Tracy Money: Transforming Public Education

I am committed to transforming public education. This is a mission I've been committed to since I attended kindergarten and realized that the system is more about compliance and conformity than it is about growing and learning. I started skipping school in kindergarten and continued through high school graduation. I did what I needed to do to get good grades. That didn't involve a whole lot of learning, and didn't require going to class. My real learning happened outside of school, from weekly trips to the public library, visits to every museum in Washington state (free entertainment for a poor family), and conversations in the car and in front of the television. Real learning was rock hunting with my dad and teaching myself to play guitar. Real learning was figuring out how to support my mother through numerous bouts of depression, how to encourage my siblings while my father worked three jobs, and how to go beyond babysitting to get a real job of my own with a steady paycheck at age 14.

It seems I've always seen life as research. Self-reflection is a continual mode for me and I've become accustomed to changing things on the fly as a result of my constant internal processing. This is a style that has worked well for me in education. The adult me understands what the kindergartener me was repulsed by but couldn't express; real learning doesn't happen with a focus on conformity, compliance, and standardization. Teaching and learning are context dependent. Rich and often unexpected learning happens when we pay attention to the very different needs of the individuals we interact with and take advantage of all they bring to the table. Frequently, that means the "lesson plan" gets tossed and replaced by something better, devised on the spot. The first time I saw the now classic EDS commercial in which they build a plane while flying it, I thought, "That's it!" It's the perfect metaphor for the messiness that is education.

Unfortunately, it's not a metaphor that is widely embraced. Educators seem to find comfort in constancy, comfort in efficiency, seem to embrace working within the givens—a common core of subjects and learning outcomes for all, core subjects taught separately to children in age-alike groups, a 180 day school year, and so on.   Any changes require a thorough planning process and all of the interdependencies of the system must be considered. If I change the textbook I use in my 9th grade English curriculum how does it impact what happens in 10th grade English? If I want to coach my students in a useful method of note taking, how does that impact the Social Studies teacher who is still requiring note cards? We follow ten-year curriculum adoption cycles and miss opportunities.

For 29 years as a "build the plane while flying it" educator, I have battled the immovable system. As a young educator, I pictured myself influencing the national education conversation and helping the system to move.   John Dewey was my hero, and I aspired to be his American scholar behaving as a "public intellectual" and adding my voice—rich with theory and practice—to that national conversation. Steeped in the works of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bandura, Gardner, Goodman, Meier, Atwell, Sizer, and others I engaged my elementary students and, later, middle school students in reading and writing workshops that put their ideas and interests at the heart of the work and encouraged learning from each other. I engaged in action research, using my classroom as a lab to test theories in action. I joined whole language educator groups, presented at NCTE and IRA conferences, trained parent groups, and believed I was changing the world of education.

I moved on to high school and college education. Still influenced by my favorite learning theorists and practitioners, I added Mezirow, Brookfield, Palmer, Newell, and Littky to the mix. Frustrated by the standards and accountability movement, which became the testing movement, I eventually founded my own personalized, interest- and project-based high school. I again got involved with several networks: The Coalition of Essential Schools, the Small Schools Project, EdVisions, and the Association for High School Innovation. I had long conversations with other progressive educators, presented at network conferences, and *knew* I was changing the world of education. I was continually engaged in action research and reflective inquiry with my colleagues. We largely ignored criticisms and attacks, turned up our noses at standardized

tests as pointless and invalid assessments, and bragged to each other with certain smugness about our information-rich performance assessments and the daily evidence of our students' growth. The others could remain stuck in the system; we were moving on. Then I read Richard Elmore. Speaking of the progressive movement, he wrote:

> *"Rather than persist in Dewey's original agenda of influencing public discourse about the nature of education and its relation to society through open public discussion, debate, and inquiry, the more militant progressives became increasingly like true believers in a particular version of the faith and increasingly isolated from public scrutiny and discourse. In this way, the developers of progressive pedagogy became increasingly isolated from the public mainstream and increasingly vulnerable to attack from traditionalists."* (Elmore, p. 11)

Guilty as charged. I want to form a support group—Hi, my name is Tracy Money and I contributed to the failing of the latest progressive reform movement. The conversations I was most involved in were with like-minded thinkers who fed my biases. That wasn't all bad. We really were engaged in continual reflective inquiry. It's just that there weren't many diverse voices in the conversation.

I am now working in the realm of higher education and reminding myself to apply this lesson of engaging diverse voices. Many recognize the failings of higher education; few have been able to disrupt it in meaningful ways. My work at Big Picture Learning is to position their adult learning initiative, College Unbound, as a leader in transforming higher education. College Unbound alone doesn't have all of the answers, but it does provide a unique way of better addressing the needs of adult learners and the workplace.