

Networking Teachers and Teacher Unions

TURN Presentation by Ellen Meyers

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This quote is a good place for me to start because it's how my career as an educator truly began. But first, I want to tell you what I'm going to talk about and how I've organized this presentation. I am going to start with my creds because for the most part we don't know each other and since I am the one standing in the front of the room I thought it would be important for you to why. Then I'm going to review the challenges that we all know that we are facing today because I have found that the best way to get creative is to start with the concerns. Then I'm going to talk about what I think is the best strategy for meeting those challenges and that is through the power of networking. In the end, all this will be preface to my culminating with a vision for the future in which unions play a central role in the creation of that future fueled by innovation, expertise, and policy change. I have also left a chunk of time for questions, comments, discussion, and next steps.

So back to the quote. The quote is lifted from a brand new book that I co-authored with several colleagues, one of whom is a young, rising star professor at New York University, named David Kirkland. Isolation was the impetus for the formation of Teachers Network, an organization that I helped found over 30 years ago. The purpose of Teachers Network from its genesis was to help teachers break through isolation in classrooms and schools to join together in like-minded networks to improve their teaching, mentor one another, and create intellectual and social bonds to keep them motivated to stay and succeed in the profession.

David joined my team a couple of years ago after having read the initial vision for our leadership network that is the basis for the new book, *The Power of Networks* published by Corwin this year. David told me that the vision was the best piece of writing he had ever read in the field and that it continues to be completely relevant and as timely as when it was written in 1990 and published in 1991—17 years ago!

So here's the story that I think best speaks to what I have learned. Ten years into the growth of Teachers Network, the first Bush and then Governor Clinton had an education summit and did not invite a classroom teacher. And I was not the only one in shock. I was hearing about it on CBS news and when Dan Rather, who was the broadcaster at the time, did the wrap up, he exclaimed, "They just had an education summit and did not invite a classroom teacher. Wouldn't that be like having a medical summit and not inviting a doctor?" That put me in gear and to shorten a long, exciting story, that event catalyzed me to launch a nationwide leadership network eventually comprising several hundred teachers annually in a dozen locations, including but certainly not limited to New York, Miami, Chicago, and San Francisco. And as a result of that network, we had teachers serve on educational task forces, gubernatorial advisory boards; present and publish action research findings conducted as participants in the network; and who have gone on to take a myriad of leadership positions. From the very first group of New York City teachers, Peter Dillon has become a superintendent of schools in Massachusetts, Alice Hom is a principal of a school in Chinatown, and Peggy Wynn-Madison is a principal of a school in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Mark Grashaw, a 35 year veteran high school math

teacher, appears in a chapter in Bill Clinton's book, *Giving*, because of his ongoing coordination of shipping containers of school supplies to Zimbabwe. And Leo Casey has become a leader of the UFT—to name just a few alumni of the network, many of whom continue to be involved to this day. The network was also prolific in documenting and disseminating its work through its website, publications, and video. The latest video, funded by the Ford Foundation and narrated by actress Cynthia Nixon of *Sex and the City* fame, is called *Teachers on Teaching* and presents network participants talking about how to attract and keep good teachers teaching.

So that's my creds, although I could go on much longer and if anyone wants more over a drink later I'd be happy to oblige.

Now on to the challenges we are facing. While isolation unfortunately continues to be endemic to the teaching profession—one teacher in one classroom as the norm, with teachers' lounges rarely the hotbed of creative ideas and inspiration—other challenges include the prevailing myth that our schools have failed. While we know this not to be true, how do we communicate it to the public? Also, lack of resources, lack of respect, being underpaid are all challenges facing teachers. Lack of support is another. A recent article in the *New York Times* titled “Principals Younger and Freer, but Raise Doubts in the Schools” talked about the excessive teacher turnover in New York City schools headed by the new generation of principals, who enter the role with a dearth of expertise compared to their predecessors. In a recent not yet published study funded by the Ford Foundation responded to by over a 1000 teachers, out of the 137 who have since left teaching, over a third said they left because they had an attractive job opportunity—

compared to a fifth who said it was the salary. When asked about the important factors in considering whether to leave the classroom, the largest percentage—a third—cited support (clearly lack of) from administrators.

