuries. The world of the early twentieth century existed in a mechanical universe shaped by Newton, and the factory emerged as the prized organizational tool as the century began. Perhaps no other organization took on the metaphor of the factory as fully as did American schools. Strong echoes of factory theory advanced by Weber and others still infuse much of schooling in the United States. Centralized decision-making, specialization, a view of productivity as “time spent on work,” and assembly lines all became embedded in our mental model of school. Woodbury notes, “The factory saw workers and parts as interchangeable, and early behaviorists saw the children as empty vessels to be filled.”

Of course the problem with this view of children, learning, and schools has been argued fiercely by progressive educators for decades. Children are not products and teachers are not machines. The factory metaphor minimizes human potential, creativity, interaction, and innovation. Yet, interestingly, schools that serve our neediest students frequently are the ones that most closely align to the view of school as factory. The dehumanizing of teachers who work in such settings is seen in materials described as “teacher-proof,” and in policies and procedures that minimize the ability of teachers to deal with the unique perspectives and the ways and rates of learning of individual students. Students who do not succeed in such mechanistic settings are seen simply as seconds off the assembly line—and from schools are passed too often to prisons—the other institution that adopted wholeheartedly the factory metaphor.
In almost every community in the United States elements of the factory metaphor remain embedded in schools. In places where poverty, lack of leadership, or other social issues sap a district’s energy, schools too often hyperbolize the factory metaphor and frame the work of school in ways that narrow the possibilities for children and adults to thrive. The additional hammer of accountability that has become such a force since the passage of NCLB also magnifies the issues and thwarts creativity and innovation in addressing school reform. This seemed to be true for MRH—a school that had been spiraling downward for many years.

The Search for New Metaphors
Schon advocates that new and better solutions can often emerge from supplying an alternative framing metaphor. The use of alternative metaphor to revitalize the school culture in the district was intriguing to administrators and the Board of Education. We saw metaphor offering a compact and rich package that could provoke an organization’s thinking about its purpose and approaches in new and nuanced ways. Cherry and Spiegel in their book Myth, Metaphor, and Leadership identify the following purposes for reframing by way of metaphor:

- Encourage people to think differently about themselves, their organization, and their relationship with the organization
- Help people solve problems creatively and proactively
- Identify a prevailing and outdated institutional myth and develop a new proactive story for your organization
- Discourage the influence of resisters to change
- Lead creative thinking and problem solving by example
- Assess, reinforce, and perpetuate spiritual values within your organization

We began to search consciously for metaphors that would counter the self limiting image of the factory. Certainly we recognized that simply identifying fresh metaphors would not resolve all of the serious issues facing the district, but the idea of inventing a new “story,” a new way of talking about teaching and learning, seemed intriguing. And clearly we needed to find alternatives to help teachers focus on positive images of themselves, their learners and on the primacy of student learning work to their teaching. We wanted metaphors that would lead us in exploring the active, constructivist approaches to teaching and learning that we felt helped children and adults thrive in a respectful and nurturing environment.
The Expedition

Our metaphor work started with the middle school—perhaps the most problematic of all of the schools. The pattern of enrollment was clear—MRH was hemorrhaging at the seventh and eighth grade. Students would continue through our elementary schools and then families would move from the district before their students began in the middle school. This first metaphor was perhaps the easiest—a well known national program focused teachers and children on expeditionary learning. One of their key slogans was “We are crew not passengers.”

We began our work with the national organization and commenced with the study of what life in school would be like if we thought of education as an expedition. Expeditions meant that teachers and students left the confines of the classroom often—and this was certainly not easy in the early days. On one of the first expeditions to a nearby science center the police were called to break up a fight. On an early overnight most of the teachers returned refusing to speak to each other. I have to admit that in the first years, as we put students and teachers on the bus to visit a site where they would study, I’d be praying under my breath that everyone would come back safe and sound.

Christy Moore, a science teacher at the middle school has been with us for seven years. Christy admits that in the early days it was sometimes a nightmare. “We were unsure what we were doing and this approach forced a degree of collaboration among teachers that was really unusual. At first we thought of expeditions as something we did in addition to “real school.” But years of experience have changed that. Christy comments,

When we leave the school building it’s as though the school layer comes off. Students see teachers in a different light. We become more human and in some ways more vulnerable. This helps build relationships—which is perhaps the most critical part of what we do with teenagers. We eat, brush our teeth together, and we are changed because of the closeness.

