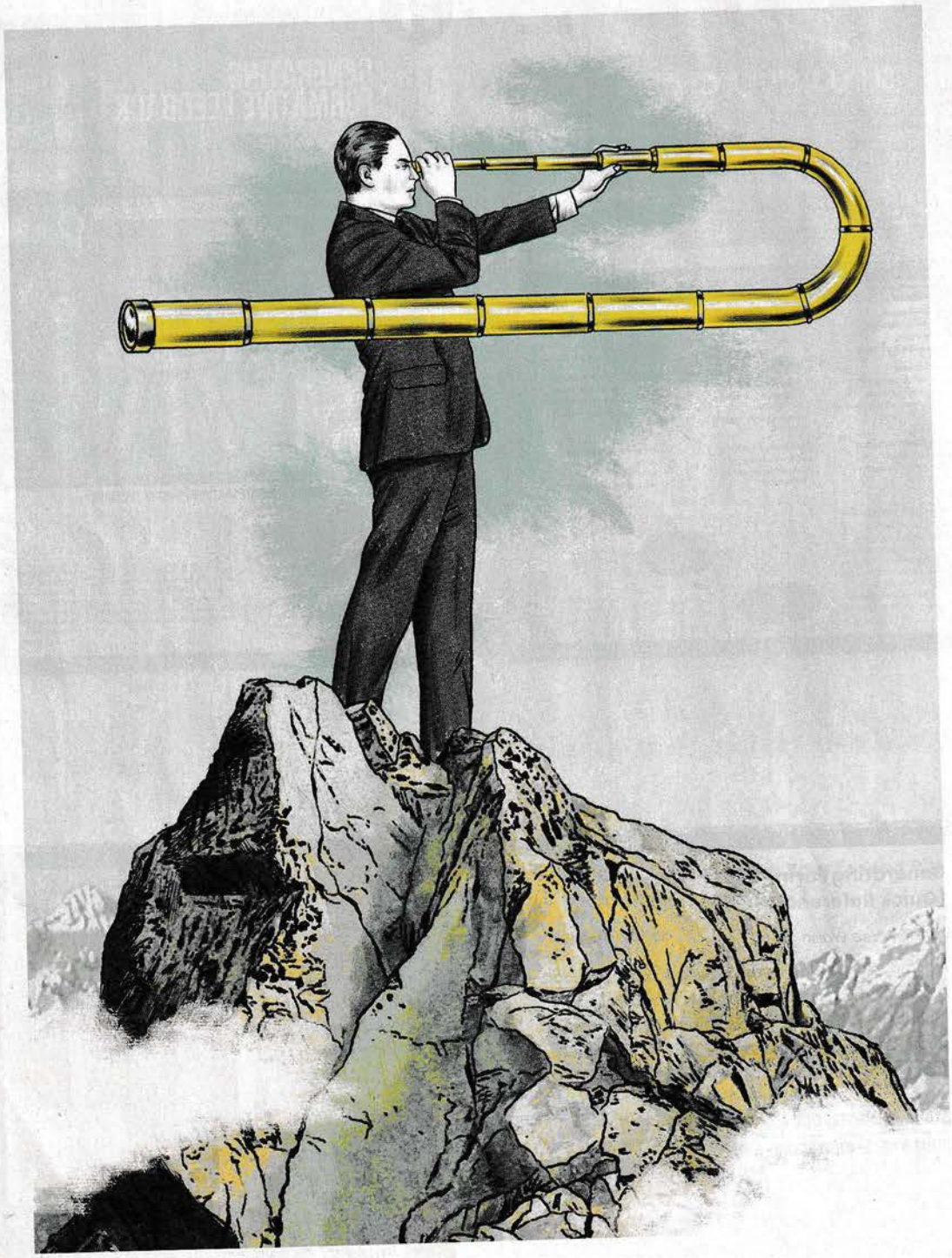
Are You Wrong



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Like Me?

Being an adaptive leader means knowing when to shift your old ways of thinking and embrace new best practices.

