Managing Dilemmas While Building Professional Communities

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I am a teacher. I have taught for a quarter-century. Others might classify me as an “educator” since over a three-and-a-half decade career I have also been a superintendent, a teacher educator, an associate dean in a university’s school of education, and a researcher. But it is teaching—not administration or research—that has defined my adult life. If teaching has permitted me to be a lifelong learner, performer, writer, and friend to former students and colleagues, it has also forced me to navigate moral conflicts.

In teaching, I have had moments when odd tingles ran up and down my back as students’ thoughts and mine unexpectedly joined and became one; moments when listening to students forced me to rethink a conventional notion after I had closed my mind’s door; moments when it became clear that my students had touched me deeply. These rare instances are, for me, like the delicious crack of a bat that sends a ball soaring into the left-field stands.

Less treasured moments are those that have left me numb with the repetitiveness of teaching four classes in a row or the nagging sense that the voice I heard coming out of my mouth glazed students’ eyes and drooped their heads onto desks. Other moments left me sad when I knew in my heart that I had failed to reach some students.

Teaching history for over a decade in all-Black schools from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s gave me insights into my cultural blind spots and a deeper understanding of the strengths and ravages of growing up Black in urban America. Those years scrubbed away stereotypes, teaching me to move beyond the then-liberal rhetoric of being colorblind and to recognize openly the dilemmas I faced in teaching Black youth a history that had to make sense to them in their terms as much as mine. Because I was in the minority when I taught in these schools, I came to understand in an intensely personal way how my students and peers viewed Whites. Within these city schools I began my teaching career, learned my craft, and forged both personal and professional values.

In the last 35 years, then, teaching has been central to my experiences as an educator. I discovered that in each teaching post I served—high school teacher, trainer of new teachers, and professor—there were common features to the craft of teaching. Moreover, deeply embedded in my teaching, administering, policymaking, and researching have been common dilemmas with which I have had to cope. Yet even with these commonalities I found little sense of belonging to a community of scholars and practitioners. This afternoon I will develop these three themes: Professors and practitioners face common dilemmas; they share the practice of teaching; and no professional community yet joins them together.

Three Instances of Conflict

Let me begin with the theme of dilemmas by telling a painful story about how I left administration to return to teaching some time ago. After 2 years as a top district office administrator in the Washington, DC, schools, the city council’s budget cuts gutted my department. I faced a dilemma. Although my position was left intact and I was urged to stay, I was thoroughly disillusioned with central office administration. I could stay to face the bureaucratic and racial politics in which I had become a losing player or I could return to the classroom where I knew I could make a contribution. I decided to ask for a transfer to the high school social studies position that I had had. Trading off salary and a high administrative position for teaching was a compromise I was willing to make. But I paid for it by receiving a series of stinging bureaucratic slaps.

I knew that my salary would drop by one third and was willing to accept that loss. What surprised me, however, was the official school board action that transfers an employee from one position to another. The notice I received read “demoted without prejudice.” The phrase, of course, was correct. I was moving to a lower rung on the organizational ladder, and being there was my choice. Still, the phrase smelled of failure.

Then the personnel department told me a week before school began that I could not receive a regular contract because I had never taken a course in secondary school teaching methods. Having taught in three cities, having prepared teachers to work in the district’s secondary schools, and having authored a book and numerous articles on teacher education, I was told that unless I took an education course within 2 years I could not teach in the system. After a pay cut, a demotion, and then a threat, I felt that I had committed a crime.

Of course, what I had smacked up against were the perverse incentives that drove big-city public schools in the 1970s. The organizational rewards of more money, higher status, and control of one’s time were outside the classroom.

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Urban high school teaching meant tough work: signing in every morning, teaching five classes, reading papers of over 170 students, hall duty, a half hour to gulp down lunch, one period to prepare lessons, seeing students after school, and then evenings spent marking papers and preparing for the next day. The grinding routine left me little energy or time for more than a fraction of my students, my wife and two children, and writing. The conflict over wanting to teach in the face of difficult working conditions and little bureaucratic regard for classroom teaching left me with unappealing choices.

