

# OUT OF THE CLOSET AND ONTO THE TABLE

## ***THE POWER AND VALUE OF PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT FOR AMERICAN EDUCATION***

**“This is BIG!”**

That was my opening for a major address on professional judgment to a national audience two years ago. One member of the audience, who had served on several Practice-Based Inquiry® teams, told me the speech made her cry. But, while a few did smile, most just sat. They had heard too many promises of better ideas for better schools.

It was exasperation that led me to mimic a cable company’s ad for fiber optics. (“This is big!” is also the shout-out of Indium Corporation of America for its new Pb-free solder paste.)

My exasperation went back to 1992 and my field study of English school inspection. English inspectors actively used professional judgment in assessing schools and classrooms. They not only used professional judgment, they talked about it as a critical component of their work. That was the most important "discovery" of my study. It began my 15 years of work with professional judgment. Professional judgment became an essential part of the Practice-Based Inquiry® visit methodology.

My conviction of its enormous potential for American education only strengthened as my understanding of how it worked became more textured. But whenever I tried to break open the closet where American educators kept it, they would say something sappy about my "passion" and change the subject. The closet door stayed tightly closed.

Michael Luntley noted the same response when British policy makers found themselves exposed to professional judgment:

INDENT PARAThe government seems unsure what to make of the idea of professional performance [that must include professional judgment]. And, like most people when they are unsure what to say about something important, they have decided to speak of other things.”  
(*Performance, Pay and Professionals*, p. 2)

At this time when state and federal policy makers say they are hunting for better ways to assess school and teacher performance, it is even more extraordinary that they avoid the closet hiding professional judgment. It isn’t that professional judgment is an illusion. It is that it only exists in the shadows of conversations among school practitioners about their work. The blindfolds of the policy makers seem to come from their

distance from classrooms and their determination to pursue a scientific objectivity that in more illusion than real.

The one exception I know to this “speaking of other things,” was brief. In the late 1990s when the Rhode Island Department of Education was committed to establishing the SALT school visit, Rhode Island’s commissioner once talked publicly about “professional judgment” and its importance to the process. He publicly thanked early SALT leaders and teachers who had served on SALT visit teams for the SALT school reports that “changed my job from one of monitoring incompetence to one of supporting competence.” Nevertheless, while the Commissioner and the Department received international kudos for their “brave and innovative leadership” for introducing the SALT visit into school accountability, the Department’s news releases never mentioned professional judgment. And after the onset of the required implementation of “No Child Left Behind,” neither did any other members of the Department’s staff. It was nicely encapsulated as a rhetorical concept used on SALT visit teams.

Even though the national discussion does now consider more seriously the problems created by our sole reliance on test score methodologies for making assessments of school performance particularly for accountability purposes, most policy makers still shimmy past the unopened door of professional judgment.

David Cohen’s and Susan Moffitt’s may have twisted the door’s handle with their recent and compelling analysis of the impact of federal policy on schools since 1961 (*The Ordeal of Equality: Did Federal Regulation Fix the Schools?*, 2009).

They document the disappointing results of fifty years of federal education policy. They explain the federal failure to the disregard of federal policy for actual practice in the schools. This disregard led to federal policy making schools do things that had not been tested in practice and did not relate well to what schools actually do on a daily basis. Thus, while the intent of federal policy was to increase the organizational capacity of American schools’ to provide good teaching and learning, the mismatch of its regulations and programs to what schools actually did led to a decrease in the ability of a school to strengthen its capacity to improve the practice of teaching and learning. Cohen and Moffitt advise that the leading challenges for federal policy going forward is to “devis[e] ways for individuals, organizations and systems to learn from experience.” (Cohen, 2010, p. 230)

Still no mention of professional judgment, but maybe “learning from experience” opens the door a crack.

Conclusions to be used for policy purposes that are based on “learning from experience” must go beyond personal narratives. There must be some test of truth/falsity for the evidence, beyond individual witness.

But the nature of experience does not match the social science approach of testing generalized hypotheses with precise data. Experience comes from action, complex human action at that. This makes evidence about experience particular and dependent on the context of the action. Professional judgment, built from actual experience and tested by discussion with others who know something, does support the generation of accurate conclusions.

Professional judgment is not a new-age or manufactured concept. It has been recognized and studied for centuries.

Aristotle says professional judgment is central to the most important virtue that defines the wise public leader. Luntley says judgment based on experience is inherent to how language works to create understanding and meaning. Two Swathmore professors say that Americans are wrecking their institutions by knocking judgment out by defining and limiting appropriate behavior with generalized prescriptions and rules. Flyvbjerg says that using professional in social science research on action can make social science relevant again. Practice-Based Inquiry® says professional judgment is a fundamental component for conducting rigorous and useful visits. While many American agencies (e.g. accreditation agencies) do conduct visits without it, the resulting reports will be deficient in both rigor or utility.

There is much to question, to discuss.

As part of its 15th year, I want to leverage open that closet door and see what happens if we speak directly about professional development. To begin, join in the discussion on my blog, *From the Branches*. <http://catalpatomwilson.blogspot.com/>.

For my part, I will spend time each business day from now until January 30, 2012 answering questions you may have of me and backstopping the discussion. Here are some possible early questions:

Should we expect that professional judgment can contribute substantially to the national task of dramatically improving teaching and learning in American schools?

What discussions would need to happen? Does additional pilot work need to be completed?

Here's why we should keep professional judgment in the closet? How can professional judgment be used in a rigorous and fair way to evaluate teachers? Should it?

If professional judgment was considered an important component of teaching, what would have to change in how teachers are prepared and supported in their work?

Or start with your own questions and thoughts.

But do join in. Click here to go to the blog:

<http://catalpatomwilson.blogspot.com/>

### **Resources for Thinking about Professional Judgment:**

**Professional Judgment and Language** Michael Luntley. *Wittgenstein: Meaning and Judgment*. Blackwell Publishing, 2003. Michael Luntley. *Performance, Pay and Professionals: Measuring the Quality of Teaching, A Challenge to the Government's Proposals on Teachers' Pay*. Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, 2000.

**Professional Judgment and Practice-Based Inquiry**® To learn about the study of English School Inspection read *Reaching for a Better Standard: English School Inspection and the Dilemmas of American School Accountability*. (link) To learn how Practice-Based Inquiry® defines professional judgment go to [http://www.catalpa.org/pbi\\_2FE.cfm](http://www.catalpa.org/pbi_2FE.cfm)

**The Roots and History of Professional Judgment** Bent Flyvbjerg. *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe. *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing*. Riverhead Books, 2010. Also see TED presentation: [http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/barry\\_schwartz\\_on\\_our\\_loss\\_of\\_wisdom.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/barry_schwartz_on_our_loss_of_wisdom.html)

Both Flyvbjerg and Schwartz and Sharpe credit Aristotle with as the authoritative source about professional judgment. See: Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Martin Oswald. Library of Liberal Arts, 1999.