Critics and Workers—
Lessons on Fame and Pain

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I've learned some things in the last three months. My lessons began at the Call for Forum 1994, continued for me at the early February, 1995 Colorado Reading Council State meeting in Denver, and concluded at the mid-February 1995 Association for Teacher Educators annual meeting in Detroit. I think I can best explain what I've learned with questions and some discussion. Here is the first lesson.

Question: “Professor, do you want fame?”

Answer: “Sure, why not?”


A sure way to fame, even better than writing a book or speaking at conferences is to host a radio talk show. On the February 2, 1995 G. Gordon Liddy noon hour talk show, a caller asked for advice. “What can I do, as a parent, to protect my three children as America goes down the toilet?”. G. G. L. replied, with glee. “It's easy. The first thing you must do is take your children out of the public schools and put them in a good private school.” He wailed about the ills of public education,
regaled terrified listeners with a public school and guns horror tale, and assured the concerned parent that the money for private schooling is a small price to pay for saving their children’s lives.

The critics try to teach us about the sins of compulsory schooling in America. Their books and speeches are hard hitting and often painfully accurate. They show how public schools seem to function to serve the school bureaucracy, not the public, not the children. The critics all, in some way, call for radical changes. While Smith and Liddy are applauded for simply yelling, ”Abandon ship!” Gatto and Lieberman suggest that family, church, craft and farm schools will make schools less of a state run job project and more learner friendly.

The idea that schools exist for themselves as state run job projects is a hard lesson to swallow. But I recall how the textbook selection practices in the Madison, Wisconsin Public Schools back in the early 1970s were designed to fit the publishers marketing and sales arrangements, rather than the schools’ needs for books that fit the curriculum and the kids. So we changed the process to allow local schools to select their own texts. It was not easy to move from a district-wide process to an individual school procedure. The publishers gave us enormous grief. And developing a teacher-directed selection process was tedious; it involved a lot of trial and error work. In retrospect, the school-centered solution we devised to break the publishers’ 1970s stranglehold on the process is very similar to the local choice, free market approach that Gatto and Lieberman advocate in the 1990s.

Breaking the government monopoly on compulsory schooling is a tall order. The free market school choice concept scares us. Some of us predict that the poor and powerless will suffer while the rich and powerful will take over. Our egalitarian heritage gives rise to the specter of a school caste system that fosters elitism. We are so used to looking at teaching from a state and school district perspective we do not trust a free market system. What about standards, accountability, teacher training? Who would supervise teachers? What would happen to teacher education programs? As workers in the education enterprise we wonder what would happen to our jobs as professors who teach teachers. At this point in the lesson another question is raised, answered, and discussed.

Question: “Hey professor, do you want some pain?”

Answer: “Gee, I don’t think so.”

Discussion: At the Colorado Council State IRA meeting in Denver
on February 2, 1995, a dozen teachers, a principal, and two supervisors attended a workshop on changing school literacy programs. The leader, a professor, presented some case studies of teachers as literacy leaders who’ve made differences in their schools and communities. The meeting was informal and after the participants traded stories of ways teachers and principals work to improve the teaching of reading and writing the professor asked, “What motivates some educators to work at improving the public schools which, according to critics, are beyond repair?” One of the participants said, “I think one reason teachers hang in there has something to do with their basic motives to become teachers in the first place.” This got everyone’s attention and she read the following from a paper on her lap.

My own bitterness and apprehension about teaching came as a surprise. Over the years I’ve been willing to tolerate the separation, corruption, criticism, even the surveillance because I’ve carried out my own teaching convinced I was helping children. It’s like the way a surgeon might be content with setting bones in the middle of an endless catastrophe. My work as a classroom teacher has become a shell for me, a way to both deny and accept the harshness of school as a work place. Thank God I can “set bones” while the criticism mounts against teachers and public schools across America. (Smith, 1992)

It was quiet, there was a nodding of heads, and as she passed out copies of her paragraph, she explained how she had paraphrased it while reading Smith’s book. As a veteran teacher she said, “As I read the book I identified strongly with the main character who was musing why he kept working so hard as a Moscow detective while the Soviet social system was coming apart. It seemed to me that the main reason I continue to teach in a system under attack is my belief that I am still making a difference in some children’s lives.” The setting bones analogy from Denver stuck with me as my lessons continued in Detroit.

At the Association for Teacher Educators conference in Detroit on February 21, 1995, Vivienne Collinson and Lisa DeMeule presented their research on helping teachers take charge of changing schools. They impressed me as excellent young researchers—two bright, sensitive, and articulate professors. They shared the pitfalls, frustrations, hopes, and successes they experienced and documented when schools try to move from the old one-shot expert-led workshop model to a new sustained inquiry model in which teachers are the leaders.

Collinson (1995) detailed the frustrations and small victories that happened when she worked to help an elementary school in the
Midwest began to shift from the old idea of teaching as a private activity to one of exposing and discussing teachers’ beliefs and practices in a public forum. Especially intriguing and valuable was the notion of how important it was for teachers to have a shared vocabulary so that they could communicate effectively in order to collaborate. She gave the example of how her use of the term “best practices” almost doomed the project from the start. The word “best” seemed to create a climate of competition rather than a spirit of cooperation, collaboration, or trust. She documented examples of how she and the teachers learned to reword discussion questions so that discussions did not bog down with unrelated comments, non sequiturs, constant interruptions, and too many talking at the same time.

