

## ONE

# Teaching and Meaning

This book is about the role of symbolic action, particularly language, in educational reform. It tells the stories of three teachers, all self-described reformers, all in the midst of revolutionizing their teaching, all straining to transform the public call for reform into the private practice of their classrooms. I characterize this strain as a quest to make reform meaningful; it is a quest that is both revealed and shaped by language use. For these teachers, talk is action. Talk provokes new ideas about teaching, it masks partial or misunderstandings about reform, it bridges the often-elusive gap between the actual and the possible. At the center of these teachers' stories is the question of meaning: how they construct it, express it, and enact it in their teaching.

Al, Brian, and Camille are real teachers in a large, comprehensive high school in a suburb of a major midwestern city. Theirs is a story of resistance and resilience as much as it is a chronicle of revolution. Buffeted by persistent calls to change their practice, they labor to decipher the meaning of reform for their students, for their community, and for themselves. Drawn to the rhetoric of reform, they aspire to create "essential" curricula, to educate students who are able to "demonstrate mastery," and to transform themselves from transmitters of knowledge into "coaches." Through it all, language is these teachers' ally. They use the languages of educational reform to inspire new ways to think about practice, to shield themselves from the confusion of contradictory understandings of reform, and to construct a shared understanding of what reformed teaching might mean. Al, Brian, and Camille use the languages of educational reform to "talk into existence" (Page, 1991) a new and better way to teach. How they do it is the subject of this book.

In focusing on the language and practice of three teachers in a single school, my intention is to offer a deeper, more multidimensional analysis of the complex, culture-bound links between policy and practice than is possible in aggregate studies. I do not explain why the reform succeeds or fails. Nor do I offer a solution to the problem of implementation. While I do examine the challenges—both conceptual and technical—confronted by these teachers, this is not a book about

deficits. Rather, it is a book about relationships: between policy and practice, between thinking and talking, and between talking and doing. In concentrating on how those relationships are forged, nurtured, and revised by Al, Brian, and Camille, I hope to illuminate how teachers construct what Geertz (1973) called the “webs of meaning” that constitute the true nexus of reform.

## MEANINGFUL PRACTICE

Most of the talk described and analyzed in this book revolves around an ambitious practice known as “exhibition.” Like most teachers who use exhibitions in their teaching, Al, Brian, and Camille became acquainted with the concept through their school’s involvement with the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES). Al was among the group of teachers who initially pushed for the school’s connection to this national engine of school reform. The school, Oakville High School (OHS)<sup>1</sup> joined CES in 1991, nearly seven years after the organization’s inception. In 1991, joining CES meant, chiefly, making a commitment to find ways to adapt and to reflect on the set of nine “essential principles”<sup>2</sup> devised by CES’s founder and then chairman Theodore Sizer. Among those nine principles was diploma by exhibition. The conviction behind this principle is that students should “earn” their diploma. Rather than basing the credential on “time spent” in classes, students who earn their diplomas demonstrate that they “can do important things” (Sizer, 1984).

While the definition of what exhibitions actually are is relatively oblique in CES literature, in practice most are public or semipublic events in which students present completed work to a panel of judges whose task is to determine whether the performance meets a specified standard. On its most basic level, then, an exhibition is a substitute for the final exam. For Al, Brian, and Camille, it is that and much more.

My chief aim for this study was to learn what Al, Brian, and Camille thought they were doing when they made exhibition a feature of their teaching. If exhibition was really meaningful for them, what made it so? If exhibitions are more than mere substitutes for the final exam, what else are they? I expected to find a link between the ideology of CES and the theories espoused by Al, Brian, and Camille. Since the ideology of CES, as it is articulated in the nine essential principles and in other literature published about or by CES, is distinguished by a distinctive lexicon, I also expected to discover links between the language of CES and that of the teachers I studied. And to varying degrees I did find alignment in ideas and rhetoric. More interesting however, and, I think, more instructive, is the complexity of that alignment.

While each of these teachers was attracted to CES rhetoric, each also brought to his or her practice a unique set of principles linked with its own set of terms. The manner in which each assimilated CES concepts into his or her existing cosmology varied based on a constellation of factors. Here I use the term *cosmology* deliberately. When Al, Brian, and Camille talked about teaching, they were

concerned about more than theories of cognition or philosophies of curriculum design. They were expressing a belief system that blends pedagogical and universal questions: What do my students need to know? How do I know when they know enough? What is the purpose of this knowledge? What is my role in helping them grow? Why am I here?