M-J Mercanti-Anthony

In my 23 years in education, I have been wrong a lot. I don't mean that I was the young, confident teacher who thought he knew everything only to be upended by the real challenges of the classroom (although I was wrong that way, too). I mean that I, perhaps like many of you, held dear a series of beliefs as central to the profession—beliefs that are no longer true. At one point these ideas certainly seemed true, but subsequent research proved otherwise.

The science moved, but I did not move nearly as quickly.

Some of the ways I have been wrong influenced my conduct when I was a teacher. Others affected my 13 years as an administrator, where feedback I gave to teachers betrayed misconceptions that I did not know I had.

One prominent example of my wrongness was endorsing the idea of learning styles. For many years, I saw it as settled fact that students were hardwired to learn in distinct ways, even though this was long ago labeled a neuromyth (MacDonald et al., 2017). In fact, science never endorsed learning styles as much as learning preferences. There is a difference between a student's preference for how something is presented and a necessity to do it that way. Yet many of us muddled this distinction and stuck to the belief in fixed learning styles. In reality, kids learn pretty much the same way. We all benefit from visual aids and seeing things represented in different modalities. But we don't need to measure students' kinesthetic aptitude or keep spreadsheets chronicling each student's learning style and how we'll differentiate a lesson to accommodate them.

Oops.

Now that we know differently, we need to do differently. Being an adaptive leader means wrestling with the uneasy tension that education is not a settled discipline. We will never know the one best way to teach because the content, context, and students are always changing. But when science does point to a different way, we need to take heed.

Two other ideas I will discuss here are also examples of strategies I once thought were settled maxims of good teaching, but now, not so much. Like learning styles, they embody much conventional wisdom in our field. I don't present the perspective I now take on these ideas as the settled view of the concept, either. It would be just as foolish to stake out these new concepts as gospel as to keep the old ideas sacrosanct. Instead, if we are to be adaptive leaders, we should all be open to new ideas and reflect on our practices, shifting when and where it is necessary to provide the best education for our students.

Misconception 1: "Chalk and Talk" Is Bad Teaching

As a young teacher, I was conditioned to avoid standing in front of the classroom as much as possible. The best teachers, it was said, were "guides on the side," not "sages on the stage." Effective teaching should be "student-centered," where teachers facilitate the learning environment such that students can build their own understandings through self-discovery and collaborative efforts. Standing in front of the room was seen as old-fashioned, stodgy, and unprogressive.

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The problem was that many of us took the ideas of student-centered learning too far. No question, there should be room in the classroom for students to collaborate and construct their own understanding. Yet researchers now increasingly think that explicit, teacher-centered instruction—defined loosely here as a teacher standing in front of the room explaining something—is at the core of effective instruction (Archer & Hughes, 2010; Rosenshine, 2012).

The first crack in my student-centered dam came from Mike Schmoker's seminal book *Focus* (2011). In it, he encourages interactive lecture as a core teaching strategy. Unlike with traditional lectures, students are active participants in this exercise. No less than every five minutes, Schmoker insists, teacher explanations should be interrupted by some type of engagement activity that allows students to process their understanding. These brief engagement breaks can take various forms, such as pausing to answer a question independently on paper or turning to a partner to discuss a prompt. The point is that all students participate in the brief activity before the teacher's explanation resumes.