My second story is about a clash with another teacher over how U.S. history should be taught to working-class Black students. It raised a dilemma in my mind when none had been before. At Roosevelt High School in Washington, DC, I had divided one of my five classes into four groups to gather information about cities in the early 20th century and in the 1970s. One group decided to explore the prevalence of venereal diseases then and now. As part of the information gathering, they decided to construct a survey of student and teacher opinion on venereal diseases and means for reducing their spread. We worked together on questionnaire items and how to do a random sample. The one-page survey went out to teachers and students in the school.

Myrtle Davis (a pseudonym), a Black teacher who had taught in the schools before desegregation and had a sterling reputation for her no-nonsense approach to teaching, returned her survey with the following note attached:

What justification is there for a survey of this kind under the banner of American History? These matters should, it seems to me, come within the province of courses dealing with Health and Science. Moreover, the performance of our students in the social studies has consistently fallen below acceptable standards. Could it be that each of us working in the field should make every moment of class time count in a concerted effort to bridge this no-information gap in American History?

I wrote a reply to Mrs. Davis and explained how this was an historical study of urban problems past and present and the survey was gathering information about one part of what the class was studying. Before sending the note to the teacher, I deleted the name and read her letter and my reply to the students. The class exploded in anger over the fact that another teacher had criticized what they were doing. By the next day, a few students had drafted a reply signed by 17 of the 19 in class to accompany mine—without knowing who the other teacher was. Their reply asked for evidence to support the allegation she made and questioned her right to criticize another teacher.

I gave my note and the class’s letter to Mrs. Davis. The next day she came to my room and asked if she could read her reply to the class. We arranged a time, and Mrs. Davis came and read her response. She spoke slowly and carefully, pointing out that she did not accuse any individual student or the teacher whom she respects. What prompted the letter was her strong concern over how little U.S. history students knew and the low student test scores in social studies on the college boards. She told the class of one counselor’s lecture to the department on the importance of teaching U.S. history if the school’s students were ever to improve on these national tests. She felt that class time should be spent on learning the basic historical facts.

After reading the letter, she asked if there were any questions. A few students again inquired why she criticized another teacher. Another asked why she made such a big deal out of learning facts from a textbook. She replied:

You have to learn these facts so you can do well on tests. If you do well on tests, you are going to get good jobs. All of us have to play catch-up. We have been behind so long, we must learn all the skills and knowledge we can. By not getting facts and skills, your chances to do well on tests and get into college will be less. We have to catch up.

Mrs. Davis was passionate. Her voice rose in volume. She occasionally trembled. The high pitch of emotion in the room broke after she spoke. There were no other questions. She thanked me and the class and left.

After she left, the class erupted with questions and comments. There was anger mixed with sincere respect for what she said and how she said it. The bell rang. With only a few weeks left before the school year ended, the incident was soon forgotten in the rush to complete assignments and take tests.

As I think about the incident, what strikes me is how Mrs. Davis and I had stumbled into a fundamental dilemma over what content should be presented and how it should be taught to working-class Black students. Our disagreement revealed the choices that each of us had made in our classes. This conflict over the moral appropriateness of content and methods for certain groups of students, of course, persists (Delpit, 1986; Lyons, 1990; Ravitch, 1990).

My final conflict is the dilemma inherent in being a practice-oriented researcher. Through my writing I want to satisfy the intellectual and scholarly values that I prize and also want to accommodate the action, can-do world of the practitioner, which is also part of me.

Trying to write for practitioners, policymakers, and other researchers creates much tension within me. In scholarly writing on the history of teaching, curriculum, and administration, for example, I ask questions and use a style that many practitioners find dense and removed from their daily concerns. The generic pattern in scholarly writing is familiar to everyone here. The protocols for such writing, even differing as they do among the disciplines, call for cautious, carefully circumscribed statements consistent with the data. In scholarly journals readers’ eyebrows go up when blueprints or prescriptions are offered to solve current problems (Marshall & Barritt, 1990).