Exhibition is certainly not the only practice that helps teachers confront these questions. Indeed, any number of practices and reforms might be subject to a similar analysis. However, because exhibition is so explicitly tied to outcomes and ideology, I argue that it offers unique insight into the reform process. Exhibition is worth examining closely as an example of the complex process of making reform meaningful, first, because the word *exhibition* itself accommodates multiple connotations. This flexibility invites teachers to ascribe personal meaning to the term, which therefore allows them to use it as a tool for guiding practice. As a concept, the flexibility of exhibition is most evidently signaled by its grammatical usage: All three teachers used it as both a noun and a verb; sometimes they referred to “the exhibition” and sometimes they referred to “exhibiting.” Flexible meaning is enhanced by a second special property of exhibition: It empowers teachers to define outcomes and standards. In this way, exhibition stands in stark contrast to many current reforms aimed at prescribing (and often limiting) a teacher’s role. Unlike reforms such as high-stakes testing or vouchers or even lengthening the school day, exhibition invites teachers to address those very questions central to their cosmology: What should students know? How will I know if they know enough? In other words, exhibition sparks consideration of what is meaningful about teaching. And in so doing, it offers access to researchers and teachers seeking a deeper understanding of how reform is made real.

At the time of the study (1997–1998) exhibition was meaningful to a small but significant subgroup of teachers at OHS. While diploma by exhibition was not yet a policy at the school, teachers who taught with exhibitions understood that each time they incorporated an exhibition, particularly a final exhibition, into their courses, they were informing an important policy debate. Were OHS to formally adopt the principle of diploma by exhibition, the process by which students graduate would change dramatically. Graduation would no longer be a matter of cumulative grade point averages and credit hours. Instead, seniors would likely undergo a battery of public demonstrations designed to show that they have met a set of competencies deemed necessary to graduate.

Even on a small scale, exhibitions present logistical, pedagogical, and cultural challenges. They require the recruitment of judges to serve on panels. They require the formulation of standards or “rubrics” against which to judge student work. They require the development of curricula to support the outcomes specified by the rubrics. All of these requirements assume that teachers are prepared to formulate, judge, and teach with exhibition rather than a final exam. And this requirement makes demands on the culture of the school as well as on individual teacher’s expertise. Not all teachers, not all administrators, and not all parents

believe that exhibition is a better alternative to the final exam, and part of Al's, Brian's, and Camille's job was to test the waters.

The following brief portraits introduce Al, Brian, and Camille, and they provide an impression of each teacher's talk as well as a glimpse into his or her classroom. They foreshadow questions that I will address in greater detail in subsequent chapters: What does exhibition mean? How is meaning expressed verbally as well as in action? How is exhibition meaningful to these teachers' teaching?

## AL

Alexander Jefferson Kaline chose his pseudonym<sup>3</sup> in part to highlight aspects of his personality and his approach to teaching. Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson are two of his favorite characters from American history, and Al Kaline, the great first baseman, is one of his athletic heroes. Al has been teaching in the Oakville school district for twenty-five years, and for twenty of those years he also coached football at the college as well as the high school level. When he talks about teaching generally, he draws liberally from images of athletics, referring to his class as his "team" and his curriculum as a set of "practices." When he talks about the practice of exhibition, he focuses more sharply on what students ought to "get" from his class: "Bottom line for me, what I want my students to get out of my class, is that they have the ability to look at an issue, to research that issue, learn about that issue, look at the sides, and, in a logical manner, come up with a conclusion. That's the purpose of my course. And that's why I teach history."

His course, Thesis in History, is offered twice a year to eleventh graders. Passing this course has just been made a requirement for graduation from OHS, and the section of eighteen students I observed contained one senior as well as one nontraditional student who was back at OHS after several years in the workforce to complete his graduation requirements.

In the spring of 1998, Al is teaching Thesis for the fourth time. Four weeks into the semester students have selected topics, most having to do with contemporary events and issues such as the suicide of Kurt Cobain, the Waco incident, the circumstances surrounding the Jeffrey Dahmer murders, and the significance of the Roswell, New Mexico, controversy. Their first substantial assignment related to their topic is the preparation of a newspaper. On March 5, Al's classroom has been turned into an exhibition hall, with the back wall covered from top to bottom with these newspapers. While the sophistication with which these projects are presented varies widely, all feature headlines, news stories, graphics, and either photographs or cartoons about their topic.

The newspaper is an innovation he and his teaching partner, Neil, have introduced this semester. It is one of the many building blocks of the course meant to lead students toward the final requirement: a "defense" in which students present their theses and field questions from a panel composed of parents, peers, and an expert in the field. Defenses will take place on the evenings of May 27, 28,

and 29. Between March and May, students must develop an “essential question,” attempt to answer that question using evidence from several sources, write a position paper explicating their answers as well as a rebuttal, and present their work to their peers in a preliminary defense.

But first, they must finish their newspapers and give a background presentation. On March 5, Al says that he is “not happy” with the first presentations he has seen. I meet him in the corridor as classes are changing and he announces that he’s “going to go over everything, again.” He is shaking his head and muttering as he walks slowly but purposefully toward his classroom. This is as agitated as I will see him all semester. Closely cropped blond hair frames a soft, round face; when he is smiling, he looks a lot like the comedian Drew Carey. As his third period section files into his classroom, he saunters to his desk, sighs and says “Okay. Listen up. Couple of things.” Then he begins one of the few lectures he will give this semester.