(slide) Here are 5 other challenges that I thought would be interesting to talk about. The first is the need for 10,000 hours—the number of hours, according to Malcolm Gladwell, in his new book *Outliers*, researchers have settled on as the magic number for true expertise. This is the number of hours needed to become an expert in any field, whether it as an athlete, musician or teacher. David Berliner in his articles on the characteristics of effective teachers, talks about expertise being developed over “hundreds of thousands of hours” of practice and that desire for excellence is the number one quality necessary for becoming an expert. Motivation is more important than talent! Gladwell has great examples of how highly motivated people get their 10,000 hours. As a teenager, Bill Gates regularly snuck out of his house in the wee hours of the morning to walk up the hill to the University of Washington where he would have unlimited access to the school’s computers from 3:00-6:00 am. The Beatles would spend stretches of time playing in Hamburg clubs where they required to play 8 hour sets seven days a week! 10,000 hours is 10 years which means from teacher preparation to becoming an expert teacher takes 10 years. (click) That’s especially a challenge to those who think we can staff schools in the same way we staff Peace Corps—with two-year commitments.

The next challenge has to do with technology. It’s amazing the speed in which the Internet has changed the way we live and work. When we began the leadership network teachers did not have email addresses, and we had just figured out how to become a keyword on AOL. We made getting an

email one of the criteria for joining our network and held a lot of hands throughout the process. We even had a couple of luddites who refused to get on board. Now not only are all professionals wired but social networking sites have proliferated. However, although joining Facebook and Linked In have become just about mandatory, and plenty of people are blogging and tweeting, for the most part social networking is miles wide and inches deep. My daughter who is 20 and has to date something like a 1000 friends on Facebook says it's all about procrastination. The challenge is how to maximize our new found desire to connect technologically 24/7 and move from shallow to deep social networks comprised of people who really share common interests, not just e-mail addresses. We have already seen a powerful example of how technology is changing electoral politics in our recent presidential campaign and how organizing can be done via the Internet in the recent protest in Moldavia. (click)

The next challenge—and opportunity—is globalization. We're all talking about how the world is flat and in the very near future whether you teach in Indiana or India you will have more in common than not because you will be collaborating via the web and via travel. It won't even matter whether you are in countries that speak the same language because now there is instant translation on the web. And, concomitantly as we become more global, we are also facing the challenges of our institutions becoming more decentralized and non-hierarchical. But the irony is while borders are disappearing, and we are being challenged to think globally and act locally—in what may soon become life or death ways—we have also experienced the disappearance of traditional communities that bound us

together as provocatively noted in the title of Robert Putnam's much touted and debated book *Bowling Alone*. (click)

The 4th challenge I have called Giving up my Saturday. I was struck over the years how many times I heard this from teachers in our network.

Saturday was our meeting day, and we met once a month. I understood how hard it was to get up on that sixth day of the week because I was doing it too but it's always a challenge to get people to go above and beyond. I especially know what it means for teachers to quote "volunteer" unquote (the quotes in this case have to do with the fact that in all my years of working with teachers I always made sure that they got paid but I was also always aware that no matter how much I could afford to pay them, their time was worth so much more). Teachers are always being asked to take on more so they are very understandably gun shy about being taken advantage of. So the challenge in inviting teachers to put in more time to develop professionally, to network, to be part of community, is that it had better be really worth their time. (click)

The 5th challenge has to do with sating teachers' hunger for an intellectual community. Just as I was struck with how often I heard teachers talk about their giving up a Saturday, I was also surprised by their explanation for why they kept coming back. They would all talk about how much they enjoyed being with smart people and how these Saturdays were their oases for intellectual stimulation. They would talk about how this was severely lacking in their daily lives. What we were doing was elevating the conversation. (click) This was fertile ground. And fertile ground leads to innovation. In that same Ford-funded survey, teachers were asked why they

participated in a network. Out of the 892 respondents to that question, 569 or 63.8% said they wanted a professional community.

