Journal of Teaching and Learning

Volume 4 | Issue 3 Article 2

12-1-1979

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Flynn, Gerald P. (1979) "Resistance to Curricular Change," *Journal of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 2.
Available at: https://commons.und.edu/tl-journal/vol4/iss3/2

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Resistance to Curriculum Change

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One of the unexamined assumptions which enthusiastic advocates of curriculum reform frequently seem to hold is that nearly everyone else either already shares, or will readily come to share, their own enthusiasm for the proposed change. Unfortunately, both experience and analysis belie this assumption. Moreover, I believe that the failure of many attempts at curriculum change can be traced to the unexpected appearance of resistance which could have been predicted and should have been planned for. In the following essay, then, I want to urge advocates to assume that resistance is usual rather than unusual. Furthermore, I intend to show that the reasons why different people oppose particular changes may be quite different. And as there are various types of resistance, so there are also various responses for effectively coping with the threat they pose to successful change. I will indicate what sorts of responses seem congruent with different kinds of resistance. Needless to say, I do not claim either that all potential resistance can be correctly identified, or that all correctly identified resistance can be effectively reduced. On the other hand, I do claim that an approach to curriculum change which ignores resistance will surely fail.

Probably the most formidable type of resistance is that which derives from an ideology which is fundamentally skeptical about the possibility of significant purposive change in people's lives. Persons having this outlook tend to believe that individuals and social relationships are simply too complex and essentially mysterious to be consciously modified.

Human behavior is likely to be explained by reference to in-born characteristics and acquired habits which persist for unfathomable reasons. In this view, any change is necessarily gradual, undoubtedly minimal and not susceptible to rational guidance. The prospects for overcoming such "conservative" resistance are small. However, the nature of education as such seems to require belief in the possibility of influencing change in people so that the prevalence of this perspective, at least among professional educators, is not likely to be large. Nevertheless, one should expect traces of this skeptical tendency among persons whose experience with unsuccessful change-efforts has been extensive. Advocates are well-advised to avoid ridiculing such views and thus inciting more active opposition. Moreover, the critical propensity can sometimes provide a useful corrective to the dangers of self-deception to which overly optimistic proponents are occasionally prone.

Another kind of resistance which is also rooted in a basic worldview couples belief in the possibility of engineering significant changes in human behavior with adamant opposition to the location of control over such changes anywhere but with the individuals affected. The essence of this position is the belief that the individual's right to maximum control over his or her own life is violated by changes initiated and guided by others. Whether such an outlook is termed "Libertarian," "Humanistic" or "Democratic," it is quite likely to be widespread, especially among younger persons whose consciousness has been influenced by the ethos of participation associated with the 1960's. Resistance of this type can be met by affording opportunities to participate in all phases of the change process.

Sheer disagreement with either the analysis of the problem which the proposed change is to solve and/or with the particular solution which is being urged as a way to solve it--the new curriculum--can also be the basis for resistance. In the first instance there is an absence of discontent. In the second, a different understanding of the nature of the problem and

so the appropriateness of the change advocated is questioned. Failure to assess the extent of dissatisfaction can lead to the necessity of trying to create a need for change where none is seen to exist. Proponents who find themselves in this curious, but not unusual, position are probably well-advised to reconsider the reasons why they believe the change is needed. If after reflection the reasons for change seem sound, then a systematic effort to persuade others of this need is indicated. In some instances, unconvinced persons may simply not have all the facts. For example, college faculty may believe that their graduates are being equipped to secure jobs whereas in fact they are not. Advocates who have this knowledge can expose others to it and thus build the potential for revising curriculum more in line with these realities. On the other hand, some persons upon being apprised of this situation will still not favor change because of their belief that it is not the purpose of a college education to fit people into the existing economic system. Thus, in some instances an increase in information may serve to overcome resistance while in others it may not because the facts are interpreted differently. Where disagreement about either the necessity for change or the efficacy of a particular solution is based on conflicting interpretations of facts, as in the above example where quite different conceptions of the purposes of education are involved, the chances of reducing opposition are not encouraging. In any event, a commitment to insuring that all interested parties have access to the facts--as the advocates see them--is essential. The assumption that everyone knows what the problem is, or that they understand how a specific change is to meet it, can only lead to greater difficulty.