“Mr. Kaline doesn’t give Fs. You get an incomplete. You’ll do it until you get it right. Newspaper is not going to go away. Don’t fall behind. There will be more and more things coming at you and they will be coming more and more rapidly. By next week you’ll need five more references, which will put you at somewhere close to fifteen. Continue to work.” He explains that he was not pleased with what he heard last period and will explain, again, the purpose and requirements of the background presentation.

“Take out a sheet of paper so you can take some notes.” He begins to pace back and forth in front of the room and gradually the classroom starts to feel like a locker room. Students sit in rows and quietly scribble as Al talks. “What is the purpose of the presentation? Number one, to demonstrate and share with the class knowledge of your topic; that you know enough to move on to phase two: the essential question. Number two, to give the student practice. You need to be able to stand in front of people and deliver your message. The essence of Thesis is to be able to stand in front of people and deliver your message and support it with evidence. You’re saying ‘I know my stuff and I’m not afraid to talk in front of people.’”

Students stare blankly as he emphasizes this last point, and I suspect it is because they are afraid to stand in front of people. They are not at all certain that they know their stuff. Al continues, “What are you gonna tell me? First you need an intro. What makes a good intro? It has to be an attention getter; you need a hook. Think of TV shows, *The X-Files*. They tell you what’s coming. Right?”

Finally, he asks if there are questions. Immediately a student asks, “What if you’re too afraid?” Al pounces as if he has been waiting for this, “Great question. We’re all afraid. I was like that. But that’s why we’re doing this in small parts. No one will laugh at you in here. You will do it. If you fall off the wire, we’ll catch you.” Mitchell, whom Al has identified to me as “a challenge” insists he will not be able to do it. Al turns to Mitchell, pauses, and looks directly at him as if to say “You’re forcing me to reveal this”: “Three years ago I had bypass surgery. I was terrified. Did I want to do it? No. I had to do it if I wanted to be here. This is not heart surgery. We’ll all be there to catch you. We’re just gonna get you ready for it.” More

sighs and protests and a final admonition: “Twenty years of coaching football, I never once said to my team ‘We got a game next week. We’re not gonna practice until then.’ You know how this works. You’ve all been in band or choir or drama or sports. You gotta practice.” There is silence. Al pauses a beat and changes the subject by saying “Go to work.”

BRIAN

For almost as long as he can remember, Brian Smith has wanted to be a teacher. This is his fourth year teaching tenth-grade geometry at OHS, the high school from which he graduated eight years ago. Brian never heard the terms *exhibition*, *performance assessment*, *cooperative learning*, or *teacher as coach* when he was in college, but now his vocabulary is peppered with these words and phrases, and he considers their impact on his teaching “profound.”

As a member of one of a growing number of OHS teams—self-contained units of teachers and students situated within a grade level—Brian views himself as both a beneficiary of and a contributor to the local work of the Coalition of Essential Schools. His team is a tenth-grade cluster known as “World Connections,” usually abbreviated as “Connections.” He associates work on his team, as well as the coalition, with “the changes that have gone on at OHS since I was a kid.” He refers to “incredible opportunities” such as “mentorship, disciplinary work, double-blocking.” Structural innovations like double-blocking (reconfiguring the school day to accommodate longer blocks of time) are well-established at OHS, and Brian’s team exemplifies many of those changes.

Connections functions, in effect, as a small school within a school. The four teachers responsible for the Connections team teach in adjacent classrooms. Every day they share a common planning time. They are authorized to adjust the schedule based on what they determine to be team needs. And they design and deliver interdisciplinary curricula. Chief among these curricula are the exhibitions that cap each semester.

When I first met Brian, he was in the final stages of rehearsing students for the first exhibition of the year. This project, on “argument and evidence,” required small groups of students to research an issue, to construct a position, and to present their position to what Brian calls “an authentic audience.” Like Al’s panel of judges, the audiences were mostly composed of one or more parents, a teacher, and a peer. The audiences for the final exhibition of the year are to be similar. Brian rarely sits in on his students’ exhibitions. Like the other participants in this study, Brian serves primarily as host to his students’ guests, and finds the whole process “nerve-racking. It’s just as much my performance on the line as theirs,” he explains. On exhibition nights (what at OHS is called the “Celebration of Learning”), Brian will do a lot of “pacing the lobby.”

Unlike Thesis in History, Brian’s second semester exhibition does not grow out of any one discipline. Rather it is conceived as a product of the entire Connec-

tions team. It is meant to draw on essential skills and understandings that supersede whatever disciplinary goals may drive the geometry, biology, English, or global issues courses that make up the team. The team, for Brian, is a primary vehicle for both determining and expressing what teaching means to him. When he talks about his students' exhibitions, he nearly always links his goals to the team's: "As the team as a whole, one of our focuses is lifelong learning. . . . As a team, we've all agreed that the Coalition of Essential Schools is an excellent piece of school reform, and we try to implement principles in terms we think we can handle."