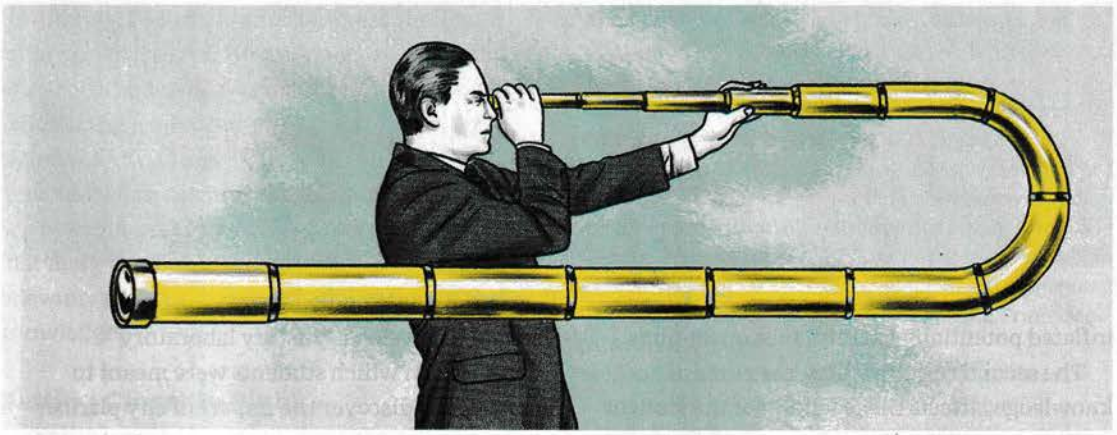
What I found so remarkable about Schmoker's work at the time was not so much his encouragement to use engagement strategies like "turn and talk" to check understanding, but rather his very use of the word "lecture" itself. Aren't lectures inherently bad teaching? Don't they go against our naturalistic understanding that students learn best by doing?

Apparently not. Research into effective teaching methods supports Schmoker's approach. Most notable is the work of Barak Rosenshine (2012), who synthesized decades of research on master teachers and emerging findings of cognitive science to develop clear principles of instruction. Rosenshine stresses that strong teachers model a concept, ask lots of questions, and check for understanding long before releasing students to work independently. Far from disparaging teacher-centered class time, his findings point to it being essential.

More popularly, Doug Lemov's *Teach Like a Champion* books have consistently endorsed a style of direct instruction centered on the teacher (Wiley, 2010). After being conditioned for so long to resist being anything other than the "guide on the side," however, many of us in traditional K–12 schools don't come naturally to embracing Lemov's ideas.

Before reading Lemov and other educator-authors like math teacher Greg Ashman, who says, "The teacher's role is not to facilitate and guide, but to fully direct the learning" (2021, p. 28), I felt guilty when I stood in front of the class. Clearly, it was some failure on my part that I could not devise another more student-centered way to explain a concept. But we do not need to feel guilty when we stand in front of the class and teach. This is not a violation of the sacred truths of progressive teaching, but an acknowledgment of the research into effective instruction.

If we are to be adaptive leaders, we must



recognize the tensions teachers experience in their own instruction. If teachers are struggling to identify a strategy that corresponds to a specific philosophy, let's first make sure the philosophy is appropriate to the task. Leaders don't need to be experts, but we must recognize that the knowledge within our field is growing and that all of us have more to learn. Adaptive leaders take a humble stance. They acknowledge that there are new strategies that will help our students—and some old ones we might need to think twice about.

Misconception 2: Students Should Think Like Real-World Practitioners

In my first few years as an instructional supervisor, I often encouraged teachers to model their classrooms after the way adult academics work in their respective subject areas. Why have students learn history like students when they can do history like historians? Similarly, encouraging math students to think and act like mathematicians—and not mere math students—speaks to many romantic notions of egalitarian, student-centered learning.

For our purposes, I will refer to assignments like these as "thinking-like" tasks, as in thinking like a historian, scientist, etc. At their essence, "thinking-like" tasks challenge students to discover and generate knowledge for themselves. That sounds great. The problem is that "thinking-like" tasks also rub against many concepts of cognitive science and are often not authentic to students' own lives and experiences. When we get lost in the weeds supporting students' "discovery" of knowledge, we end up having less time for students to work with new knowledge in relevant and rigorous ways.

More specifically, thinking-like tasks are likely to fall victim to two specific cognitive biases. The first is the Dunning-Kruger effect, named after the psychologists who first theorized the concept (Bown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014). This is the bias reflecting that the less information one knows about something, the more likely one is to overestimate their understanding of the concept. When a student knows a little about a concept, the student does not know what he doesn't know—and therefore inflates his understanding of it.