Christy notes that at first the expeditions seemed exhausting and complicated—but now students leave the classroom several times for each unit of study. “There were so many resources we were overlooking,” she said. “And now we are much more interdisciplinary in the way we think about our work. I plan my units with the social studies, English, and math teachers so we get the most out of our units. We are not isolated in our own rooms.”
Christy also recognizes that relationships with both teachers and children are transformed because of the expeditions. Because the adults are working so closely together, they problem solve together. She describes one situation:

*In the past when students misbehaved we sent them to the office. Over time we realized we were relinquishing important control. Now we do much more reteaching about appropriate behavior than ever before. I think about my teaching from the Dog Whisperer’s perspective. I think about how I need to change my behaviors to help students succeed—very different from how I used to approach students.*

In the past three years, discipline referrals have dropped by 75%. Christy attributes a good part of this to the focus on learning as expedition. She notes even the difficult tasks they take on—clearing brush at a nearby park as part of service learning or the eight mile hike as part of an extended stay in the mountains of Tennessee—gives students cause to celebrate their accomplishments. “It’s like boot camp in some ways,” she notes, “Kids love to accomplish something important.” “And,” she comments, “Kids have so much now that they want to read and write and talk about. This learning is real.”

**The Studio**

The second metaphor to evolve was at the Early Childhood Center, serving students in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade. The principal and teachers began to study the work in Reggio Emilia, Italy—considered by many to offer the finest early childhood programs in the world. A grant allowed the staff to work with a skilled group of university professors to explore the unique philosophy of the Italian program. At the heart of Reggio Emilia’s work is the atelier—the studio, where students learn to express themselves with a wide range of media. And so the early childhood staff members began to examine what life was like in a school that resembled a studio.

JoAnn Ford, a preschool teacher who has worked in the district for over 20 years, had just returned from a trip to Italy to see the schools she had been reading about when I asked her to take some time to visit with me about how the metaphor of studio has influenced her practice. JoAnn comments that she thinks everyday of a Piaget quote “If you teach a child something, you have stolen forever his opportunity to discover it.” She states,
When I operate my classroom with this in mind I relinquish a lot of control. Today I see that my students are really doing important thinking. My classroom has become a studio which is something like a think tank of three, four, and five year-olds. When we had the earthquake earlier in the year, my students developed hypotheses of what had happened. One child thought that dinosaurs underground were shaking the earth. Students expressed their understandings of the earthquake with drawing, with blocks, in lots of different ways.

JoAnn’s enthusiastic description of her classroom highlights the value placed on students’ construction of understanding. In the studio students have become active participants in shaping the conversation. They have also learned to use a broad range of media to express their learning. JoAnn discusses the evolving role of documentation panels that record students’ work with excerpts from their conversations and photographs of them working as well as examples of their projects:

At first we were very hesitant about developing documentation panels. We asked, “Who is this for?” It began, I think, for most of us as window dressing. Now we realize documentation is not simply display. Now students, teachers, and parents all use the panels to talk about what we have learned and what we are learning now.

JoAnn is quick to note that changes in practice took years...only the superficial changed overnight. The key point of leverage for her and for her colleagues was sustained opportunities to discuss, explore and think about alternatives together with an expert in the area as a coach. She comments, “Regular collaborative time has really changed our practice. Now our best and our worst come to the table. We trust each other.”

As JoAnn and her colleagues waded into a new metaphor she found herself questioning “some of the things we do because we’ve always done them.” Lines, for example. She notes:
I sat up in bed one night and said to my husband, "Where do adults walk in straight lines without talking? Why do we take so much pleasure putting kids in lines? If we really are a studio, would people need to move in straight lines? And does an entire class always have to move? Wouldn't smaller groups be moving to find what they needed?"

And so the study of the studio evolves—supported by expert coaches who help teachers frame questions, examine their practice and facilitate students in expressing their learning in a broad range of media.

The Museum
The metaphor for the elementary school emerged from an article by Linda D’Aguisto about students producing museum exhibits published in Education Leadership. I sent a copy of the article to the elementary principal and asked her to discuss the piece with her staff. The article outlined the experience of a school where students created displays of their learning for other students and the community. A number of teachers were interested in exploring the metaphor, and so we arranged for Linda to begin to work with a small team of volunteers. The results of the first museum opening were infectious. Parents, teachers, and children all had something to talk about—and parents came to the opening at their children’s insistence. It was the biggest parent event we had ever held. Clearly we were on to something.

Within two years the entire school was involved in producing exhibits as part of students’ inquiry education incorporating science and social studies. When we passed a bond issue that allowed us to build a new elementary school, we approached the design with the idea of a museum in mind so that every grade level has an exhibit area. As visitors enter the foyer today, they are greeted with a sign that welcomes them to MRH Elementary School and Museum. A brochure announces the exhibits that are available for viewing and how to secure a personalized tour with a docent.

Dan Lyons has been a teacher in the district for ten years and currently serves as the elementary gifted teacher and chair of the Museum Board of Directors, a group of students who deal with the operation of the museum. Dan was in the original group that experimented with museum exhibits and now supports students and teachers in learning in this way. Dan notes that both students and teachers in the museum school think much differently about their work than when he first started at MRH:
Thinking about our school as a museum opened up so many ideas of what is possible. We used to teach the American Revolution as a series of facts. Now we do an object study, a visit to a local museum, and a perspective wall. More and more we are feeling comfortable going where students are interested in the topic. We’re no longer driven by the textbook. Students’ questions become very important, not just a nuisance.