In Brian's—as in his three teammates'—classroom are posted five "Habits of Mind," as well as four of the nine essential principles advocated by the Coalition of Essential Schools. According to Brian, it is these habits and principles that serve as the nexus of the interdisciplinary work undertaken by the team. While I never heard him refer directly to any of the habits or principles while he was teaching, he frequently used terms like *backwards-building curriculum* or *specificity or relevancy* when discussing his goals for his students. He suggested in conversation that essential principles and habits of mind prompted him to think about his teaching in a new way.

He thinks the focus on habits of mind like "argument and evidence" helps give his geometry curriculum coherence: "It's more than just finding the antecedent of a condition. It is how does that skill of looking at the comparison of the antecedent and the consequent carry all the way through? Why is that so early in the geometry text? What's the purpose of it and how does it apply later?" Again, he links this insight to his role on his team: "Had I not been on the team and not done the unit like that, I never would have reinforced that through the entire year."

The culminating exhibition for the Connections team is known among students and teachers as "Resumé." The Resumé project requires students to research a potential career, and based on what they learn about that career, to construct a personal resumé that provides evidence that (1) they understand what skills and knowledge are required for this career, and (2) they either possess those qualities, demonstrated by their work in and outside of school, or they are working toward developing those qualities. Between February and late May, students will undergo a series of personality tests, shadow and interview a practitioner in the field they think they might want to pursue as adults, develop their resumé according to standard formatting procedures, and present their resumé along with the evidence that supports it to their audience.

When I visit in early April, less than two months before the Celebration of Learning, Brian's Resumé group is about to begin to put their resumé together. Work on resumé occurs during small blocks of time carved out of the schedule by the team. Each team member has a resumé group, which Brian tells me has been handpicked for compatibility between students and teacher. Early in the semester, resumé groups meet once or twice a week for approximately thirty minutes. By April, the frequency increases, but the block remains the same. In the final weeks prior to the exhibitions, Resumé will assume a much larger role in

the team's day, meeting for between fifty and seventy minutes three to four times a week.

At 10:45 on a Tuesday morning, Brian's Resumé group files into his classroom. One by one they walk over to a milk crate in one corner of the well-lit, immaculately organized room, pull out manila envelopes, and take their seats in neatly arranged rows. On the board is today's agenda for Resumé.

#### Today in Resumé

- Write Career Objective

Example: To pursue a career in law enforcement where I can utilize my physical fitness and take a leadership role along with working with others. . . .

"You are mine for a half hour," Brian announces as students take their seats. "We have two goals that need to be accomplished by tomorrow. Half by the end of today and the other half tomorrow. We are going to start drafting your resumé." For the next fifteen minutes, Brian conducts a whole-class discussion based on an analysis of four examples of career objectives—the one on the agenda plus three others he hands out.

Throughout the discussion, which consists primarily of prompting from Brian (What's important to this person? What else besides the job does the objective include?), he focuses on the language of the objective statement. Brian wants his students to use "profound" language. He does not want students to say "to get a job." He wants them to say "pursue a career" because it "sounds more profound." He personalizes the discussion by referring to himself: "In a few years, when I apply for an assistant principal position, I'm not gonna say, 'I wanna be an assistant principal.' That's not very profound."

After analyzing examples of career objectives, Brian asks for a volunteer who will allow the class to construct his or her objective. He selects two students who want to be veterinarians. Brian prompts with an opening phrase, "To pursue a career," after which a quiet controversy, again about language, erupts. Is it better to use fewer or more words to describe the career? The students seem to have absorbed Brian's call for profundity, when they agree that "a career in veterinary medicine" is better than "a career as a veterinarian."

Next, what skills can they bring to the job? One of the students, Adam, struggles to identify skills. Brian asks the whole class to brainstorm, and they come up with four: decision making, problem solving, taking chances, and patience. Brian, mindful of the time, suggests that four skills are too many: "I'd narrow it down to three. Four is too many." Another student suggests eliminating "taking chances," and Brian agrees: "I'm not sure I want a vet 'taking chances' with my dogs."

Adam mutters, "That's not what I mean."

Without acknowledging Adam's comment, Brian moves on to drafting the next sentence on the board: "To pursue a career in veterinary medicine, where I



can demonstrate my problem-solving skills, make strong decisions, and exhibit patience.” He steps back and admires his handiwork: “This is an excellent career objective. It uses strong verbs like *demonstrate*.” He pauses, looks at the class, then puts down his chalk as if to signal a new segment of the class: “Now you have fifteen minutes to draft your career objective. Write the first draft, then trade with someone and get feedback.” He asks Adam (whose objective is already written) to walk around and help students draft. Tomorrow they will work on the next piece of the resumé.