Not so when writing for practitioners. The question posed is one that resembles a particular situation that teachers or administrators face. While there may be intellectual interest in the theory and analysis, what readers seek are detailed particulars that speak to their situation; they want an action plan, advice on what will work, and evidence that the plan will solve their practical problems. This is not peculiar to teachers and administrators. The same expectations exist among practicing lawyers, physicians, architects, and engineers.

So, for practice-oriented scholars writing for mixed audiences a typical compromise is to combine the scientific and the practical. Books have last chapters entitled “An Action Plan for the Future” or “Designs for Change.” Articles have closing paragraphs recommending what policymakers and practitioners ought to do. It is a compromise that I have used.
frequently in order to satisfy the scholarly side of me and the side that says don’t be too critical of practitioners because you were there; help out by suggesting what they ought to do. I manage the dilemma, but it leaves me uneasy.

I am even less comfortable with another conflict embedded in being a scholar/practitioner. What, for example, are my responsibilities as a scholar, secure in his tenure, to speak out against educational policies that I believe are seriously flawed in both logic and evidence and, ultimately, hostile to the vision that I have for students?

Take as an instance the current momentum building for national tests and a national curriculum. I could reason that this train is rushing down a track and there is little I could do to stop it other than try to persuade the engineers that there are better tracks to follow than the ones already here. I could then help build those better tracks.

Or I could reason that as a tenured scholar I have a secure perch from which to speak openly to practitioners, policymakers, and opinion setters. No presidential adviser, no governor’s aide, no superintendent, and no teacher has the freedom that a tenured academic has to try publicly to slow down that train rushing toward national tests and a curriculum. Much evidence is available, for example, that the linkages public officials have forged between the nation’s eroding economic productivity and student test scores are simply wrong. That American productivity has slowed down is due more to the growth of the service sector, the globalization of world trade, and gains that Third-World countries have made in their productivity. Declining American productivity is not due to declining student academic performance. Such arguments and evidence, and there is much more, can compellingly reveal the holes in the popular reasoning underlying the current movement to create national standards, tests, and a curriculum (Kerr, 1991).

Should educational scholars who are noneconomists but who believe that this train is on the wrong track accommodate to what appear as political realities and help build better tests, or should they use what expertise, evidence, and freedom they have to speak out to lay and professional audiences to influence the policy debate? Both choices, and there are others, are reasonable, of course. I lean toward the latter choice, but the dilemma pinches nonetheless.

These instances of personal dilemmas are not the stuff of TV miniseries. But they are ones that illustrate conflicting choices that we face as professors, practitioners, and scholars. So what?

What I want to argue is that we seldom examine these below-the-surface conflicts even though we cope with them continually in our work. We call them pesky problems or brush them aside as peripheral to our core business of getting the job done. What many practitioners, policymakers, and researchers call problems, I contend, are really fundamental dilemmas. The distinction between problems and dilemmas is worth making on intellectual and moral grounds.

I see problems as fairly routine, structured situations that produce some level of conflict because a desired goal is blocked. For example, in a high school class, just as the tardy bell rings, students continue to mill around and pay no attention to the teacher taking attendance or the assignment on the chalkboard. Or a researcher has run into obstacles in gaining access to conduct a study. Such problems do have solutions. Often these familiar situations, routine as they are for experienced teachers or researchers, require some degree of technical expertise in generating and implementing procedures that novices must master in managing groups or gaining access to study sites. Once solved, most of these problems can be handled customarily even as they recur.

This technical process of identifying the problem, generating feasible solutions, choosing the one that best reaches the goal (that is, eliminates the problem), and putting the solution into practice works well when it comes to fixing stalled cars, mending broken limbs, winning chess matches, and getting classes started on time. There is a history to these problems. Procedures have been developed to handle an array of contingencies. Solutions tend to be programmed. If the same problem is again diagnosed, a readily available list of rules is trotted out and executed. Like a jigsaw puzzle in which all the pieces fit together, the problem goes away (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979; Majone, 1989; Schon, 1983).