I played right into this tendency as a teacher. I once taught a law elective where I had students re-litigate a celebrity trial going on at the time. Student lawyers had great fun calling witnesses and making closing arguments. Yet in the end, the project only demonstrated my students' understanding of how courtrooms work based on TV and movies, not real life. Students knew a little about how courts worked from shows they watched, but they thought they knew a lot more. The exercise did not increase their true understanding of the courts. It more likely just

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inflated potentially harmful misconceptions.

The second cognitive bias, the curse of knowledge, affects the teacher, not the student (Willingham, 2021). Teachers, particularly at the secondary level, are experts in their content. They naturally see it differently than novices do and may often have trouble foreseeing misconceptions common to novices.

Thinking-like tasks compound this problem. They are easy for the teacher to complete, but extraordinarily difficult for a student learning the content. Students charged to think like a German diplomat and negotiate a better Treaty of Versailles, for example, must first understand what was negotiated at the real Treaty of Versailles and work backward. Keeping that information in their heads, while then exploring alternative timeline scenarios to strategically negotiate a better deal, is a lot for students learning about World War I for the first time to manage.

Cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham (2021) argues that for these reasons, thinking-like tasks should be employed sparingly in the classroom. They run the risk of inspiring a false confidence in students and encouraging a misconception of what practitioners actually do.

Looking back, I sensed this discrepancy in my own classroom. As much as I wanted students to do history (meaning research and discover like historians), I constantly ran up against the challenge that my students did not yet know enough history to do so. Often, my assessments fell back on essays and discussions based on content I taught, not content that students self-discovered.

For example, I once supported a New York school to develop a "history laboratory" approach, in which students were meant to organically discover the impact of city planner Robert Moses. We wanted students to take their "original" research on Moses and make connections to his decisions and their effect on the local community. Our hope was that students would see how things like the Cross-Bronx Expressway shape the socioeconomic life of the neighborhood today. Looking back, we would have gotten farther if we had first directly taught what Robert Moses did and then challenged students to analyze the ramifications of his work. Students would have had more time for the deep, relevant analysis we had intended.

No question, students need to be active, engaged learners constantly wrestling with content in the classroom. But what's most important is productive struggle—where students are challenged to thoughtfully engage with content with the least amount of supports necessary. Author Zaretta Hammond (2014) points out that such work literally grows student grey matter. She points to neuroscience research that shows students are most successful when they connect new knowledge to existing schema familiar to them, which she calls culturally relevant pedagogy.

Instead of rooting instruction in faux activities mimicking adult scholars, a culturally relevant approach challenges students to use new knowledge to engage in authentic, challenging learning activities relevant to their lives. Rather than imagining some real-life scholar out there, we should find tasks and lessons that apply to what students know and care about.

And this, in turn, is another great challenge for adaptive leaders. Having spent so much time as a profession encouraging thinking-like tasks, articulating a nuanced pivot toward deeper applications of knowledge is difficult. Such leaders must talk with teachers about how students can learn new content knowledge most efficiently, so that more class time can be spent on authentic, relevant, and, yes, hands-on application of that knowledge.

Getting Closer to Right

Since this article describes the numerous ways I have been wrong over the years, you should take any ideas I offer with a grain of salt. For years, Michael Fullan has encouraged school leaders to eschew the title of *instructional leader* in favor of the role of *lead learner* (2018). Instruction is too complex to pretend we have all the answers. As teacher and blogger David Didau memorably writes, "I'm not trying to convince you of anything, except that you are sometimes wrong" (2016, p. 5).

Our understanding of learning is ever changing and deepening. Adaptive leadership means being open to new ideas and recognizing when old ideas are no longer good ones. The heart of adaptive leaders' work is facilitating their communities' collective understanding of shifts in our field and how these shifts can improve teaching and learning.

Adaptive leaders acknowledge that there are new strategies that will help our students—and some old ones we might need to think twice about.

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