#### CAMILLE

Camille Rogers and Brian Smith came to OHS as teachers the same year, but their respective journeys to the school represent vastly different origins and trajectories. Brian always knew he wanted to be a teacher, and he nurtured his dream while a student at OHS, followed by a sterling college career at a selective state university. Camille, by contrast, came to teaching indirectly, following a series of educational experiences punctuated by a successful career in banking. Oakville is a “test market” community (predominantly white, middle class and suburban), and as a product of that community, Brian is—has always been—at home at OHS. Camille, on the other hand, grew up in the predominantly African American east side of the state’s capital city. As one of only three African Americans in a faculty of over ninety, Camille stands out. She also stands out in the way that many tall, attractive, gregarious people stand out. She is immensely popular with students. Her classroom exudes laughter, warmth, a constant flow of students and teachers of various hues, the occasional whiff of food brought in from the local Chinese restaurant, and the remarkable sense of conviviality associated with teachers who are loved. She has made herself a home at OHS.

Like Brian, Camille is a member of a team. Her teaching partner, Carole, shares classroom space with her, and for two years they have cotaught the twelfth-grade interdisciplinary elective Senior Political Studies. SPS, as it is known, was originally conceived by Carole to be a double-blocked, thematic class that examined political issues from the perspectives of government and English. Carol is the government teacher and Camille is the English teacher. Also, as originally conceived, the second semester theme was “utopia,” and the year culminated in a lengthy project in which groups of students read and critiqued political as well as fictional literature related to the concept of utopia, and presented their work at a final exhibition. This year, the Utopia unit has been scrapped, and the exhibition totally reconfigured.

Early in the school year, Camille and Carole noted “problems with responsibility” in SPS. “We just weren’t seeing the level of maturity we had seen with other groups,” Camille explained, detailing the reasons why the Utopia unit was redesigned. Instead of collaborating on a group project, students will compile and present individual portfolios indicating the completion of a variety of tasks assigned by Carole and Camille. Camille regards the portfolio as a “kinder” version

of an exhibition. "It's more about process," she explains. As for the change in content, Camille describes the project largely as "career exploration."

"In changing the program," Camille explained, "the intent was for them to see what they're gonna be faced with as college students. What they're gonna be faced with if they choose not to go to college. What are these jobs? What are they paying? What are the requirements for these jobs? What's the next level that you would move up to in this particular job?" When she talks about the design of the portfolio, at first she sounds a lot like Brian, but then her tone shifts, and she draws on images of vision: "We were trying to get them to look *in themselves*. The point of this is to get them to look in themselves and see what they were doing. Look at where they want to go."

The project links the political process and the students' futures by requiring students to sit in on school board hearings, to visit a college class, and—recalling the resumé project—to shadow a professional whose career they may want to pursue. Carole has recently become interested in technology, and several of the requirements involve using computers: designing a Web site, searching the Internet for information on various topics, and preparing the final exhibition using the software program Powerpoint.

During the semester in which the students were preparing their portfolios, I rarely saw Camille "teach," at least not in a traditional sense. I rarely saw her stand in front of her class. I rarely saw the entire class assembled in her room. I rarely saw students engaged in what I would have normally called "curriculum." I was never exactly sure what the plans for any given class were. The only long-term design was indicated on the rubric designed to guide students' compilation of their portfolios.

On most days students work independently, and on Fridays they check in with Camille and Carol in a ritual known as "portfolio check." Students take turns presenting their works-in-progress, and Camille, with her grade book open, gives students a  $\checkmark$  for completed work, and a  $\checkmark-$  for incomplete work. Portfolio checks are brief, and relatively private. Fridays are double-blocked, which means SPS lasts for nearly two hours, and time not spent in portfolio check belongs to the students.

Often students disperse, but just as often, they linger. It was during these "hanging out" times that I saw Camille teach. On one of these occasions, an afternoon in late April, after a majority of the class had gone to points unknown, a group of six remained to chat with Ms. Rogers.

Gill, a loquacious African American student, sidles up to Camille's desk to discuss the colleges to which he has been accepted. Mostly Gill talks. He explains his dilemma: He was accepted by two colleges, but his parents will only contribute financially if he attends their choice. Camille nods, then notices another student wandering into the room: "Suzie, are you working on the computer? Do you want me to do something for you?" Suzie glances over to Camille, smiles—without breaking stride—and says "You know I like you Ms. Rogers." Everyone in the room laughs. Camille smiles back and turns her attention back to Gill. But the

energy, which had previously been dispersed among the students in the room, now centers on Camille.

Gill's private concern of life after OHS is actually shared by everyone in the room, and Gill widens the conversation by bringing up a topic everyone can relate to. "Ms. Rogers," he bellows in his class-clown voice, "please tell my mother not to cry when you talk to her." Camille looks at him, narrows her eyes, and with a mischievous grin, says "Who? Me?" One of her hallmarks as a teacher is the frequency with which she calls parents to keep them apprised of student progress. She calls when assignments are incomplete, when students have missed too much school, when their attitude concerns her. Often the call is a gesture—she leaves a message on an answering machine—but it is a powerful gesture, one that students refer to regularly when they talk about Ms. Rogers.