The circumstances of some people's lives may firmly attach them to the existing curriculum so that the costs of undertaking something new will seem prohibitive. Such persons can be thought of as being situationally unavailable for change. For example, teachers with illness or other family-related responsibilities, those who are pursuing a demanding course of graduate work or who hold a second job, may feel

unable to invest the additional time and energy which most changes entail. To some extent many conscientious educators may feel the burden of adopting a new curriculum is excessive. For this reason, providing ample opportunities to prepare for the change within normal working hours or during vacation with adequate compensation, is an effective way to gain support from persons who resist on these grounds. Where such allowances cannot be made, advocates must expect resistance from persons who would otherwise be supportive.

The kind of resistance which seems to hold out the greatest potential for rational discussion and effective response is that which is based on the perception that the proposed change will adversely affect the person's vested interests, i.e., their prestige, authority, wealth, range of choice or satisfaction gained from the old curriculum. Advocates should be especially attentive to the impact of the proposed change on the lives of the people affected. Underestimation of what they feel will be lost can only lead to resistance from unexpected quarters and with unexpected intensity. In some instances it may be that the perception of the potential loss is distorted and in these cases a fuller explanation of what is really going to happen can assuage such fears. However, in those cases where the change will in fact involve the loss of a valued "thing," efforts must be made to provide compensations. For example, a curriculum which entails a change in the teacher's role away from one who determines what will be learned, when and how, will be resisted by those for whom the deference, control and organization of learning of the more traditional style are important. Unless such persons can be convinced that the proposed change will offer equally satisfying, if different, rewards, their resistance will remain. In some instances provision of new sources of gratification outside the realm of the new curriculum can compensate for the loss which the change imposes. Identification of genuine threats to vested interests is relatively easy for advocates who understand both the nature of the change and the people who are to be affected by it. Moreover, it is relatively easy to discuss such matters. It is also

relatively easy to engender defensiveness by failing to treat such threatened losses with respect. Sensitivity, on the other hand, is likely to produce an appreciative and so somewhat less resistant party. Where alternative satisfactions can be pointed out, either within the new curriculum or in some other area, resistance of this kind is not likely to prove intractable. Where other benefits cannot be provided, and this seems unlikely, or where the perceived threat is not taken seriously, advocates should expect sturdy opposition.

The tendency to underestimate the difficulty of learning something new is often present in people who have already learned. Thus, the apprehensions of a person who feels unable to master the proposed change may not be fully appreciated by those who favor its adoption. The pervasiveness of resistance based on doubt of one's ability is considerable, as any experienced educator should know. It is especially important to gauge whether or not this fear is accurate. The assumption that all such trepidation is groundless should certainly be avoided. Rather, as with all varieties of resistance, an attitude of respect for the legitimacy of the feeling is crucial. Allowing ample time and adequate assistance in adopting the new curriculum would seem to be the recommended strategy here.

Finally, there may be some psychologically fragile persons whose attachment to the-world-as-it-is discourages even the most modest innovations. More important, among the psuedo-sophisticates, the tendency to tar all opposition with this broad brush may be strong. This is not, however, very constructive as it almost certainly eliminates the possibility of discussion, persuasion and compromise. Who, after all, can take such "sick" persons seriously? When others discover that their opposition is viewed in such invidious terms their inclination to enter into dialogue will hardly be enhanced. Thus, such a psychological interpretation of resistance should be avoided wherever possible. When such an explanation does seem justified, a policy of considerate

understanding should govern the relationship.

To summarize, I have described several different kinds of resistance which advocates of curriculum change can expect to encounter: ideologically-based skepticism about the possibility of any significant change; ideologically-based opposition to changes which are externally initiated; disagreement over either the existence or the nature of the problem; disagreement over the effectiveness of the solution proposed--the new curriculum; situational unavailability; perceived threat to vested interests; fear of failure; and psychological fragility. In addition, I have tried to indicate the different responses which are likely to be effective in meeting the different kinds of resistance described. The underlying theme is that resistance should be taken seriously, both in the sense that advocates should expect to meet it and in the sense that they should respect the legitimacy of that which is met. The ability to put oneself in the position of those who are to be affected by the change is essential. Advocates who lack this skill are likely to be thwarted. In all, the realities of curriculum change in American schools suggest that while the time devoted to careful analysis of probable sources of resistance, as well as the effort to respond in appropriate ways, will not guarantee successful change, neglect of such matters insures failure.