Difficulties with this technical approach to problem solving arise, however, when social, educational, and political problems with their entangled connections overwhelm our rationality, producing feelings of helplessness. Difficulties arise when a problem cannot be solved on the basis of existing scientific principles. For example, to solve the problem of increasing crime rates, cities and states add police officers, appoint more court officials, and build prisons. Expanded enforcement, more judges, and more cells divert dollars away from drug prevention, schools, welfare, and job training, which in their absence often contribute to more addiction, prostitution, poverty, and crime (Weick, 1984).

When the template of technical rationality is laid over a messy social or educational problem, it seldom fits. The entangled issues and their ambiguity spill over. There are no procedures to follow, no scientific rules for making decisions. Worse yet, the template hides value conflicts. These so-called “problems” are complex, untidy, and insoluble. They are, I argue, dilemmas.

Dilemmas are conflict-filled situations that require choices because competing, highly prized values cannot be fully satisfied. The choices I faced in returning to teaching or staying in a highly paid administrative position or the choices that scholars face in deciding either to write for practitioners and policymakers or to speak out on a controversial educational issue are instances of conflicting values inherent to the dilemmas that I described earlier. There are others, of course. At the university, a common organizational dilemma unfolds over the tension between professors helping practitioners cope with issues in their schools (a highly prized value for some scholars) and also producing rigorous research that passes muster with tenure or promotion committees (another important value). These values are anchored in professional, organizational, and personal expectations. They are built into the complex roles that teachers and professors perform. They derive from organizational imperatives. Tensions surface when there is insufficient time to accommodate these values.

These dilemmas look like problems. They even feel like problems (conflict is common to both), but they are far messier, less structured, and often intractable to routine solutions. They become predicaments rather than problems when constraints and uncertainty make it impossible for any prized value to triumph. Every person, every organization operates under constraints of time, money, laws, cultural and political assumptions, and scores of other conditions that limit what can be done at any one point in time. Awkward,
unattractive choices must be made in the face of these conditions to secure as much of the competing values as possible (Ben-Peretz & Kremer-Hayon, 1990; Berlak & Berlak, 1981; Burroughs, 1986; Elbow, 1983; Fenstermacher & Amarel, 1983; Getzels, 1982; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Sarason, 1982).

Unlike problems, then, where there may be three tested ways of collecting lunch money or gaining access to a research site, dilemmas are less susceptible to technical solutions. There are no “smart” bombs for dilemmas.

Dilemmas, then, involve choices, often moral ones. They end up with good-enough compromises, not neat solutions. We “satisfice” when we cope with dilemmas. That is, in order to satisfy, we must sacrifice. We invent a tightrope to walk, knowing that to cross the tightrope juggling the competing claims will still leave us uneasy. We negotiate the unappealing choices within dilemmas by tying opposites together in some fashion to cope with differences in values. Moreover, these good-enough bargains among values that we strike have to be renegotiated again and again because they are so deeply embedded in who we are and the practice of teaching, administration, and research. Thus, more often than not, we end up managing recurring dilemmas, not solving problems (Ball, 1990; Delpit, 1986; Fenstermacher & Amarel, 1983; Lampert, 1985; Lyons, 1990).

I claim no originality for the distinction that I draw. Philosophers and social scientists have made the point often (Berlak & Berlak, 1981; Getzels, 1982; McCaskey, 1982; Morgan, 1986). Moreover, lawyers and judges are thoroughly familiar with the notion of balancing competing claims and seeking compromise that will satisfy adversaries. Politicians also understand the language of bargains and logrolling. And economists routinely deal with trade-offs between values in making decisions.

A skeptic could question the distinction that I make on the grounds that just because other professionals are familiar with it and because I find it attractive, the distinction may still not be compelling to scholars and practitioners. Here are a few reasons why I focus on dilemmas rather than problems.

