

What's Deming Got to Do With It?

by Patricia Kokinos

Educator and Author

Wasn't W. Edwards Deming the management guru who transformed the Japanese economy back in the day, showing that nation how to organize for the production of quality products? Well, yes. And didn't his ideas foster the whole Total Quality Management development that occurred in the '90s? Of course. But his reach went much beyond industry to teach us about **SYSTEMS THINKING** and show us that the whole must be centered around a powerful vision of learning.

"Massive training is required to instill the courage to break with tradition," he said. Courage, yes, that's what we need to break with the rigid patterns that define public education, and to break the stranglehold that piecemeal efforts have on the concept of school reform. After all, we have had 40 years of "school reform," where almost everything in the ballpark has been in vogue. Now, let's step back to the conceptual level with school itself and look at ways to change the system . . .

Deming's ideas spawned an entire generation of systems thinkers, who extrapolated his views into the growing study of organizational change. Peter Senge, the original Director of the Center for Organizational Learning at MIT, is perhaps the most famous of these, an organizational innovator whose books *The Fifth Discipline* and *Schools That Learn* catapulted him to the global stage.

In an article posted on the site of the Society for Organizational Learning (<http://tiny.cc/Senge>), which he founded, Senge says, "**Building learning organizations requires personal transformations or basic shifts in how we think and interact.**" The three major roadblocks to this shift are cultural **dysfunctions that promote fragmentation, competition, and reactivity**. Sounds exactly like our traditional school system, doesn't it?

"We continually fragment problems into pieces; yet the challenges we face are . . . systemic," Senge writes. We also revere competition, which can be fun and inventive, but needs to be balanced with cooperation. "**We think in terms of war and sports analogies . . . when the process of developing leaders may be more like parenting than competing . . . and developing a new culture may be more like gardening than a military campaign,**" he says.

Most importantly, Senge says, "We have grown accustomed to changing only in reaction to outside forces, yet the wellspring of real learning is aspiration, imagination, and experimentation." He relates this mental state to what we ALL have learned and continue to learn in school: "**Fitting in, being accepted, became more important than being ourselves. We learned that the way to succeed was to focus on the teachers' questions as opposed to our own.**"

These dysfunctions, he believes, are "frozen patterns of thought to be dissolved," for which he proposes a "**Galilean Shift**" in the way we view our places in the world, as members of a whole community that works in collaborative ways to create a new culture.

Nowhere is such a new culture more desperately needed than in our schools, where our obsession with test scores, closing the gap, evaluating and punishing teachers, and turning around failing schools is distracting us from the REAL WORK of school change: **Building a new, coherent vision of schooling that can bring EVERY CHILD, EVERY TEACHER, EVERY PARENT, EVERY COMMUNITY into productive and positive work toward a smarter, more inclusive, and more nurturing public education system.**

I know, to those school "purists" who believe that school is for academics and all that fuzzy caring-about-the-kids stuff is just so much California "fluff," what I'm saying here is appalling and probably frightening. If we did that, what would happen to our (gasp!) test scores?!? Listen guys, if we really want schools that work for KIDS, if we really want "better teachers" and "smarter schools," **then we're all going to have to CHANGE OUR MINDS** in exactly the ways Senge suggests.

Now, this kind of change does not have to be scary and certainly not "touchy-feely," so don't despair, all you academic hardliners. We're mainly talking about a **NEW PERSPECTIVE from which to view schoolwork**. Does it really have to be drudgery for everyone involved? Or can it be a shift of thinking that does things like teach Algebra and Geometry together as a mathematical SYSTEM for problem-solving with scenarios where kids can apply what they're learning and see some use for such abstractions? Or what about Physics and Chemistry working together to reveal secrets of the physical universe? Or how about history as a human system with developing THEMES working toward equilibrium? Well, there are about a million more examples, but you get the idea: **A NEW WAY of engaging kids (AND teachers) in their own learning is our KEY to real change.**

Even more to the point, we need to see EACH INDIVIDUAL SCHOOL as a learning organization **where teachers work together to develop new, engaging projects and support each other in their implementation**; thus, common ground and collaboration instead of closed classroom doors. We need a flattening of the hierarchy that is sitting on the heads of teachers and schools, crushing out creativity with statistics and test scores; **we won't need all that paper-pushing when we finally repudiate "test scores" as our sacred cow and more highly trained people can escape the dreaded "district office"** and go back to the fun of working with kids, teachers, and schools. There's a RENAISSANCE for schools right there, in that single concept. **We need university education faculties to be headed by people with REAL experience in real schools**, and we need them to be out in schools with the fledgling teachers, helping them solve teaching dilemmas in real time. Again, a whole new concept that would revolutionize teacher training.

But let's take these thoughts a step further: Deming was a member of the "Greatest Generation" who passed on in 1993, leaving his work to Baby Boomers like Senge. Now there are Gen-X systems thinkers who have picked up the challenge. A recent article sent to me by a colleague in Atlanta gives a fresh take on the whole concept of "standards," from a quality management professional--and a parent: Mike Micklewright says in his piece in *Quality Digest* (<http://tiny.cc/QualityDigest>), "Students are taught how to take tests, not how to learn or discover or create or challenge or to gain more knowledge

School becomes a job and children begin to lose their natural desire to learn." If we really wanted to focus on students, he asks, shouldn't school quality be judged by **"the degree to which students are fulfilled by the educational system to meet their particular and individual needs based on the unique method by which each student learns?"**

Sounds like a good plan to me. What about you? We're only a few steps away from a SEA-CHANGE in public thinking about what school can be. Jump on Facebook with us to help spread the word:

<http://facebook.com/ChangeTheSchools>

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Patricia Kokinos is a veteran teacher, school and district administrator, and change agent in schools. Her award-winning novel, ANGEL PARK, a mystery about the death of a school administrator, tells the story of the forces that stifle our educational system and how deep we're going to have to go to make some changes that count. See more at <http://ChangeTheSchools.com>.