What Does It Take To Improve Schools?
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Module #1: What does it take to improve schools?

Introduction

This module builds on the idea that efforts to change and improve education often fail because those involved neither acknowledge nor understand the complexity of the change process. In particular, those interested in educational reform need to understand that recent work on change and improvement in many sectors reflects a dramatic shift. That shift moves from a classical, mechanistic understanding of change as a linear process with a beginning, middle, and end to a view of change as a dynamic, situated, and multi-dimensional process. In a "mechanistic" view, leaders develop a plan or strategy, initiate changes, and then strive to motivate others, organize resources, and carry out the activities that will lead to the desired goal. But a dynamic view of change recognizes that changes are always underway: people are growing, the economy is expanding and contracting; technologies are developing; communities are evolving; the ground is shifting… From this perspective, education leaders cannot simply plan or "make" changes, they have to understand change and learn how to pursue their visions and goals while dealing with the many changes that are always already underway.

Therefore, this module offers readings and activities designed to provide a sense of that complexity and to highlight both the impossibility of controlling change and the possibilities for working within constantly changing conditions. In the end, the module may leave you wondering: "If you can't control the change process, how can you be sure that your plans and designs actually lead to more powerful learning experiences?" But, ideally, it will also help you recognize that designing powerful learning experiences, begins with the idea that, while you can never be sure what the "right" plan will be, you can build on what others have learned in the past and you can prepare for the predictable and unpredictable challenges you will encounter along the way: "Ready, Fire, Aim."

Specifically, this module is designed to help foster a deeper understanding of the process of change and how it might apply to schools. In order to achieve this goal, the module raises several key questions including:

- What's the difference between change and improvement? How do we know?
- What facilitates and inhibits improvement?
- Why do educational reform efforts so often fail? Why and how is "failure" predictable?

Assignment #1: What does it take to improve schools?

In order to get an introduction to the complexity of educational change, please read the Fullan chapters, then explore several different perspectives on change, improvement, and innovation by reading one or more of the works by Senge, Christensen & colleagues, and/or Hargreaves & Shirley:

Required reading:
Fullan, M. (2007). "The meaning of educational change" & "Insights into the change process." In *The new meaning of educational change*. Teachers College Press.

And works by at least one other author:

Christensen, C., Horn, M., & Johnson, C. (2008). "Making the Shift: Schools Meet Society's Needs." In *Disrupting Class: How disruptive innovation will change the way the world*. New York: McGraw Hill.
Christensen, C., Horn, M., & Staker, H. (2013). "Is K–12 blended learning disruptive? An introduction of the theory of hybrids". Cambridge, MA: Christensen Institute.
AND/OR
Hargreaves, A., & Shirley, D. (2009). "The crisis of educational change" & "The paradox of innovation and improvement." In *The global fourth way: The quest for educational excellence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press
AND/OR
Senge, P. (1990). "The laws of the fifth discipline" & "The art of seeing the forest and the trees." In *The fifth discipline*. New York: Doubleday.

As you read,
1. Strive get an overall sense of what Fullan and the other the author(s) you chose are trying to say – what is their "thesis", "theory", or "argument"?
2. Note (at least) two or three key quotes/issues/concepts/ideas that you think are particularly important for school designers to keep in mind
3. Jot down any ideas/concepts etc. that you think need further clarification and/or any major questions the work raises for you

To help you consolidate and remember what you read, you are encouraged to share and discuss some of the key quotes/ideas and questions you identified with your colleagues.

Assignment #2: What has changed in K-12 education? What hasn't?
For a seminal analysis of the challenges and possibilities for school improvement and a succinct overview of some key developments and issues in the history of school reform in the United States, read Tyack & Cuban's *Tinkering toward utopia*.

Required reading

Tyack, D. & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (Particularly chapters 1-4.)

Recommended reading:
Hatch, T. (2009). "It takes capacity to build capacity" & "Changing conditions, changing times." Chapters 1 & 2 from *Managing to change: How schools can survive (and sometimes thrive) in turbulent times.* New York: Teachers College Press.
Kober, N. & Usher, A. (2012). *A public education primer.* Washington D.C.: Center on Education Policy

As you read, please note some key terms and ideas that Tyack and Cuban (T&C) use including: the grammar of schooling, policy elites, policy churn, "real school," "incremental" vs. "radical" change; "how schools change reforms." You may want to come back and revisit some of these terms after an initial reading, and, if you want, try to define in a sentence or two what they mean to you. In addition, please pay special attention to T & C's discussions of the "innovations" of the Carnegie Unit, kindergarten, Junior High School, the Dalton Plan, the proposals that were the focus of the 8-year study, and the Schools of Tomorrow. How do they explain why some of these "innovations" took hold and were sustained and the others were not? (Not to spoil the suspense, but the terms/ideas above are a key part of their analysis…).

As you did in Module #1, please continue to identify one or two key concepts/ideas that you think are particularly important for school designers to keep in mind, and jot down any ideas/concepts etc. that you think need further clarification and/or any major questions the work raises for you. You are encouraged to share and discuss a few of your notes/quotes/questions with your colleagues.

Assignment #2: Why don't schools change?
To get a sense of the similarities and differences between three different perspectives on the problems with a variety of educational reform read three widely-circulated pieces from Cohen, Elmore, and Payne:

Required reading:
Cohen, David (1990). "A revolution in one classroom: The case of Mrs. Oublier." *Educational Evaluation Policy Analysis, 12*.
Elmore, R. (2003). "Change and improvement in education." In David Gordon (Ed.). *A Nation reformed?* Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.
Payne, C. (2008). "I don't want your nasty pot of gold From social demoralization to organizational irrationality" In *So much reform, so little change.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Recommended reading:
Evans, R. (1996). "Reach and realism, experience and hope." In *The Human side of school change.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. 289-299.

Please quickly skim each of the three required readings to get an initial sense of their main points and their similarities and differences. Then pick one of the readings of particular interest to you and read it with a few questions in mind (use the attached chart to take notes if you find it useful, but you do not need to turn in your notes):

- What does the author see as some of the key problems with current school reform efforts?
- Who do they see as the key participants in explaining whether reforms are likely to work?

After you've completed your reading, review your notes and consider:

- What (and who) does each author leave out of their analysis?

You may find it useful to work in a group and compare notes with colleagues who are focusing their reading on the other authors. If you are reading on your own, you may find it easier to answer the questions by comparing the perspectives of all three authors, as that will help to highlight their different points of view. Regardless of which author you focus on, one of the key points of the assignment is to recognize that there is always something missing from the analysis. There is no single, overarching perspective that can account for all possible problems and solutions. As in previous weeks, you are encouraged to share and discuss a few of the key ideas and any quotes/questions with your colleagues.

C&T 4004

What are some of the similarities and differences in the Cohen, Payne, and Elmore's explanations for why improvement efforts often fail?

	COHEN	PAYNE	ELMORE
What are some of the key problems with improvement efforts from their perspective?			
Who are the key participants in reform efforts from their perspectives?			
What's missing from their analysis?			