Transformation by Degrees

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By Alfie Kohn

Three concepts emerged independently in different fields: quantum leaps (in particle physics), punctuated equilibrium (in evolutionary biology), and paradigm shifts (in the history of science). All of these converge on the revelation that change doesn't always take place incrementally. Sometimes things stay pretty much the same for a long time, and then, suddenly — ka-pow! — rapid transformation that seems to come out of nowhere.

This notion is intriguing precisely because it's so counterintuitive. Generally, we expect evolution, not revolution. And those of us who are trying to serve as change agents in education had better not count on teachers' waking up one morning prepared to adopt radically different practices. In fact, we would do well to have some examples ready for how they can get from here to there step by step.

Imagine, then, a teacher who recounts the following story of professional growth:

"Awhile back, someone — I forget who — suggested to me that, since I was lucky enough to have relatively small classes, I should start the term by having each student take a few minutes to introduce him- or herself. Why not, I thought; it won't take that long. So I asked everyone to say a little something about their personal background and also mention an

experience or two relevant to the topic of the course.

"What I didn't expect is that this tiny change would end up making such a difference in my perception of what was happening in class. You know, I'm very serious about the subject matter I teach. But learning a bit about each student on the first day turned them into flesh-and-blood people for me, and I realized with an unpleasant little start that for all these years I'd been so focused on what I was teaching that I was ignoring the students who were learning it. I had forgotten that what matters isn't so much the knowledge itself as the uses particular people make of that knowledge. It's not the ideas that count; it's the experience of the individuals who consider those ideas.

"So the next time I taught the course, I did the same thing, but I tweaked it a bit. I allowed more time for the introductions. I thought up more interesting questions to ask everyone — for example, 'Is there anything about taking this course that worries you?' And this time I, too, took a turn introducing myself.

"These changes made a good thing even better. But right before the following term, as I was prepared to do it again, something occurred to me: Why not ask each student to find and interview a partner, then introduce that person to the rest of the class? This was a huge step forward: It created connections, and pretty soon I wasn't just teaching real people but a *community* of learners.

"What a striking departure from the days when I was holding forth to a blur of note-takers! But then I realized something else. I had given students instructions on what to tell us about themselves, and then I had told them what to ask one another. Was that really necessary? What if I began instead by having the class brainstorm together for couple of minutes about what sorts of questions might elicit interesting information? Why not let *them* decide collectively how to

conduct their own interviews?

"By now, I was feeling like a completely different teacher teaching what had become a completely different kind of class…"

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It is possible to edge slowly away from traditionalism with respect to just about any specific practice. You can start by assigning less homework, then try to assign better homework, before finally questioning the need for having homework at all. Or you can stop punishing students for doing what you don't approve of, then stop rewarding them for doing what you *do* approve of (which is sugar-coated control), before finally realizing that praise (a verbal reward) is just another way of doing things *to* students rather than working *with* them. And so on.

But notice that our instructor, by introducing and then refining ostensibly minor changes in a first-day routine, has shifted the ground in three fundamentally different ways. To learn something about the students was to transcend (or at least create the conditions for transcending) *traditional pedagogy*. To invite the students to talk with, and then introduce, one another was to transcend an ideology of *individualism* — learning as an activity for a roomful of separate selves. To ask (rather than dictate) what the interview questions should be was to transcend the default model of top-down *teacher control*. In each case, what was challenged had simply been taken for granted.

Here's another example of those three steps in succession: A language-arts teacher begins by improving the feedback she offers on students' writing — perhaps by getting rid of grades and rubrics, perhaps by inviting students to focus on the effect their writing might produce in a reader. Then it dawns on her: She's still the sole source of feedback in the room.

Why not distribute a set of criteria for effective writing and invite students to apply them to one another's efforts? Finally, the third stage: Have the students reflect together about what criteria ought to be used for peer-editing rather than supplying them herself.

These advances don't have to proceed in the same order. Suppose a teacher begins by introducing regular class meetings — opportunities to talk freely about how things are going in order to give the classroom the feel of a caring community. Next, the scope of the meetings is widened so students can use them to participate in making certain decisions about instruction and assessment, such as which section of the textbook to read next or when the next test will be given. Only then is the teacher ready to question the whole premise that the curriculum should be centered on a textbook or that assessment should be done with tests. Students are invited to reflect on more meaningful ways to learn and more authentic ways to determine the success of that learning. Here, the teacher first takes on individualism, then teacher-based control, then traditional pedagogy.

One can expect to encounter resistance to all of this — for example, from people who are more interested in raising test scores (or implementing a set of imposed standards) than in promoting meaningful learning and putting students at the center of it. But resistance can also be internal. At each stage, one can move ahead only after confronting the unsettling truth that what looked like a destination turned out to be just a rest stop. There's farther to go on this journey. As I've argued elsewhere, this recognition ("I haven't made as much progress as I thought") can occur with creating a "discovery-based" classroom, and also with classroom dynamics more generally.

"My job," a teacher in Ohio once commented, "is to be as democratic as I can stand." Had she invited me to append a friendly amendment to her declaration, it might have been, "…

and my other job is to push myself to be able to stand more democracy next year than I could this year." It's not all or nothing, and classrooms that are relatively democratic, collaborative, and based on exploration (and the active construction of knowledge) are not created overnight.

But that doesn't mean we should be satisfied with one or two small steps. Perhaps our motto should be: Change by degrees — but don't underdo it.