First, making moral decisions is at the heart of educational practice. All teachers, administrators, policymakers, and researchers, at one time or another, must act. To act, they must choose. Invariably, the choices involve competing values. For example, when a group of students copy from classmates during a major test, a new teacher has to choose among ignoring the copying, picking out one of the cheaters and making an example of the person, or confronting the group and taking some action. Or, in another example, researchers must decide how much they disclose to participants in their study about its design, theory, and hypotheses. The baggage for these decisions contains numerous constraints. These conditions produce trade-offs that must be weighed and then decided upon. Making choices, often moral ones, then, is central to practice (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Jackson, 1986; Tom, 1984).

Second, much research in education, particularly studies wedded to methods borrowed from the natural sciences, often obscures the central paradoxes: the messy difficulties that mark schooling. Such subject matter rarely fits the methods commonly used by educational researchers. One English scholar said:

There are three kinds of things in the world: there are troubles which we do not know quite how to handle; then there are puzzles with their clear conditions and unique solutions, marvellously elegant; and then there are problems—and these we invent by finding an appropriate puzzle form to impose upon a trouble. (Shulman & Elstein, 1975, p. 3)

Lee Shulman and Arthur Elstein, who quote this scholar, say bluntly, “Educational researchers attack problems for which convenient puzzle forms exist” (Shulman & Elstein, 1975, p. 3).

The point I make is that often the frameworks educational researchers use, especially within the social science disciplines, screen out certain complex problems that don’t fit existing ways of thinking. We ask questions for which we know how to find answers. Many educational researchers, imbued with the ethos of a science, often overlook mutually (or perhaps wisely) the enduring tension-ridden dilemmas that practitioners and policymakers must manage in their organizations.

But I am too heavy-handed in making this familiar point. There are disciplinary-based researchers who have made significant contributions to the study of practice by asking questions derived from their view of the world. Some anthropologists, linguists, sociologists, and psychologists have moved beyond the usual puzzle forms in their disciplines. New understandings of educational decision making, for example, come from the theoretical work of Herbert Simon, James March, John Meyer, and others who have opened up rich paths for viewing the organizational choices practitioners and policymakers face. Moreover, there are teachers, researchers such as Magdalene Lampert and Suzanne Wilson who, working closely with teachers and teaching themselves, have broadened our understanding of the dilemmas of classroom practices. What I want to do is underscore the obvious point that we must continue to make more room at the researcher’s table for disciplinary-based and practice-oriented scholars and scholarly practitioners who have moved beyond the usual puzzle forms in attacking complex issues in schooling (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972; Lampert, 1985; March & Simon, 1958; Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Wilson, 1990).

There is a final reason for concentrating on dilemmas. Americans think of problems as just waiting to be solved in a can-do, John Wayne spirit. “Pragmatic Americans,” wrote Luigi Barzini, “consider the very existence of problems intolerable and life with problems unacceptable. They believe... that all problems not only must be solved, but also that they can be solved, and that in fact the main purpose of a man’s life is the solution of problems.” One British observer called Americans “Godsakers.’ For God’s sake do something’” (Payer, 1988, pp. 131, 137).

The common observation that Americans seek a cure for every disease, a tidy ending for every film, and a beautiful sunset after a troubled day has become a cliché. This culture prizes getting the job done, speedy and efficient technologies, and asking the basic question, Will it work? Acknowledging that many situations are unsolvable and require good-enough trade-offs goes against the cultural grain and creates guilt over failing to remedy problems.

This is why a distinction between problems and dilemmas can be helpful. In a can-do culture, a pervasive sense of guilt often haunts practitioners, professors, and policymakers who face recurring, insoluble situations and repeatedly fail to...
“‘solve’ the ‘problem.’” Repeated failures of highly touted solutions leave a debris of disappointment, even cynicism, among well-intentioned educators. To distinguish between problems that can be solved and dilemmas that require “satisficing” can reduce guilt. We can pursue ways of reframing those dilemmas to get unstuck from familiar “solutions” and create better compromises and more elegant tightrope walks. Reframing and managing dilemmas are art forms, filled with doubt but at least free of corrosive guilt.

