

# How Not to Get a Standing Ovation at a Teachers' Conference

## Rueful Reflections of a Long-Time Presenter

By Alfie Kohn

After speaking to a group of educators about, say, the harmful effects of standardized testing — and receiving an enthusiastic response — I am likely to hear from some spoilsport in the audience who wonders why I bother preaching to the choir instead of talking to policy makers. “Why don’t you offer this message to the people who really need to hear it?”

Why? Maybe because I’ve gradually learned that things tend to work out better when I speak only where I’ve been invited. But it’s a reasonable question, and it has led me to consider that there are basically two alternatives to preaching to the choir (if we must persist with this musty ministerial metaphor). The obvious one is to preach to people who aren’t in the choir. The other is to size up the people who did invite you to speak and then say things to them that they may not already agree with.

Would you like to know how to get an auditorium full of teachers to nod, smile, make those little humming noises of agreement, tweet approving quotes, and even interrupt a speech with bursts of applause? Tell them how important — and difficult — their job is. Declare that the politicians and corporate types who talk sanctimoniously about the need to “raise standards” wouldn’t last three days doing a teacher’s job. Attack the outrageous practice of treating professional educators like technicians, as well as the insulting and inaccurate premise that distant authorities know more about learning than they do.

If you’re on a roll, you can get a lot of love from an audience that way. But I’m reminded, somewhat uncomfortably, of *The Jackie Gleason Show*, which aired on CBS in the 1960s and was taped in Miami Beach. Gleason would close each show by shouting “Miami Beach audiences are the greatest audiences in the world!!” And of course the crowd always went wild.

I believe the word I’m looking for here is “pandering.”

I don’t mean to sound cynical. I strongly believe everything I say to educators. Furthermore, I don’t think it’s wrong to offer some affirmation and appreciation to people who don’t get nearly enough of it. But I’m not sure a speaker’s (or writer’s) talents are best used for telling people what they want to hear and already believe. That’s why I decided some years ago that if the folks who really need to listen to my message about the disastrous policies known collectively as “school reform” won’t ask me to their events, then maybe I need to deliver a different message to the folks who do.

Once, when I had the opportunity to address the staff of a rural school district, I spent the first half of my presentation railing against meddling state officials with their 73 language arts standards at each grade level and their inability to distinguish high test scores from effective learning. The audience was eating it up. Then I switched gears and pointed out that:

\* if we were honest, we'd have to admit that, even before the Tougher Standards fad had swung into high gear, not all classrooms were places where students were engaged in deep thinking,

\* teacher-designed tests can be just as superficial, and the results just as misleading, as standardized tests, particularly if they call for rote memorization,

\* we may have something to learn from our colleagues who have summoned the courage to stop grading kids' assignments and assigning homework, given that those two practices clearly lead kids to be less excited about learning, and

\* at some point teachers need to decide whether they're going to treat their students essentially the same way they're being treated by politicians — as opposed to the way they wish they were being treated. If students are excluded from any meaningful role in designing the curriculum — or manipulated with classroom management or schoolwide behavior programs (like PBIS) that rely on bribes or threats to elicit compliance — then educators are being as disrespectful of kids as their worst bosses are of them.

So...what's the opposite of "eating it up"? A few minutes after I had pivoted from my teacher-pleasing rant about top-down policies to a discussion of pedagogy that asked teachers to rethink what they'd been doing for years, the room grew so chilly that I started looking for my coat. Had I continued instead with something in the key of "How dare they tell us how to teach!", I would have had them on their feet at my final rhetorical flourish. Instead, the applause at the end was polite at best.

Maybe something about my tone put them off. Maybe I failed to be as persuasive as I could have been in making my case. Maybe it was presumptuous to think that a one-shot professional development lecture in an auditorium (which is all I was invited to do) was the right setting for a radical challenge of this sort. Maybe those teachers would have been happy for long-term coaching to help them experiment with something more nontraditional and student-centered. I honestly don't know. But one thing I'm pretty confident about is that getting folks to say "Amen!" is overrated. My job in the limited time I have with a group of teachers is to pose unsettling questions and present surprising research, to suggest the possibility that traditional practices may actually be undermining our shared long-term goals for kids — and to offer at least a glimpse of some alternatives.

After more than 25 years of doing this, I'm still trying to figure out how to structure my presentations for educators so they're more interactive — partly in order to model how classrooms should operate. I'm still struggling with how many topics to discuss (I keep hearing Ted Sizer whispering in my ear: "Less is more!") and how to be provocative without provoking people to the point that they shut down. (That's a difficult feat, I finally realized, because the line between the two is in a different place for each person in the room.) I'm still wrestling with how to discuss the damaging effects of traditional educational practices without making it sound as if I'm blaming people who rely on them.

I often discuss the psychological nuances of motivation, but I do not give "motivational" (feel-good) talks, the kind that leave no residue the next day. In fact, I even aim beyond being thought-provoking; my hope is to achieve at least something that could be called change-provoking. If, when I get home from a trip, I'm asked how my talk went, the only honest answer I can give is: "Well, I don't know yet. I'd have to go back and visit their classrooms a few months from now before I could tell you whether it was successful."

Applause is a reasonable metric of whether a presentation was entertaining, not whether it did any good. I know how to get a standing ovation from teachers. What I'm still learning is how to help

them support and appropriately challenge their students.

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