On this occasion, she is in the process of calling the parents of all her students who are in jeopardy of not graduating. By late April, students have all received notice from the OHS administration, but Camille follows up with a phone call. This notice, what the students call the "jeopardy letter," becomes the subject of the day; and Camille listens as students chime in, each with the story of his or her letter: "My mother cried." "My father woke me up at 5:30 this morning to tell me that my teacher said I wouldn't graduate." "Mine came when I wasn't home." I am struck by their openness. They are almost lighthearted as they reveal this information, wearing it as a badge, not of honor, but of belonging. And Camille encourages the exchange, shaking her head at some moments, chuckling at others. Never does her demeanor suggest disapproval. She wants them to tell their stories, to express themselves.

Later, when I share my impressions, she tells me conversations like the one I witnessed are an example of "what I do versus what I'm supposed to do. They're scared to express themselves. It's more important that they feel competent and confident than that they can analyze *Animal Farm*."

When Camille talks about the meaning of her teaching, she almost never brings up exhibition. Despite the fact that nearly all of Camille's classes feature exhibitions, her teaching revolves around what she considers to be a deeper quest for engagement, expression, and success, "whatever that means to the student."

When pushed, she, like Brian, links exhibition to her teaching by focusing on the meaning of display, the prideful, public nature of the work of learning: "I think as a teacher you wanna be proud of your kids. I mean, like a parent. This is a product of me. This is someone I've worked with, someone I've helped, someone I've tried to encourage and this is the end result of what they've done."

## VARIETIES OF MEANING

Al, Brian, and Camille are three out of approximately ten teachers at OHS who, at the time of the study, had chosen to incorporate exhibitions into their teaching, and while each does so in remarkably individual ways, these teachers' decisions to

make exhibition a feature of how and what they teach marks them (to colleagues, administrators, themselves, and me) as innovative and reform minded. They hold in common a number of beliefs about teaching and learning that can be traced to their involvement with the practice.

They believe that exhibiting is more demanding for students than other forms of assessment, such as paper-and-pencil tests. They believe that teachers should do more than lecture if they are to teach effectively; that guiding, facilitating, and structuring learning is more important than transmitting knowledge. They believe that exhibitions should serve as a central focus of the entire curriculum. And they believe, perhaps most insistently, that exhibiting is a meaningful experience because it is public and ceremonial, and because it requires students to accomplish something they are rarely asked to do: to “stand up” before an audience to present and defend a position.

As one of nine essential principles guiding the Coalition of Essential Schools, exhibition, particularly as it is discussed and practiced in CES schools like OHS, both belongs to and contributes to a tradition of schooling. This tradition is an extension and reinterpretation of progressive reforms of nearly a century ago (Perone, 1998; Sizer, 1984; Tyack and Cuban, 1995). This era of educational reform is frequently associated with the child-centered, experiential, and democratic philosophies of John Dewey, and exhibition as promoted by CES alludes directly to this constructivist approach to curriculum and pedagogy. But progressive reforms aimed for much more than curricular change. Though rarely invoked explicitly, the influence of the sweeping social agenda of progressivism, an agenda that included social reconstruction, social efficiency, and vocationalism, hovers over the CES agenda generally and these teachers’ understanding of exhibition specifically.

CES is, furthermore, identified by a coherent ideology, culture, and language; and all three of the teachers I studied engaged with these in one way or another. The varieties of this engagement comprise a central theme of this book. While all three teachers are engaged in the practice of exhibition, each interprets it differently. Al likens it to the Friday night game, highlighting the practices leading up to the game. For Brian it is a more “profound” test, a task that prompts anxiety with a focus on the “relief” that comes after the final performance. In Camille’s version, the final performance is a ceremony in which the ideals of her teaching—responsibility, confidence, and expression—are acted out.

Each understands exhibition in a different way. Each teaches exhibition in a different way. And each uses exhibition differently to construct as well as to enact the wider meanings of teaching and the purpose of school. These wider meanings and purposes—what I understand to be teachers’ cosmologies of learning and teaching—find some expression in the practice of exhibition; but what is more remarkable is their breadth, their dynamism, and their variety. While it is easy to trace connections between what teachers say and do about exhibitions and the ideology, culture, and language of the Coalition of Essential Schools, it is clear to me that CES is only one of many sources influencing teachers’ thinking. Al, Brian,

and Camille came to OHS with beliefs of their own. These beliefs are far ranging, often tacit, at times contradictory, and reflective of multiple traditions.

#### LEARNING TO BE HISTORIANS

When Al says “I used to teach kids history. Now I teach them to be historians,” he is reflecting one aspect of the progressive tradition out of which CES grows and to which it aims to contribute. This is a tradition that aspires to be both intellectual and democratic. Building consciously on Dewey, Sizer (1984) focuses on skills and competencies necessary for thoughtful and responsible involvement in civic life. As a history teacher, Al also thinks about larger purposes, and he supports the goal of participation in democratic society. But, over the years, his focus has narrowed.

I was becoming a better lecturer and I knew history well, I thought. But all the time I was doing that, I couldn't lose this one question: *Why are kids in my class?* And I kept coming back to, all I'm doing is preparing them for *Jeopardy*. You know, how are they ever going to use what I'm teaching them? And I said, well they can work crossword puzzles, they could go to *Jeopardy*, and those types of things. I wanted history to be more than that. . . . My view is, I don't teach history anymore. I teach kids to be historians and I think that's what historians do. They look. They analyze. They research. They draw conclusions. And so that's essentially what I've been trying to do with this whole thing.