So with those challenges in mind, I'd like to move to what I think is the best strategy for addressing those concerns, and that is the power of networking. I'll start with the big picture. (slide) Networks begin with vision, and I learned early on that you can't just expect a vision to arise amidst the workaday world. After a disastrous first attempt, when we brought our best and brightest teachers to City University to talk with architecture students about their vision of the future of schools and they talked about cleaner hallways, windows not broken, and more outlets, we did much better with our next attempt. This time, we brought together 50 Kindergarten through grade 12 teachers from rural, urban, and suburban schools across the country to a weeklong retreat in the beautiful mountains at Snowbird, Utah. That's when we developed the vision that informed our work all these years and that David Kirkland found as powerful in 2007 as we did in 1990. We adapted our process from the peace movement's work on envisioning a world without war and a detailed explanation of the process as well as a reprint of the actual vision are in the new book. (click) The process begins with identifying concerns; envisioning first as individuals, then as teams, then in small groups and finally as a full group; overcoming barriers to achieving the vision; and lastly developing an action plan to implement the vision. The result was a vision that the 50 teachers who did the work literally signed off on and that hundreds more over the years continue to sign on to. (click)

Networks are first and foremost about excellence, what I called here virtuosity (just came up with the three vees in preparing this presentation). In our network, each teacher conducted an action research study, inquiring after some area of their practice that they wanted to better understand. As part of their study, teachers read relevant literature and, for many, this was the first time they were connecting research and practice. Teachers mentored one another and formed collaborative relationships, making connections often extending way past their active participation in the network—all with the goal of becoming better teachers. (click) David Berliner talks about second in importance to becoming an expert teacher after motivation is good coaching and how social learning and communities of practice are of particular importance to beginners (with a nod to Vygotsky). And Berliner notes that because practical knowledge, what teachers build, is tacit knowledge, experienced teachers seem to have a harder time than other experienced professionals in sharing their knowledge with novices. To me, that speaks to providing experienced teachers with more opportunities to hone and practice those skills—in a risk-free environment. (click)

The third part of this picture is voice. The inspiration for this journey was addressing the wrong of no teacher participating in that first Education Summit. But before we could get to voice—and demand a seat at the table—we knew that in addition to having a vision in common and teachers who were professionals, we needed to build knowledge and skills and develop relationships so teachers would be able to more than hold their own at the table. (click) And with that knowledge and skills, and those relationships, we would be grooming leaders. And these leaders would

ensure that the teachers' voice would be part of all national or local conversations about education. (click)

I thought I would share one more response from the Ford-funded survey. As a result of network participation: close to 80% of the teachers said they continued as a classroom teacher, two-thirds said they became teacher leaders, over half said they became an education advocate, 90% said they improved their teaching, 78% said they improved their school, 94% said they gained knowledge and skills, 60% said they developed better relationships with parents and guardians, and 78% said they encouraged others to join the network

(Slide) I'd like to finish this section by talking a little about the purposes, characteristics, processes and content of networks—what I see as the four primary elements. I'll start with the purposes and go back to Gladwell who tells a great story in *Outliers* about community being about life and death. Beginning in 1882, emigrants from a small village in Italy began settling on a rocky hillside in Pennsylvania which over the next decade or so flourished into a town comprised of hundreds of immigrants from the village. Eventually they named the new town for the old which by that time was pretty much abandoned. Through a string of chance meetings and conversations, a doctor in the 1950s began testing the townspeople and found that almost no one under the age of 55 had died of a heart attack or exhibited any signs of heart disease. For men over the age of 65, their death rate from heart disease was about half that of the US population as a whole. The doctor brought in a sociologist who found no suicide, no alcoholism, no

drug addiction, and little crime. Their diet and exercise were no different from the rest of the population so that didn't explain the findings nor did the geography of the town because the neighboring towns made up of a similar demographic had heart disease rates reflective of the rest of the country. The doctor and the sociologist finally came to the conclusion that what explained this anomaly was the nature of the community which they called "magical"—three-generational family meals, folks strolling down the streets, neighbors working side by side. It was a brand new way to look at health. It was not about the individual but it was who they surrounded themselves with and their collective values. I'll add a personal note here. In the fall, my husband was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, a really nasty cancer, and our support network immediately went into action. It's wide and it's deep, and I'm convinced it will help provide us with a fighting chance to beat this thing.

