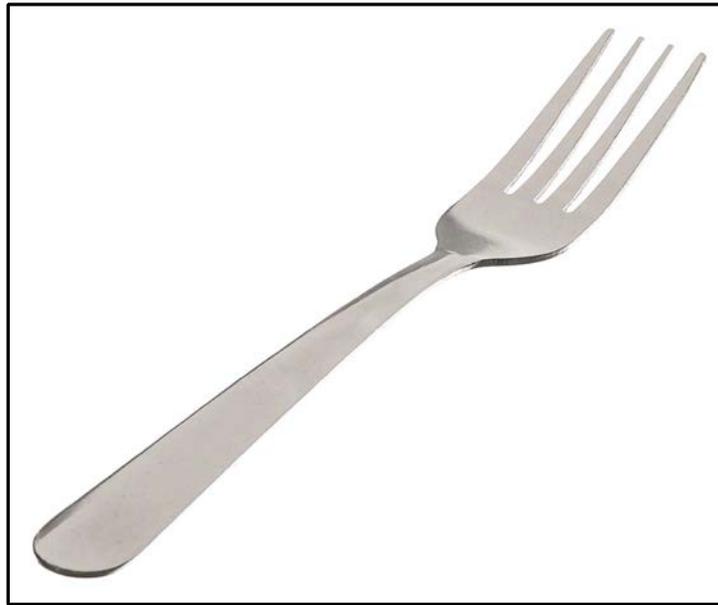


THE GREAT FORK DEBATE



What will it take for us to engage in the real discussions of the big issues?

The Fork Debate

This case narrative opens up discussion on:

Nature of power
Models of governance
Relationship between needs and behaviour

Task:

In small groups discuss the piece using the following questions to guide your conversation

- What issues does the fork discussion raise for you?
- How might you describe a 'fork' focused institution in terms of tone and organization? What beliefs are reflected?
- In what ways might 'fork' based relationships influence engagement and participation? What affect might they have on satisfaction and performance?

Debriefing

- What parallel do you see between those raised in the narrative and your organizational structure.?
- Are there issues that are discussed regularly but never seem to be addressed?
- What is the real issue that is not being discussed do you think?
- How would the culture of your organization change if fork discussions were replaced with conversations on the real issues.
- What new skill set would support this transition?

Follow up

- Skill development

The Fork Debate

By Laura Thomas

What will it take for us to engage in the real discussions of the big issues?

My husband and I argue over forks. Specifically, we argue over the direction the forks should point in the dishwasher. Tines up, I assert, results in an assured poke in the hand when someone (usually me) reaches into the dishwasher to unload. Tines down, he responds, leads to dirty forks, food poisoning, and, ultimately, death. After 13 years of this argument, one would assume that we would have worked it out by now. Come to some kind of compromise. Agreed to disagree and moved on.

Nope. The fork debate rages on, resurfacing in times of stress, de-escalating when things are running smoothly.

In my work as a school coach, I spend much of my time mediating similar conflicts among teachers, administrators, parents, and students. We discuss food in the classrooms, hats inside the building, and students without pencils. In the midst of powerful conversations about teaching and learning, we suddenly may find ourselves hijacked by a discussion of one of these issues in its latest incarnation.

"Why do we have this rule if we're just going to ignore it?"

"It's just a matter of common courtesy."

"I don't care what the rule is, I'm not going to waste time on a hat."

"I'm going to fail him if he shows up without a pencil again."

"The administration needs to clamp down on this."

"If a kid is hungry, how can she learn?"

Sometimes I want to scream. I'd like to say, "From now on, hats can be left on in the building, and food is welcome in all classrooms. Now, can we just move on, for Pete's sake?" But I don't. Partly, this is because it isn't my place to make such decisions—I'm not a part of this community—and partly it's because this kind of unilateral decisionmaking is completely contrary to the democratic practice I'm attempting to model. Mostly, though, my reticence is because I keep reminding myself that we're not arguing over forks. Or food. Or hats.

We're arguing about power. About consistency. About priorities. We're trying to discuss the Big Issues, but we're afraid to name them. So we

bicker about minutiae. We fall into the safe arguments that no one will ever win but that will surely fill the time allotted, ensuring that we can return to our classrooms, departments, and homes. We'll talk it over in the hallways and bathrooms and parking lots—with our friends, our allies. We'll say things like "you know, the real problem is ... " and "I just wish someone would realize that ..., " but we'll only say them to the people with whom we feel safe, never questioning why we don't feel safe with our colleagues.