This kind of teaching, Dan acknowledges requires teachers to be both skillful and collaborative. He remarks, “When you aren’t following a textbook you have to get very clear about what you want children to learn.” He also emphasizes that this work has become much more social for both teachers and students. “You can’t be successful at the elementary school and stay in your classroom. You are expected to be planning with your team and helping your students learn from the exhibits other grade levels are producing.”

The work at MRHE strikes Dan as more authentic now that it is guided with the museum metaphor. “Kids are much more aware of “other” because they are constantly thinking about how well we are communicating with our audience. Do we need graphics or charts or an experience to help little kids understand our exhibit? What about our grandparents?” And the conversations have deepened.” He reflects, “The openings give children opportunities to have rich conversations with adults. Parents, grandparents, aunts—they all come to openings because the kids are excited to tell them about what they have learned. Kids really like being experts.”

Kathy Stroud who has just completed her first year as principal at MRH Elementary agrees with Dan. She comments, “Parents come to exhibit openings because their kids are excited.” But what intrigues Kathy even more is how the idea of museum is changing teacher practices beyond preparing exhibits:

I see students and teachers taking a much longer view of their work than I have in other places. They are not thinking about bits and pieces of knowledge—they look for patterns and connections. Classroom walls are covered with questions students are investigating and things they are discovering.

The elementary school staff continues to work with the Linda D’Aquisto, each year peeling back the layers of the museum metaphor and exploring the implications for their work.
The Apprenticeship

The least developed of our metaphors is at the high school, where the principal and teachers have begun to explore life in a high school that focuses on students as apprentices. While this is the least developed of the metaphors thus far, three major changes in the school are attributable to the metaphor.

The first recognition that emerged from our thinking about apprenticeship was that our students need to have teachers who are themselves experts. This meant promoting both content area expertise and real world experience for our teachers. The principal now encourages teachers to select "an area of scholarship," and the district supports additional coursework, seminars, and travel to help teachers become experts. We encourage our science teachers to become involved in actual science research. One of them has traveled to the Galapagos Islands as part of a research team; another works with the scientific community locally and has been able to secure intern positions for her students. Students are actively participating in a study of migratory birds on our campus as a result of a teacher’s experience. We encourage our English teachers to write and publish and our social studies teachers to become experts in a particular era or a region of the world. This acknowledgement and support of expertise stands in stark contrast to the world of the factory where teachers too often are viewed as interchangeable parts.

The curriculum itself focuses much more on authenticity of work than in the past. Performance events at the end of each unit of study in all courses now require students to apply their learning in a real world setting. And the curriculum offerings have also begun to change. We have begun a new environmental sustainability curriculum where students research topics such as alternative energy sources for the school district and report their recommendations to the Board of Education. A conference writing program requires students to attend regular individualized writing conferences with their teacher throughout the year to insure their writing is improving. New courses in web design and videography are taught by individuals who first worked in the business world and can show students how to apply their new skills.

Patrick McEvoy, the principal at the high school for the past ten years, has big plans for the apprenticeship metaphor. He would like all students in the high school to serve a real world apprenticeship in an area of interest during their high school career. He has already begun to work with a teacher team to explore this possibility. And he has learned from the other schools in the district. "One thing I noticed," he commented, "was that in all the other schools in the district, displays of student work are very important. So I got to thinking that should be true in a school that focuses on apprenticeship as well. The students need to
think of their learning as their work. They need to be proud of it. So we implemented the academic wall of fame.”

The High Schools wall of fame takes up a major part of a hallway on the main floor. There each quarter every teacher in the school displays some of the best work from every course that was taught. The display includes a picture of the student who created the work and the rubric that was used to evaluate the piece. Students take a good deal of pride in the wall of fame and frequently encourage visitors to the high school to take a stroll down the hall to see the kind of work that is done by students at MRH.

**Reframing Beliefs at MRH**

The use of metaphors to fuel school transformation is in many ways directly counter to the current thinking on school reform with the intense emphasis on accountability. At MRH, however, we have found that over time we have shifted important attitudes and practices as a result of our reframing of our work. Current widespread beliefs as illustrated by the above interviews include the following:

- *MRH is a place where creativity and innovation are valued.*
- *Collaboration is critical to our work in the district.*
- *Our students thrive in environments that support them in building their understandings through active, social learning.*
- *The learning work our students produce is important to us: we display it, analyze it, and celebrate it.*
- *MRH hires and supports high quality teachers who assume important leadership roles in the district.*
- *Parents are an important part of our success.*
- *Genuine change takes a long time and requires both outside experts and our own best thinking to take root.*

Over the past eight years, teachers have become much more satisfied and no longer see the district as a short career stop—teacher turnover has dropped to around 12%. Our elementary school museum program features prominently in Linda D’Acquisto’s new book, *Learning on Display*. We have attracted back a full fifty percent of the parents who had fled the district earlier. Tests scores are up and so is college attendance. While we know we still have much to learn and to improve, our students are now applying their skills and building their
understandings in rich environments that celebrate their voices and their contributions to our learning community.

References