Like Sizer, Al wants students to learn to do important things. And, of the three teachers, he is most explicit about what constitutes important things. Looking, analyzing, researching, and drawing conclusions are all important to Al because these are the “things” historians do.

His view of what his teaching means aligns with current pedagogical trends built on constructivist learning theory; and he resonates with other CES slogans such as “teacher as coach, student as worker,” and “less is more.” Those terms, Al tells me, “made sense” when he first heard them, because they expressed what he already “had been trying to do.”

Of the three teachers, only Al consistently expressed concern with disciplinary understanding. His was the only exhibition deeply connected to his discipline, and his was the only exhibition that dominated every moment of his semester-long class. Al came close to transforming the slogans into concrete guides for his practice, perhaps because he had concrete referents for the metaphors so central to CES rhetoric. I suspect that having been a coach invited him to use the metaphor as a tool for comparing the way he taught athletes to his approach toward his history students. Coaching was meaningful to Al long before CES told him that teachers should be coaches. And the meaning of coaching clearly extends further than the athletic connotations of the metaphor. But talking about coaching in

the context of his teaching is what made the comparison useful to him. And without the metaphor, the conversation may have never taken place.

When I first met Al, I asked him to tell me how coaching affects his teaching and he said, "Well, I'll tell you. I never once in my twenty-some-odd years of coaching football put a play up on the chalkboard, told the kids how to make the play, then passed out a test." When, the very next day, a version of that explanation appeared in his speech to his students, I was alerted to at least one of the ways Al made reform meaningful. He was engaging in a reciprocal relationship between the language of coaching and its practice in his classroom.

#### LEARNING TO BE STUDENTS

All three teachers want their students to succeed at school. The exhibition as a public display of achievement, a test of a student's ability to stand before an audience and present himself/herself, was taken as an indicator of a student's readiness to move on to the next phase of schooling. This view of exhibition as a gateway also recalls progressive reforms. Only these reforms were not aimed at elite, intellectual echelons of society. Rather, they were designed to address the needs of students who would not go on to college, but would enter the workforce. Here the assumption of all three teachers seems to be that high school functions, in part, to sort students. For some, high school leads to college and college leads to productive adulthood. Others will be directed into vocational tracks leading to productive adulthood of a different type. In either case, the teachers suggest a keen awareness that the quality of that adulthood will hinge largely on the school-based experiences that precede it.

Learning to be a student involves public presentation, but it also carries with it a moral imperative. Good students are responsible, self-motivated, well-organized, and able to think critically as well as follow instructions. Exhibition offers more subtle lessons about learning to be a student. Brian consistently emphasized the "nervousness" he associated with the public performance, and he believed that nervousness is one of the lessons of exhibiting because "that tension is causing them to push forward." He compares his students' experiences with exhibition to his own as a member of the high school band: "The same thing happened growing up in a band program. The nerves caused us to play better; the nerves caused us to listen more and I think when our kids get nervous before an exhibition, it causes them to listen to each other a little more as well."

In this utilitarian view of schooling, the teacher is a pragmatist and acknowledges the status of power holders, such as the "experts" who sit on exhibition panels (Labaree, 1997). Exhibition serves as a tool to celebrate the moral order (Metz, 1987), and to prepare students to preserve it.

#### LEARNING TO BE ADULTS

Camille certainly wants her students to be successful, and holds many of the values expressed by Brian and Al, but her long view of the relationship between

schooling and adulthood blends critical and utilitarian perspectives. Even though she distrusts the system that defines success, she wants her students to have access to it. School is a means to an end. It is not necessarily a logical or fair means, but it is the one that everyone must use and, therefore, her students, she reasons, must get to college, must be poised and confident and expressive, because with those qualities comes access to successful lives as adults.

She constructs her view of what kind of adults her students should be from her own coming-of-age experiences. The daughter of a close-knit, middle-class African American family, Camille cites the Baptist church, “where my whole family went, where we grew up,” as a significant influence in her life. “I think as far as respecting other people’s opinions,” explaining what she learned at church, “it was a place [where] you’re allowed to express yourself and ask questions.” She came to teaching reluctantly, despite the discouragement of family members who felt that teaching represented professional and economic status beneath Camille. Proving herself in banking, however, emboldened her to pursue what she considered to be a more meaningful career as a teacher.

Why is teaching meaningful? “My goal is to get students to think on their own. From within,” Camille responds. She recalls her upbringing in the church, and also negative experiences from her own public education: “In high school, with teachers who spit out this information and all you had to do is memorize and you never came back to revisit or make any connection with anything. You learn this long enough to take a test and you’re done with it.” Throughout this study Camille made it evident that her teaching is, above all, an attempt to right that wrong: “And so I try always to make these connections, to show just this big picture.”