Explicit analysis of these inevitable predicaments may lead to more imaginative reframings of dilemmas (Getzels, 1982; Katz & Kahn, 1978). For example, Gunnar Myrdal’s study of race relations in this nation in the 1930s and its history went beyond the customary definition of racial troubles as a “Negro problem.” Myrdal reframed the “Negro problem,” as if it was then called, into an American dilemma where the beliefs of equality, the land of opportunity, and freedom—what he called the American creed—conflicted with Jim Crow practices and the second-class status Blacks had endured. The American dilemma was no longer a Negro problem but a clash of choices within the White man’s soul between the social and economic advantages gained from segregation and the ideals of equality and freedom (Myrdal, 1944).

Myrdal’s reframing of a historic and complex issue recast the traditional policy debate from how best to uplift the Negro economically to how to arouse Americans from their moral slumber over the gap between democratic beliefs and racist behavior. The intellectual reframing of the situation, of course, became a basis for the moral authority of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and its leaders’ extraordinary success in reducing the distance between Americans’ ideals and racial practices, a struggle that continues today (Garrow, 1986).

In the remainder of my time, I offer a perennial predicament that touches everyone here. A few scholars and analysts have examined this conflict, but it needs further inquiry and reframing. What I propose to do is examine through the lens of a dilemma the linkage between the unharnessed growth of specialization within all levels of schooling and the absence of community among educators engaged in teaching, the preparation of practitioners, and research. This specialization and lack of community stem, I argue, from deep conflicts in core values and organizational imperatives within the university, professional education, and public school teaching. These conflicts and conditions reveal the low regard in which teaching is held and the contradictions and moral struggles that all educators experience.

A Core Dilemma

Over the last century, at least three overlapping cultural values have created conflicts. The university culture, prizing the values of reflection, rigorous analysis, and scientifically produced research, competes against values within a professional school of applying disciplinary knowledge to practical situations in order to prepare the next generation of teachers, administrators, and researchers. Both sets of values embedded in university structures compete against another set of values within schools. There action is prized. The knowledge that is admired is concrete, relevant, drawn from experience, and applied to the practical dilemmas of teaching and learning (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988; Goodlad, 1990).

Despite decades of trying to reconcile these competing values and conditions through varied compromises, one obvious outcome has been a stunted sense of community among educational researchers and practitioners. The notion that professors and practitioners are engaged in the same enterprise, sharing common purposes, has been shredded into finely chopped specialties, distracting dichotomies such as theory and practice, and an abiding hunger for higher status by increasing the distance of scholars from public school classrooms. We are known by our degrees and publications. In being known, we have gained a crippling rigor in our research and kept potential colleagues at arm’s length.

These three overlapping cultural values create a “trilemma” rather than dilemma. In conflict with one another over the last century, universities and professional schools have created quiet compromises to reconcile these competing values. These compromises have tried to “satisfice” the apparent conflicts between disciplinary-based knowledge and its application to practice within schools and classrooms. These compromises have also tried to calm researchers anxious to raise the regard for educational scholarship held by academic colleagues in the humanities and sciences.

In this century, for example, the movement from normal schools to state teachers’ colleges to regional and national universities sought to elevate professional education within universities by increasing the amount of research to be produced. Schools of education added the PhD degree. They have hired social scientists to investigate basic educational questions and apply their knowledge to the practice of schooling, as cell biologists, physiologists, and geneticists in medical schools have probed at the causes and cures of diseases. These unexamined actions sought to finesse conflicting values by assuming a correspondence between the medical and social sciences and, in doing so, distanced scholarship from practice. These patchwork compromises, however, widened the cracks that already existed between professors and practitioners, further destroying any sense of community that may have existed among educators (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988; Goodlad, 1990).