DeMeule’s (1995) work, which she reported, was to lead a large faculty of 80 teachers in Memphis, Tennessee to write a school development plan that was based on the shared visions of the staff, administration, and community. She documented the headaches, problems, as well as the progress she and the teachers made as they tried to shift from the old role of teacher as private disseminator of knowledge to a new role of teacher as facilitator, community member, and school improvement leader. They spent four months meeting, discussing, arguing. They wrote a 17 page document that included a school philosophy, shared visions for curriculum changes, a new school/community network, and a school beautification plan. Illustrating the ambiguity and lack of trust she encountered at early meetings, DeMeule told how one teacher asked, “Are you asking us these questions because you don’t know, or are you thinking we [the teachers] should decide together?” As the year progressed, DeMeule reports that teachers moved away from their private self-interest toward a great common vision. She says, “Many teachers reported that their greatest reward was working with other teachers who cared about the school and were committed” (p. 17).

Collins’s and DeMeule’s accounts of the tensions, lack of trust, their own anxieties, excitement and frustration as they led the school development sessions illustrate both the pain and the hope involved in changing schools. Their work clearly illustrates the importance of professors and teachers who are willing to get “dirty hands” in order to move from the traditional private setting bones orientation to a public shared vision or surgical amphitheater outlook. And while both researchers are optimistic about the positive effects of teacher collaboration they acknowledge the pain, the danger. DeMeule said, “...there are no easy solutions or quick fixes when attempting to promote teacher leadership. It is a long and complex work fraught with many issues of affect” (p. 17). The lesson winds down with another question.
Question:  “Professor, what have you learned by now?”

Answer:  As I think about the lesson I’ve learned from these encounters with both critics and workers, I go back to the Call to Forum on Sanibel Island in December 1994. I took a seat away from the front. I didn’t want to go first and by the time my turn came it was clear that Gatto’s book was not well liked. Most of the professors wanted to burn him at the stake as a heretic. When my turn came, I wanted to be different and positive so I said, “I thought it was a religious book. My former association with the Congregational Church squares with his ideas, especially the good effects of a social system where people feel ownership for everything that happens in their organization. I stopped talking at this point. No one responded directly to me. The Gatto lynching party resumed. Only one panelist said, “I love this book. Gatto’s right, and we ought to listen and do something about it.” His strong endorsement stood alone. Dumbing Us Down was rejected. Alice dismissed it as “A silly little book,” and others were more brutal. Gatto was booed and hissed like a basketball referee who called traveling, charging, and other fouls on the beloved home team. No wonder the Forum ended with cries of “Kill the ref! Kill the ref!” The Forum rejection of the critic Gatto was very similar to the resistance workers like Collinson and DeMeulle encountered when they attempted to make changes.

And now three months later, I think I know why Gatto was rejected by professors at the 1994 Forum. We know how painful it will be to change roles. We are just like the classroom teachers Collinson and DeMeulle met with and asked, “Let’s open up, collaborate, and collectively change what we are doing.” Instead of disseminating information in the privacy of campus classrooms, professors may be asked to experience the ambiguity, the frustration, and the tension that Collinson and DeMeulle describe when they worked face to face with teachers on their local school turf. If professors expect teachers to share visions, and collaborate, they will have to change from private bone setting on campus to a more public and ambiguous role as school reform facilitators. And while our respect for professors like Collinson and DeMeulle can run deep, we secretly dread facing the pain they encountered as they attempted to facilitate change in schools.

Perhaps the real lesson from these encounters with critics and workers is not simply that critics get fame and workers get pain. The truth is that both are needed. Gatto and Lieberman have put their fingers on some rotten spots and have suggested some solutions that need to be seriously considered. As for Frank Smith and G. Gordon Liddy, their calls to jump ship, leave, go AWOL, or quit, simply fall far
short. They appear arrogant, callous, and unwilling to get their hands dirty. They’re all talk and no effort.

The lesson for me is that the most reasonable way to proceed with school reform is to listen to the critics like Gatto and Lieberman and study the work of professors like Collinson and DeMeulle. Taken together, we cannot ignore the message. The Gattos and Liebermans get our attention, and young professors show us the way. They remind us that changing public schools means new roles and new expectations for professors as well as classroom teachers. And as we both try to shift from a private setting bones in the midst of catastrophe view of teaching to a more public and consumer-oriented view there will be more pain than fame.

References


Fame can put your close relationships to the test, and this is something you should be prepared for. Some people in your life will be very affirmative and excited about your career, and others may end up jealous and competitive for your time. Spend time having one-on-one conversations with your loved ones, explaining to each person your goals, values, and intentions for your relationship during times of your major success.

5. Stick close to the art that got you famous. His father took pains to inculcate a sense of duty in his heart. Later he came to be a responsible person.

2. It's not intelligence that you need to choose friends. When the management refused to bow down to the workers' demands, they called a general strike.

2. Realizing that the situation was getting out of hand the president called in troops to restore order in the capital. 3. He pulled up his lorry in the middle of the road, got out and ran to the damaged car.

1. Their sudden rise to fame took all the critics by surprise. They hadn't expected the band to dominate the charts.

2. The death toll is going to rise as more bodies are being recovered.

Tame, Same, Fame and pain! To come out from your shame, With the frame of a new life. Edward Kofi Louis. Topic(s) of this poem: fame, lifestyle, overcoming, pain. Poems by Edward Kofi Louis : 9203 / 32298. Å« prev, poem, next poem Å«. Comments about Fame And Pain! by Edward Kofi Louis. There is no comment submitted by members.. User Rating