Deciding to Lead

Denny Wolfe and Joe Antinarella have written a wise book about school reform that celebrates the authentic core of teachers’ experience in writing projects. Though they do not set out to praise the National Writing Project, their book makes it clear that the basic requirements for authentic school reform and the outcomes of writing projects are the same. Reform, according to Wolfe and Antinarella, depends upon the professional growth of teachers, the essential result of any teacher’s experience in a writing project.

In the authors’ view, professional growth involves more than merely learning new classroom techniques. They suggest that the foundation for all growth and reform must be built on a healthy relationship between teacher and student. In this regard, they advocate “seductive teaching,” relying on the fourth definition proffered by the Random House Dictionary of the English Language—“Seduce: to win over... attract... lead.” In presenting their portrait of the seductive teacher, they challenge some educators’ callous assumption that inner city students are tough and must be treated with toughness instead of love and understanding. They argue for an “amorous bond” rather than a tough contractual relationship with students. Over thirty years ago, when David was my student at Smith High in Atlanta, I may not have described our relationship as an “amorous bond,” but I did have some sense of what the authors are getting at. David was the youngest of four brothers, three of whom were serving time in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. They were tough and David did everything he could to let me know he was a tough hombre too. His language was out of bounds, especially for those more genteel times. Once, when I asked him to take his seat so we could continue, class he snarled, “F— you, you long legged sack of shit.” I knew then I had to set some limits for David. I asked him to leave class for ten minutes and think about his language. But after that incident I kept reaching out to him by talking to him about his two great passions: stock car racing and Suzie, his dog. Slowly our relationship turned around and David became my biggest supporter. When the year ended he took up a collection from his classmates, many of whom were poor, and bought me a wild Hawaiian sports shirt.

I try to communicate the importance of this kind of caring to my preservice teachers by having them read and discuss Sapphire’s brilliant novel PUSH. In this novel, we see school from the very sad perspective of a tormented thirteen-year-old, Precious. Life for Precious is brutal: it is punctuated by poverty and abuse. Precious is hostile toward her English teacher, a hostility...
grounded in her life situation. Finally, a teacher at a special school reaches her by listening to her terrible life story and helping her through her pregnancy. When my students come to understand Sapphire’s almost devastated Precious, they recognize the quality Wolfe and Antinarella urge them to find in the needy hearts of such buffeted children.

While the authors urge educators to have caring attitudes toward their students, they recognize that this alone is not enough. Educators must also understand the complexity of the culture in which they work. Wolfe and Antinarella tell us that declining SAT scores are only a symptom of the deeper problems students face, particularly illiteracy and violence. On the subject of violence, the authors assemble a sobering array of statistics:

NEA Today ... reports that the number of children killed by firearms between 1979 and 1981 equals the number of Americans killed in the Vietnam War; that every two hours, a child dies from gunshot wounds; ... A 1993 Harris survey ... says that twenty-two percent of students polled claimed they took weapons to school in the previous school year ... (p. 23)

As to their claims about illiteracy, the authors rely partially on the work of Jonathan Kozol which, although a decade old, still comes close to the present reality:

... fifteen percent of recent high school graduates from urban high schools read below a sixth-grade level; eighty-five percent of juveniles who come to court as alleged criminals are functionally illiterate. (p. 15)

To the systemic problems of violence and illiteracy, Wolfe and Antinarella propose a partial solution:

Whatever else “English” is, it’s language — the language that often invades the soul. Whatever the literature canon is that ennobles that language, it must include works that deal with conflict — strenuous and wrenching conflict that likely will provoke many different ways of questioning, valuing, and perceiving. (p. 38)

Wolfe and Antinarella believe that educators better understand educational complexities than those critics who have only the vaguest notions of real classrooms and real students. Deciding to Lead shows us that trusting teachers and helping them to take their own growth steps is the essential way to ensure reform of public education rather than turning these efforts over to the world of business. It is teachers acting with personal autonomy and independent judgement, not outsiders who focus on the bottom line, who are most likely to bring to the classroom attitudes that will help students who must negotiate very rough lives.