The implicit strategy governing these compromises has been to copy the more prestigious occupation of medicine. One constant beacon for educational reformers guiding their designs has been the transformation of medicine. From a lowly regarded occupation in mid-19th-century America, medical practitioners have become a major profession by affiliating with the university and embracing research models from the physical and natural sciences. The increased stature of medicine was due, in part, to the tight coupling that developed between research findings that cured diseases and alleviated pain and medical practitioners who used those findings in their offices and hospital rounds. In education, the thought was that psychologists and other social scientists could develop the same relationship between research and practice that their medical colleagues had across campus. Seeking scientifically respectable research findings for practitioners to use in their classrooms continues to engage able educational scholars in worthy research (Berliner, 1987; Goodlad, 1990; Ludmerer, 1985; Soder, 1990).

Yet any impartial inspection of the higher education landscape in the 1990s would conclude that these quiet accommodations hammered out over the last century have failed. They have not enhanced the prestige or credibility of educational scholarship and professional preparation within the
university, among practitioners, state legislators, or the larger public. John Goodlad’s studies on teacher education and the work of Geraldine Clifford and Jim Guthrie confirm that low status persists. These schools are still “adrift between practicality and prestige”—as Clifford and Guthrie nicely put it (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988, p. 298).

Even with the gorged rhetoric of professionalization and a fierce determination to convert research findings on instruction into practice, teachers and educational researchers have yet to be accorded the status of doctors or professors of medicine. The evidence thus far suggests that the strategy of basing the enhancement of professional preparation and research upon the model of medical education is shot full of holes. Worse yet, the creation of intellectual communities among educators who find meaning and wisdom in the practice of teaching has been undermined, even buried, in this unbridled passion for specialization and higher prestige.

Serious scholarly examination of the uncertainties, ambiguities, and moral dilemmas of teaching students at different levels of schooling is one basis for assembling intellectual communities among educators.

Can the trilemma be reframed to seek another basis for enhanced professionalism other than the medical analogy? I believe that it can. Before I offer a redefinition, two assumptions need to be stated explicitly: First, I assume that teaching at any level of schooling is grounded in making practical moral decisions; second, I assume that it is the act of teaching anchored in its moral purpose, relationships to students, and impulse to serve others that binds professors and practitioners to one another. These two assumptions are at the heart of my reframing the trilemma. Simply put, I ask: How can we create intellectual communities among practitioners and professors that develop shared standards of teaching practice, and engage in sustained conversations over dealing with our common moral dilemmas?

Let me elaborate on this reframed trilemma. What joins together teaching from kindergarten through graduate school is that it is, essentially, uncertain, action driven, ridden with dilemmas, and morally based. Moreover, what attracts newcomers and sustains veterans are the ideals of service to students of all ages and to learning. Teaching requires making concrete choices among competing values for vulnerable others who lack the teacher’s knowledge and skills, who are dependent upon the teacher for access to both, and who will be changed by what the teacher teaches, how it is taught, and who that teacher is (Dewey, 1923; Fenstermacher, 1990; Floden & Clark, 1988; Greene, 1986; Jackson, 1986; Schon, 1983; Sockett, 1991; Soder, 1990; Tom, 1984).

Teaching’s blend of the practical and the moral and its constant coping with enduring dilemmas can join the three cultures of university researchers, professors in schools of education, and practitioners into intellectual communities. Scholars who teach in the disciplines, professors who prepare practitioners, and high school and elementary school teachers do more than convey information and cultivate skills. They demonstrate ways of thinking; they model how to inquire and engage others in intellectual exchanges; they disclose how they cope with the inevitable conflicts that arise in classrooms; they display moral virtues.

Our characters as human beings and how we teach become what we teach. If a professor only calls on the brightest, most verbal students in the class, snipes at students’ answers that call into question the professor’s statements, and provides little justification for grades on papers, undergraduates learn about fairness, independent inquiry, and the moral character of their professor. If a professor’s dominant view of teaching is that it is telling, knowledge is accumulating facts, and learning is remembering those facts, then that form of teaching, that notion of knowledge, and that view of learning is taught to students. Teaching in professional schools, to undergraduates, and to sixth graders binds our occupation together because in acting as teachers we model professional behavior; we exhibit our views of knowledge and learning; we advertise our ideas, how we reason, and how we struggle with moral choices whether we intend to or not (Elmore, 1990; Fenstermacher, 1990; Sirotnik, 1990; Strike, 1990).

