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February 2004

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MIND, CULTURE, AND ACTIVITY, 11(2), 163–165
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Practitioner Sensibility and the Negotiation of Contradictory School Reforms

Changing Classes: School Reform and the New Economy, by Martin Packer, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 313 pp., $65.00 (hardcover), $23.00 (paper).

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Martin Packer's book, *Changing Classes: School Reform and the New Economy,* is humane, straightforward, and accessible. It is also important, but perhaps not mainly for the reasons that one might infer from its title or its inclusion in Cambridge University Press's series, "Learning in Doing: Social, Cognitive, and Computational Perspectives." Although this book will be of interest to those interested in situated cognition, cultural-historical theory, and cultural psychology—three domains in which Packer overtly locates his book (p. 7)—it does not explicitly advance any of these areas. Indeed, Packer notes (p. 8) his "downplay of theoretical discourse," and the book includes endnotes but no bibliography and no extended discussion of any of these theoretical areas. Instead, this poignant depiction of two reform initiatives concurrently in play in the Willow Run Michigan public schools in the early and mid-1990s will be most relevant to those interested in whole-school and systemic reform. It should also be read by those concerned with developing new genres of educational research representation that are simultaneously more accessible to a range of interested readers and more respectful of the research subjects. The volume does contribute to the three theoretical domains Packer identifies, but it accomplishes more within the two domains I am noting. The book also usefully considers how students' attitudes toward school influence their behavior.

In describing Willow Run educators' simultaneous attempts to implement the Willow Run Systemic Initiative (as a pilot site of the National Science Foundation-funded Michigan State Systemic Initiative) and the market-oriented reforms of Michigan's new Governor Engler, Packer insists that those concerned with school reform honor and account for the professional wisdom of locally-based educators. He illustrates well the contradictions in the initiatives educators are asked to enact, the sense-making they attempt in the face of these contradictions, the knowledge and experience they apply, and the importance of sociohistorical context for understanding why they respond as they do. Packer illustrates the conundrums and respects the local educators' actions by "showing instead of telling." Consider, for instance, the following snippet from one of the dozens of portrayals of Willow Run educators conferring and acting:

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> An interesting debate develops over the appropriate measures of success, one that uncovers some differing assumptions about goals. Scott argues that focusing entirely on student outcomes sets up teachers for failure, because student achievement may occur only down the line. Teachers seeing no change in their students will go back to their old ways. He proposes instead we use measures of the process, of the teachers' change, and in particular he'd like to see some evaluation of the extent to which people move from being a "lecture-teacher" to having a more "student-driven" classroom.
>
> Vivian and Laura disagree with him. Laura points out that changes for teachers are often intangible and that changes in their classroom instruction may also not occur immediately after they attend a workshop.
>
> "People have had misunderstandings that if you just go to a workshop, automatically the kids do better and you're better and you're a good teacher and that proves it because you went. But it doesn't! It doesn't change anything if you never talk to a colleague about what you saw..." Laura says.
>
> "Or if you don't use it in a way that's meaningful to the students," Vivian agrees. And this has implications for our objectives. "If you don't write it in such a way that people expect something to show in their students, they may or may not make the transition." (pp. 164–165)

Reflecting on my own work with educators engaged in a high school reform initiative in Maine, I found myself again and again nodding at the familiar discourse of practitioners engaged in reform that Packer chronicles. Long segments of many chapters are so experience-near that they are almost full transcripts of committee meetings, classroom teaching, school assemblies, and the like. The effect is to leave the reader quite conscious of the sincerity, expertise, and sophistication of the educators involved. The passages also reinforce readers' disapproval of "top-down" initiatives that blithely ignore or try to bypass this local expertise. The reader ends up agreeing with Packer's decision regarding how to tell this story:

> My choice of narrative is motivated too by a belief that the details are important; that although big generalizations may appear more powerful, details are more informative, especially in the long run. I've tried to convince by illustration rather than by assertion and argument. But narrative doesn't replace analysis; this narrative *is* my analysis. (p. 9)

Packer makes two other striking choices in terms of how he tells this story. One is to include a few autobiographical asides—noting the parallels, for example, between his unsuccessful bid for tenure at the University of Michigan and subsequent professional uncertainty and the uncertainty of the hundreds of Willow Run families facing relocation when General Motors decides to shut its automobile assembly line there. The parallel is not overdrawn, but it does help us see why Packer would have been a familiar and sympathetic figure to the educators he was studying and why we should believe that what he witnessed was not a performance just for his benefit (see pp. 178 and 225, in particular).

Packer also decides not to use pseudonyms in this account, with the exception of the names of a few middle school teachers who he thinks might come across poorly. "I've tried to be clear that I don't consider individuals at fault for the tone of the middle school's classrooms, but educational researchers are so entrained to blame teachers for instruction they regard with disapproval that this additional step seems necessary to protect the teachers from this interpretation" (p. 296). He names the educators he studied as a sign of regard, regard both for their multidimensional human-

ness (which naming only their professional role—for example, first-grade teacher—would obscure) and for their professional competence. The effect is both egalitarian and respectful: egalitarian in the sense that Packer does not seem to hold himself in more regard than those he describes and respectful in accordance with the spirit that pervades this book. Why, if the studied educators are competent and professional, should they not be as readily named as a scholar or educational policymaker? Using a pseudonym can hint that the named party has something to hide or is vulnerable to punitive action if his or her identity is disclosed; neither of those pertain here.

This book is also successful in other ways. Twice (pp. 5, 204) Packer discusses the genesis of students' classroom attitude and how and when that attitude is consequential for the way students' learning is regarded. He writes the following:

> Striking an attitude is a way of dealing with the contradictions of classroom life, a way of answering the question "Who am I?" Attitude is the *manner* in which children inhabit the social world of the classroom, a stance toward teacher, other students, different ways of knowing, and to self, that shows itself in posture and demeanor as well as words, but typically remains invisible unless it becomes an alignment *against* the teacher. (p. 5)

Packer's acknowledgment that students might not find classroom practices logical or compelling echoes the spirit in which he honors local reformers questioning the mandates they receive. His noting that attitude is invisible except when discrepant from expectation also appears true of school reform.

Consistent with his goal "to highlight the taken-for-granted background against which teaching and learning are accomplished" (p. 180), Packer devotes lengthy segments to describing Willow Run's history as a community. He also intersperses nearly every chapter with quotes about the restructuring economy from national and local media. The effect is two-fold: it reminds readers of the inconsistently harsh bite of the U.S. recession of the early 1990s, which hammered Willow Run when its auto assembly line closed, and it sets up a rather nuanced deliberation regarding the new economy and what schooling and thus school reform need to look like in this new era. Here, too, the way Packer tells this story matters. Readers are so close to the sincere deliberations and efforts of the Willow Run Systemic Initiative team that our consideration of schooling in the new economy cannot stay at the level of glittering abstraction, but instead is grounded in practical if complex questions like, if you were Scott or Vivian or Laura, or other members of the Willow Run team, what would you do?