What Wolfe and Antinarella do most concretely, perhaps, is speak to classroom teachers by offering them simple yet thoughtful suggestions of things to do to encourage professional growth and support the best in school reform. One of their suggestions that is as dangerous as it is right is to speak out against reforms that smell bad. They ask teachers to “resist reform strategies you don’t believe in.” They add:

If we honestly and rationally recoil from some ‘reform’ idea in our school, if we truly believe it will not help us and our students do better work, we should make our objections heard as effectively as we know how. If we are known to be good at what we do, if we are known to be ‘team players,’ if we are a presence in our schools, if we don’t cry wolf too often, we can sometimes win our points. Not always, but sometimes. (p. 113)
The authors know that recalcitrance in the service of sloth or timidity is the enemy of any serious school reform, but they also know what writing projects preach - that teachers must decide. Exclusively top-down reforms won't get it. So teachers who have confidence in their instincts and their knowledge of best practice have to blow the whistle on mindless movements that whirl through schools like late summer hurricanes.

At my university, for example, funding for computers has been almost unlimited; along with this overwhelming support there is a belief that computers in the classroom will automatically mean improved teaching. I do not want to stand in the way of innovation that will improve instruction, but I fear that computers are too often being used to prop up a dated presentational style of teaching. If teachers do not have the decision-making power and do not articulate their serious qualms, schools will lay prey to any loony idea that has fuel and funding to propel it. Teachers must, Wolfe and Antinarella tell us, insist upon occasion that the Emperor indeed has no clothes.

Wolfe and Antinarella suggest a number of other leadership acts that are less risky but demand good instincts and lots of commitment:

- When asked, help.
- Relate to colleagues as you relate to students.
- Promote cross visitations in teachers' classrooms.

Conduct classroom-based research and share it.

Communicate regularly with parents.

Promote/organize teacher led seminars.

These are some of their best suggestions. The first is almost a litmus test for commitment, the engine for true leadership. I know colleagues who are extremely busy but never too busy when asked to help. As the Director of the North Carolina Writing Project, I am amazed that the busiest site directors are always ready to take on any task in order to keep the state network alive. In my department at Wake Forest University, it is the same. I marvel that many overworked teachers will volunteer to do one more job. Others only look out for their own interests, moan about their burdened life and offer lists of insurmountable tasks as an excuse.

Finally and maybe most helpfully, Wolfe and Antinarella hold up four stages of professional growth as a mirror to any teacher who reflects on self. Their stages do not merely describe growth; they offer teachers a way to set aside the comfort of doing things the same old way and challenge themselves to try new ideas and step out of old patterns.

**Emulation/Control**: Beginning teachers teach as they were taught. Control and classroom management are overriding priorities.

**Experimentation/Discovery**: Learning from colleagues becomes paramount. Collecting new ideas and experimenting are central.

**Facilitation/Resource**: Philosophy and theory drive teaching. Students are encouraged to be active learners.

**Research/Innovation**: Educational philosophy and classroom practice are integrated. Reflective researchers become sophisticated students of teaching.

The first of their four growth stages aptly captures the way most of my students enter the profession. They have images of the great teachers they have known at my university and hope to emulate those revered professors. My work however, centers on helping these bright and dedicated students see a more appropriate way to relate to adolescents in a secondary English classroom. They initially envision themselves offering rich insights to their students about the poetry of Yeats or Virginia Wolfe's fiction, but they put these visions aside after a time and work to develop structures which allow students to work out a text's meaning for themselves. Classroom management is initially their greatest concern. Partly because of their inexperience, they have a difficult time recognizing themselves as leaders in their classrooms. They are so familiar with the student's role that they identify with that part of classroom life rather than the high profile of being a teacher.

After a year or less they leave this early stage behind and start to lean from important mentors. They begin to develop a repertoire
of teaching activities that engage and challenge their students. Eventually they carve out their own philosophy of teaching and learning, recognizing the necessity for students to take responsibility for their own learning. Finally, they become real leader-teachers who integrate theory and practice and take on the role of reflective researchers.

Wolfe and Antinarella present examples of teachers whose work has evolved to this advanced stage. One of these teachers is Bob Tierney, a writing project teacher consultant who is known nation-wide as a science educator and advocate for writing across the curriculum— and definitely a “seductive teacher”:

Bob Tierney became a researcher/innovator in his classroom, relentlessly pursuing more effective ways to teach and testing the results. Furthermore, he became a teacher of other teachers, a ‘teacher’s teacher.’ Over the last decade, he has conducted scores of workshops and seminars for other teachers — teachers of both science and other subject areas — all across America and abroad. In these workshops and seminars, he describes his own teacher growth, his beliefs as a master teacher, and the details of his own classroom experiences. (p. 57-58)

Wolfe and Antinarella provide a self-help guide which prompts teachers to steer themselves toward a deeper sense of community yet stronger sense of autonomy. Some educators have been accused of naming what they can’t fix, but Wolfe and Antinarella are fixing as they name. Teachers, project directors, educators and others can learn much from their book.