While the “big picture” as she calls it, revolves around free-flowing expression, she is also concerned with the little picture, the details that determine what impression students make and how that impression will influence their future. Again, her own experiences as a student validate this belief: “In college, the transition from high school was a struggle for about two years because for you to tell me to write what I think is absolutely foreign. Because I had never been asked what I thought.” Camille wants her students to be prepared for college, and for her, that means primarily two things: First, that they be able to express what they think and, second, is what she calls “responsibility.”

Again and again, she emphasizes the importance of students “taking responsibility” for their success. Exhibition, she explained at our first meeting, appeals to her because it “makes students more responsible. All of these kids want to go to college. And so the fact that you can’t turn a paper in late in college meant nothing to them.” She teaches students to be more responsible most visibly by holding them to their responsibilities. Using what Swidler (1979) calls a “therapeutic” model of teaching, Camille takes care of her students (Noddings, 1984), aiming to “break down barriers” preventing students from developing (Dennison, 1969) into adults. One of her hallmarks is calling parents to apprise them of student progress. Often she shares stories of calls home, but always there is the coda: “I’m not gonna be there in college to call your parents.” She also tries to serve as a role

model. “My thing is, I understand. I’m here full time,” referring to the fact that she is enrolled in a master’s program in education, “I bring my books in. . . . And I think it makes it more real to them. They know I’m not bluffing them.”

### MEANING, EXPERTISE, AND CHANGE: BECOMING A COACH

At the time of the study, both Camille and Brian had been teaching for less than five years, and as relative novices, they shared some similarities with regard to the way they talked about teaching and also the challenges they encountered in the classroom. They were both concerned with authority as it relates to their students. Brian asserted his by demanding order and providing clarity and explicitness. Camille, on the other hand, cultivated the consent of her students through personal appeal and used ambiguity as a lubricant for potentially sticky situations with students. How deliberate each was about the choices he or she made in the classroom is less clear. Camille was eloquent in expressing her belief that confidence is more important than analytic skills, but I suspect that part of her certainty about what she should emphasize was determined by what she was able to emphasize.

How Camille, Brian, and Al interpreted exhibition (and, by extension, teaching) was influenced by a constellation of factors, including where they grew up; what their parents did for a living; where they went to school; what they read; other experiences they may have had with exhibiting, such as athletics, music, or theater; what they believed about education generally; and what they knew about teaching specifically. In all three cases, I found both meaning and expertise to be significant—and interactive—influences in the ways these teachers understood and practiced exhibition. In other words, what they thought they should be teaching was both determined by and limited by what they knew about teaching.

Brian’s and Camille’s emphasis on management at the expense of planning or assessment bares the hallmark of the novice. By contrast, Al displayed many of the characteristics of the expert pedagogue. His confidence among students and his focus on both curriculum and student performance suggest an emerging commitment as well as a capacity to organize his practice according to a constructivist orientation. Al’s emphasis on education for disciplinary understanding grew out of twenty years of reflecting on his job as a history teacher and a coach combined with his involvement in school reform at Oakville High School. It was perhaps serendipitous that the reform mechanism selected for Oakville was the Coalition of Essential Schools because it was through this connection that Al was introduced to the metaphor of teacher as coach. It was also through CES that Al was encouraged to deliberate about the meaning of coaching and was afforded a community in which to do so. The combination of experience, community, and reflection served to sharpen what he knew how to do as well as what that know-how meant to him.



Camille and Brian were in the midst of developing a coherent technical repertoire, even as they attempted to make sense of what it means to change it. For them, the idea of being a teacher seemed much more closely aligned to being a coach. The practice of coaching, however, remains more elusive. While all three teachers talked about coaching and its relationship to teaching, only Al pursued the metaphorical possibilities in any depth. Through the construction of extended metaphors and elaborated narratives, Al constructed form for his theories or schemata (Livingston and Borko, 1989). In other words, Al used language to construct his cosmology of teaching; and when he put that cosmology into practice, he made explicit the link between action and intention.

This is not surprising in that only Al had a concrete referent for the concept. It is, however, useful to note what seems to be a need for an experiential referent. That is to say, Al's resonance with the image of teacher as coach seemed largely a function of the fact that he had real experiences as a coach with which to compare those suggested by this changed image of a teacher. As hoped for by CES, the metaphor of teacher as coach provoked Al to think about his teaching in new ways. And, as his practice attests, he thought systematically about teaching students to understand. Of the three teachers, his pedagogical content knowledge was most sophisticated, and his practice alone approached the ideal of demonstrating mastery described by exponents of exhibition and other coaching pedagogies.

The cases of Al, Brian, and Camille are complex and multidimensional. Each takes on the challenge of reform in unique ways, and each ascribes distinctive meaning to his or her teaching. The chapters that follow explore the uniqueness as well as the commonalties of their experiences and understandings. I rely on the portraits presented here to lend focus to my discussions of how these teachers construct and express the meaning of their teaching through interpreting and enacting the practice of exhibition.