Those are examples where the purpose of the community is fostering healthy individuals. Here's an example from the world of business. Recently, my buddy, Fred Frelow, at Ford gave me a really interesting article called "It's 2008: Do you know where your talent is?," published by Deloitte Research. The subtitle is, "Why acquisition and retention strategies don't work." What works? Beginning with the premise that learning is social in nature and citing a finding from a study asking in which situations do people learn best, with the overwhelming majority responding, "when working together with a colleague on a task," the article talks about mentoring and coaching, finding meaning in work, getting to take risks by being in situations in which one is stretched, being trusted and respected, and the power of connecting and collaborating. Cited are the decades of research conducted by the University

of Chicago and Stanford validating the link between social networks and social capital and how it is often suggested that we learn 70% of what we know about our jobs from informal networks, and how research at MIT confirms the importance of social networks and that people with rich networks tend to solve problems faster and with better results. The article suggests that rather than leave the formation of networks to chance, organizations can help employees increase quality of interactions and knowledge flow by encouraging communities of practice, which they define as self-organized groups formed around a common mission of interest. By the way, here's a great result from one study cited in the article: the energy we send to each other in our interactions is four times a greater predictor of performance as the information we bring to the table. Reading this brought to mind Donald Graves' wonderful book, *The Energy to Teach*, in which his prescription for avoiding burnout is surrounding yourself with people who give you energy.

The Deloitte article also talks about a new role for leaders because if organizations are to retain and recruit top talent, communities of practice can't be mandated from the top. The authors call into question the efficacy of traditional, top-down driven succession planning and define the role of leaders as that of communicating guidelines and strategies and providing the tools that critical talent needs to succeed.

Which brings us to the characteristics of networks. Another very good article on this topic is by Wenger and Snyder called "Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier," which was published in the *Harvard Business Review* fittingly at the turn of this century. Wenger and Snyder

define communities of practice as groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for joint enterprise who share their knowledge in free-flowing creative ways that foster new approaches to situations; can drive strategy; generate new lines of business, solve problems quickly (we would use a listserv), promote spread of best practice; develop people's professional skills (depending on availability of peers and their willingness to act as mentors or coaches); and help recruit and retain talent. Basically, the purpose as they delineate it is to foster professional development.

According to these authors, communities of practice can be composed of up to tens or even hundreds of people but typically they have a core group whose passion for the topic energizes (here's energy again!) the community and who provide intellectual and social leadership. These communities typically set their own agendas and establish their own leadership. Membership is self-selected.

The parent organization provides the infrastructure, intervening when communities run up against obstacles, such as a technological system that doesn't serve them, a promotion system that overlooks community contributions, and a reward structure that discourages collaboration. The parent organization also provides resources and coordination. In our case, we provided teachers with fellowships as well as all necessary logistical support.

And here's a challenge for unions—

While building and sustaining communities of practice and integrating them with the rest of an organization is not easy because their organic, spontaneous, and informal nature makes them resistant to supervision and influence, Wenger and Snyder have seen companies overcome the managerial paradox inherent in communities of practice, and successfully nurtured them. And while managers can't mandate communities of practice, what they can do is bring together the right people, provide the infrastructure for the community to thrive, and measure the communities' value in nontraditional ways. And then they go with the ever prevalent biological metaphor: "These tasks of cultivation aren't easy but the harvest they yield makes them well worth the effort." They talk about the community as a "Petri dish." A lot of folks use biological references when talking about communities of practice. Here's a good one: a friend of mind told me that her Israeli friend, Professor Malka Gorodotsky, refers to communities as edge environments, like where the woods might meet the plains, transitional places where change happens, where creativity lives, where problem solving takes on a new dimension.

Wenger and Snyder also talk about measuring success—a big challenge for networks because the effects of communities are often delayed; and the results generally appear in classrooms and schools and not in the communities themselves. So to measure success, they strongly suggest listening to the stories generated by network members and gathering anecdotal evidence systematically—and then making the evidence public, in reports, through newsletters, and on websites. On the subject of story, I also want to recommend another really interesting book called *A Whole New Mind—Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future* by Daniel Pink. For

Pink, it's all about story because getting hold of research and data is now as easy as Google. And since we all have easy access to the penultimate library, the Internet, we can find research to back up whatever case we want to make, and everyone knows it. So, in today's world, it's about having the most compelling story. Pink provides examples of corporations hiring professional storytellers to write their stories. I used a couple of stories told by Malcolm Gladwell. He's a case in point. As a master of the anecdote he supports his theories and makes his case in a most interesting, if not wholly credible, way—and sells lots of books. Wenger and Snyder give a couple of examples of story gathering: at Shell, community coordinators conduct interviews to collect stories and publish them; another company has an annual competition with prizes to identify best stories.