The glaring neglect of analysis of undergraduate and graduate teaching and its linkages with precollege classrooms is seen in the scarcity of explicit intellectual discourse and conversations among scholars and practitioners about these teaching commonalities (Elmore, 1990; Sackett, 1991). The argument that I make, then, is that serious scholarly examination of the uncertainties, ambiguities, and moral dilemmas of teaching students at different levels of formal schooling is precisely one basis for assembling intellectual communities among educators. Such collaborative inquiry into core teaching activities common to all levels of schooling invigorated by respect of professors for wise practitioners and of practitioners for thoughtful professors could forge coherent communities of researchers, professional educators, and practitioners.

In doing so, perhaps a more convincing case for professionalism among different levels of teachers can be made than the prestige-seeking comparisons with doctors and medical education. Professional communities based upon commonalities in teaching, its moral imperatives, and its ideals of service and learning may be constructed for those in higher education and in public schools and become the basis for raising the regard of others for our noble work.

To imagine that teachers and scholars can come together to engage in serious discussions and conduct jointly designed research projects is not foolish in the 1990s. It does occur internationally in scattered networks of teachers and academics and emerging formal partnerships between schools and campuses (Atkin, 1991; Atkin, Patrick & Kennedy, 1989; Carter, 1991; Elliott, 1987; Huberman, 1990; Sirotnik & Goodlad, 1988).

To imagine that academics in science and the humanities can join with one another and public school teachers to produce case studies and use them in their classrooms is not foolish in the 1990s. Such initiatives exist; intellectual communities interested in creating teaching cases have already

To imagine that professors in disciplines, teacher educators, administrators, and classroom teachers could work together in schools studying, creating, and managing the dilemmas of practice is not foolish in the 1990s. It does occur in emerging professional development schools (Holmes, 1990).

To imagine that university presidents would refocus their attention upon the quality of undergraduate instruction and establish centers for teaching on their campuses while calling for broader definitions of scholarship that include creative ways of teaching is not foolish in the 1990s. Such manifestos have been issued and centers have been established (Cross & Angelo, 1988; Kennedy, 1991).

Now, I am no Pollyanna. Such joint teacher/scholar research projects, emerging collaboratives, professional development schools, and the use of cases for instruction might disappear. They could become a 21st-century doctoral student's footnote to another evanescent higher education reform. Moreover, these scattered and uncoordinated initiatives have yet to deal with inhospitable workplace conditions in public schools. They have yet to deal with the current lack of university incentives for seriously studying teaching in higher education. Whether such efforts will produce more of the communities I describe or come together into a coherent movement, I do not know.

What I do know is that the reemphasis upon teaching's fundamental moral nature can provide a basis for an intellectual community of scholars and practitioners. This reemphasis accompanies a growing awareness that the headlong drive for enhanced prestige for educational scholarship and teaching has yet to yield higher status and may well be a fool's errand. Both fundamental insights into teaching might spur professors and practitioners to begin building intellectual communities, places where they can construct shared standards for the practice of teaching. In reframing this dilemma, I offer no solution here, but simply another way of trying to reconcile competing values.

No one can predict with much confidence what will happen in the 1990s. The profound difficulties facing teachers, professors, policymakers, and researchers willing to confront dilemmas and the mirage of simple solutions are daunting. To know that there are enduring dilemmas, not problems, suggests that decent, thoughtful educators can do research and engage in practice together to figure out better ways of managing intractable situations. Whether my dream of communities of scholars and practitioners devoted to the study and improvement of teaching will become more than words, I cannot say. I have hope, but it is doubtful. That is why, as an optimist in my heart and a pessimist in my mind, I find the words of that Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, still satisfying: "If I knew the world were to end tomorrow, I should plant an apple tree today" (Craig, 1990, p. 3).

Notes

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*The term satisfice was coined by Herbert Simon (1957, pp. 204-205).

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