

**CHANGING THE CURRENT DOMINANT NARRATIVE ABOUT
PUBLIC EDUCATION, TEACHERS AND TEACHER UNIONS**

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In the spring of 2009 I facilitated a process with the joint e-boards of the St Paul Federation of Teachers and the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (roughly 40 people). The impetus for the session was that both local Presidents saw that teachers needed ways to combat the growing negative image they and their union were constantly running up against – from the administrations, from parents, from elected officials, from the media and, unfortunately, from some teachers. Both Presidents had been exposed to Grassroots Policy Project’s (GPP) work on worldview as an arena of power and thought I/we could be helpful.

While the work of using the narrative is ongoing, there has been interest expressed in the ‘product’ of the process – a new narrative about public education, teachers and their unions. Given past GPP experiences, we recognize the natural inclination to want to ‘adopt’ something that someone else has created and seems powerful. The language of the new narrative is powerful and often elicits many emotions, especially from teachers. But the true power of the new narrative is the work that goes into creating it and then the understandings that come out of that process. Our experience is you can’t hand people the new narrative – they need to create it for themselves.

OUTCOMES

There were a number of outcomes that SPFT and MFT realized out of the narrative development process. The degree to which each local realized these varies but includes:

- stronger relationships among leaders and a core of people willing to act together in new ways
- a stronger identity with the union and clarity of its purpose
- enhanced leadership and agency – more leaders see themselves as part of creating something that can dramatically enhance the possibilities of change – there are a number of places where people also are asked to exercise leadership in the process – and the whole process is geared towards saying “you are the ones who can make it happen”
- emerging leaders with a sense of being in on creating something new
- foundation (new narrative) for future action
- deepened understanding and analysis of what it will take to “win” – another component of building leadership
- creating energy – improving morale – finding reason to hope
- new strategies for building power that are grounded in the narrative

PROCESS

The process we used took place over 3 sessions, each 3-4 hours, with some work done by a small group between the 2nd and 3rd sessions. Since we did these in the evening we always started with food and some social time. Roughly, the sessions looked like this:

Session I

- Relationship building, grounding in what got them into teaching and what keeps them in it
- Grounding in the idea of a narrative (meta-stories that have the power to shape people's perceptions understandings analysis and sense of what needs to be done) and then the idea of a dominant narrative
- Naming the dominant narrative about public education, teachers and teachers unions –and then exploring its impact – we also, very importantly, explored how teachers are consciously and/or unconsciously complicit in this dominant narrative.
- Where does this narrative come from – looking at how this narrative relates to a larger narrative in our country right now, whose interests are served and who perpetuates the narrative. A key lesson made here is that it was created by people – so we can create and advance our own.

Session II

- Reground in dominant narrative and deepen understanding of its power – connect to what they have seen happening since the last session and explore:
- Preparing to create a new narrative – this is usually time for people to talk with each other about values/beliefs that they hold in their own lives (generally) and sharing stories about where they came from (also builds relationships)
- Brainstorming elements of new narrative – this is done in small groups— each group writes up all the thoughts and flags those that are most resonant to verbally report back on
- Group debrief and form synthesis group to prepare a draft narrative out of the work of the group

Synthesis

- Small group meets for couple hours to synthesize themes – couple people take on responsibility for drafting, circulating among group and bringing draft to next session.

Session III

- Share draft narrative and engage group with draft narrative in three ways
 - personal and emotional - all politics is emotional as well as cognitive
 - cognitive and content
 - uses – meaning for their work
- Define next steps in fine-tuning narrative and beginning to put it to work

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE APPLICATIONS

Drawing both on my experience with these two locals and on work with other groups here are some important considerations:

- for this to work well the top leader(s) – in this case the President of the local – must see the need for something new in the work of the local and be open to changing how they and other leaders think about and do their work
- it seemed to add to the power of the experience that leaders from two locals who did not know each other were in the room together – it broke them out of their usual patterns of interaction and it was validating to see teachers they didn't know with similar hopes and struggles
- there is an ideal number of roughly 20-40 people that make this process work best
- it is important to make room for, draw out, and use the emotional content this conversation can illicit – this is where part of the power of the process lays and it will make the 'product' much more powerful because people will see themselves in it
- there is a tendency to think about this work as messaging; I went out of my way to emphasize that is NOT what we were doing; this work has implications for messaging but if the work of the local does not change, people will see through the messaging and the current dominant narrative will stand
- it is important to avoid “wordsmithing” and “writing for others” – again, the product will be most powerful if it represents the largely unfiltered beliefs and values of the leadership
- there needs to be a plan for how to start using the new narrative relatively soon after this process finishes so that people see it as something more than “just another exercise”

USING THE NARRATIVE

Both MFT and SPFT have been using the narrative for a couple years now. The ultimate goal of using the narrative is to shift the dominant narrative away from the “bad teacher” narrative toward their own. This is an ongoing process that takes time and involves work within their membership, with the administration, with parents, and with community groups as well as with the press. They have seen both the power of the narrative and the challenge of shifting a narrative when the current one has so much sway. They have come to recognize that it is something that is critical for them as educators and union activists to do to change the current course of conversation regarding public education, labor and our communities

The kinds of things they have done so far include:

- training stewards to run a conversation in the schools with members that is a short hand of the process used to create the narrative but ends with introducing the narrative for response
- shaping language around contract demands within the themes/values of the narrative (eg reducing workload becomes increasing teacher-student time)
- running “how to shift narrative in the moment” trainings to help people role play stepping out of defending against the dominant narrative and into speaking out of their own narrative
- using the narrative to shape public communications (eg around Waiting for Superman)
- using the elements of the narrative in community outreach conversations and in conversation with the administration
- using the narrative to shape strategy (eg how to approach Race to the Top)