We're arguing about power. About consistency. About priorities. We're trying to discuss the Big Issues, but we're afraid to name them.

We know, deep down, that we'll never resolve the hat issue, because we're not talking about hats. We're really talking about respect—modeling it, expecting it from our students—and we're caught in a chicken-and-egg battle over whose respect (student or teacher) needs to come first. We won't resolve the food issue because we're really talking about rules that exist on the books but don't serve the higher purpose of the school. We're really talking about that lack of a higher purpose, or of a mission, rather than a mission statement.

And yet we're not. We're talking about hats. Over and over and over again. We blame hats—or food, or pencils—for the problems we face. We don't talk about the real issues because, if we identified those, if we acknowledged them and discussed them, we couldn't go back to pretending that the problem is kids who wear hats in the hallways. We can't "un-know" that which we have named.

If we're actually going to talk about why kids need to eat in class, then we may have to break the silence around the issues of poverty and inequity. We'll have to open the Pandora's boxes of "our kids don't have enough to eat," and "our school breakfasts and lunches don't offer any real nutrition," and "we've sold our pedagogical souls to the soda companies in exchange for our cut of the take." We don't really want to do that. We prefer to stay safely ensconced in our ignorance, putting mountains of energy into talking about nothing at all. We appear busy—we *are* busy. But what are we busy at? Nothing of substance, that's for certain.

What will it take for us to engage in the real discussions of the big issues? Whose permission do we need? What, exactly, are we afraid of?

Part of the answer may lie in what the best-selling writer Marianne Williamson has said: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure." We're safe if our conversations stay small. We hide in the notion of powerlessness. We spend our time and energy on things that are seemingly simple (to eat or not to eat?), leaving the bigger issues for later. We assume that our circles of influence, our energies, are most appropriately focused on these small issues—that larger questions are the purview of Someone Else. "What if?" is a scary question to ask ourselves. What if, as the longtime school reform advocate Nancy Mohr used to say, "the wisdom is in this room"? What if we have the answers in us and are just too afraid to look for them? What if we really are powerful beyond measure? What if we're letting our fear keep us from doing that which we absolutely must do—and should have done years ago?

The short answer is that kids stay hungry, continue to lack basic supplies, and, more important, fail to get a sense of what it is to recognize and be able to use their power as citizens. They don't learn how it feels to exercise power wisely because we refuse to show them. They learn to pour their energies into petty battles, rather than real civic engagement.

In this era of increasing political partisanship, isn't it time for us to teach our students that looking deeply into the well of our own shortcomings is the way to solve them?

We are missing out on that educational equivalent of lightning in a bottle: the teachable moment. We have all of the components for powerful learning communities; now we must build them through real, meaningful work. We must dig into those issues of consequence with all the energy we currently invest in the "fork" issues of our schools. We must recognize that we hold more power than we imagine. We must ask the difficult questions over and over again. We must begin to build learning communities marked by democracy, respectful disagreement, and assumption of positive intent.

We must model for our students what it means to be a member of a community, what it means to be a citizen. We have to shine a light in the corners of the box, pull all of the messy issues out, sort them, discuss them, wrangle with them, and, ultimately, find a way around, over, or through them.

In this era of increasing political partisanship, isn't it time for us to teach our students that looking deeply into the well of our own shortcomings is the way to solve them? How long will we maintain the charade of infallibility, our blameless collective personae? The greatest gift we can give our students—and ourselves—is the acknowledgment

that things *aren't* OK—and won't be OK, even if we build a school in which no one wears a hat indoors, everyone has a pencil, and neither Snickers bars nor apple cores can be found outside the cafeteria.

The fork battle may go on forever in my kitchen, but my husband and I recognize it for what it is: an indicator of our stress levels during tough times. We don't aim to get anywhere strategically in this battle. On our 50th wedding anniversary, we'll probably still be debating the merits of tines up vs. tines down. But we also know that we have to discuss the real issues that emerge in every family, and that we have to name them and make plans to deal with them.

Let's hope our colleagues throughout the education community can do the same.

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