The final characteristic that I'll mention is what I also took to be the ultimate compliment for the network that I launched and facilitated. Several years ago, Leo Casey, who some of you may know, told me that the leadership network was the only time he had experienced being part of a truly democratic (with a small d) community. The potential for networks to perpetuate what and how it means to actively participate in a democracy is huge.

And that moves us to the processes of a network. We tend to think of networks as a series of dots that are connected, like television, a series of antennas connected around the country. But a network is not a bunch of teachers connected by email. To give you a better sense of the inner workings of a network, I'll draw from the work of Ann Lieberman, who served as the first national advisor to our network. Networks agendas are

responsive to members and their needs (a voluntary group of our members would meet together a week to 10 days before our monthly meeting to put together the upcoming Saturday agenda); the learning environment is more indirect than direct in that it results from new friendships and new ideas; the format is collaborative, not individualistic, with members working interdependently; work is more integrated than fragmented; leadership is facilitative, not directive; thinking from multiple perspectives is encouraged; shared values are both context-specific and generalized; and the organizational structure is more movement-like than organization-like. In networks, members direct their own learning; sidestep the limitations of institutional roles, hierarchies, and geographical locations; work with many different kinds of people; break through isolation; connect with others who are passionate about their work; introduce new ideas, projects, materials and ways to motivate students; develop new skills; feel supported for risk taking (the network is a safety net); and become technologically literate because while I strongly believe in face to face meetings much of the interaction and work takes place online, the reality of making it possible to do and have all in today's world.

The last piece of this is the content which of course is what binds network members together and what will hopefully sustain the network over time. Our network was focused on giving teachers a voice in policy making so we developed over the years a menu of activities related to helping teachers take on that role which included conducting action research, gaining the knowledge and skills to conduct advocacy, documenting and disseminating, writing cases, and developing partnerships and relationships. The design of this menu was informed by quite a few choice moments including a meeting

with an assemblywoman from Queens who told us teachers would get nowhere if all they could do was BMW (bitch, moan, and whine); a former chancellor who told us to look for the dead fish, that no one took cleaning up the Hudson seriously until people starting pulling dead fish out of the river; the importance of having an elevator pitch when one of our members actually ended up in an elevator with a major policymaker; and the experience of one of our members who kept convincing her colleagues on her school's leadership team to take her suggestions. She was the only one who cited research—and because it was successful, she did it repeatedly and experienced continued success.

And now, my vision for the future. When we began Teachers Network, the union was not only supportive but took an active role in helping us design our networks. After our initial year of the leadership network, Sandy Feldman, then still president of the UFT, met with the teachers to discuss the union taking over the network. The time then wasn't right but I'm hoping it is now because I see the teacher unions as being the ideal organization to transform not just schools but communities. The future is about networking and the unions are the only organizations powerful enough to reach out to harness the desire and energy of those thousands of teachers who choose the profession to create social change. As one of the teachers in our recent documentary stated, "Teaching is not about letter writing, signing a petition, voting every two to four years; it's about creating social change every single day." The future is about moving from workers to leaders, from top-down to non-hierarchical institutions, from bureaucratic to grassroots ways of working. The union understands this. It's about change, hope, sharing, challenging, and inspiring. It's about getting young teachers over the hump

from thinking about teaching as a two-year gig on the way to something else to becoming part of a profession. It's about helping the next generation understand what it means to be part of a union and what it would be like not to have one. You've had success with a regional network. The vision of the future is to have a myriad of regional networks in which teacher-centered innovation leads to student-centered education. The walls are coming down so education will more and more no longer happen primarily in the classroom so the vision of the future encompasses teachers and their unions becoming leaders in their communities. In the future when problems in the community arise, people will turn to teacher leaders, what a tremendous role for unions. Why aren't educators leaders in our society? In the future, teaching will no longer be the legacy of sacrificing old maids, underpaid, under-respected. They will be those who the community will turn to as the most influential folks in town. Over the next decade, the unions will become centers of innovation, generating ideas, sharing best practice, developing new ideas, and using the web in real time to document success, disseminate it, and transfer it. In the future, the vision will come from thousands of teachers around the world based on their experiences. They need to be connected, nurtured, and inspired. (slide)