

EDUCATION WEEK

Published: March 26, 2003

Making Peace With Campfires: Confessions of a Reformed Radical

It is easier for me to tell you what a new-paradigm school is not. It is not a traditional school.

By Prakash Nair

I've often been asked, "What exactly is a 'new paradigm' school?" OK, I admit I only get asked that when I tell people I plan new-paradigm schools for a living. I say, "It is easier for me to tell you what a new-paradigm school is not. It is not a traditional school where the teacher stands in front of the classroom and lectures while students sit passively taking notes." From there, I go on to explain concepts of student-centered schools, about project-based learning as a way to empower students, and why brain-based learning is not just a theoretical talking point but a technique for setting up today's classrooms.

It is easier for me to tell you what a new-paradigm school is not. It is not a traditional school.

[← Back to Story](#)

I also tell people about David Thornburg's four "primordial learning metaphors," which he defines as the campfire, the watering hole, the cave, and life. The popular author, educator, and PBS commentator tells audiences why each of these modalities is important in the overall scheme of learning: Campfires are a way to learn from experts or storytellers, watering holes help you learn from peers, caves are places to learn from yourself, and life is where you bring it all together by applying what you learn to projects in the real world.

Since "campfires" represented, in my own mind, everything that was wrong with the old model of schooling, I tended to place the least value on this form of learning. For me, it was the antithesis of learning. The old, and by now clichéd, picture of a child as an empty vessel into which the teacher "pours" information kept popping up; I imagined the "campfire" in school as a typical old-paradigm classroom.

And yet, even as I was dismissive of the value of campfires, I found myself becoming more and more of a campfire teacher. Most of my talks to educators, school designers, and other professionals worldwide tend to last about an hour and end up as lectures. While I try to use a conversational tone to keep my monologue as close to an interesting story as possible, I am often reminded of David Thornburg's idea that the campfire is alive and well today, even though, as he says, "the glow of the LCD projector has replaced the glow of the campfire." And so I lecture less and allow more time for "interaction," for questions and answers, for some sort of group exercise—perhaps as a lame way of apologizing for using the campfire format I rail against.

My feelings about campfires changed recently, after listening to a talk by Capt. Scott O'Grady,

who was the keynote speaker at the 2002 Council of Educational Facility Planners International Conference in Phoenix. Why Captain O'Grady, the F-16 pilot who was shot down by a surface-to-air missile behind enemy lines in Bosnia, was opening a conference of school facility planners is a legitimate question. But wisely, conference planners have always used the opening ceremonies as an inspirational opportunity. This time, they got everything they had hoped for and more.

For almost 90 minutes, Scott O'Grady held the 1,000-plus audience spellbound. Belying his diminutive physical presence and using no props, no overheads, and no PowerPoint, he was able to project a larger-than-life image through the power of his words. His story about evading Serbian forces while on the run south of the Bosnian city of Banja Luka was interspersed with recollections from his life, and told with humor and humility.

Without motivation, there is no engagement, and without engagement, there is no learning.

As much as O'Grady's odyssey of surviving against all odds for six days before his dramatic rescue by Marine helicopters was fascinating, his message to the audience was even more compelling. In essence, he was saying, "As I faced the prospect of an almost-certain death, the most important things in my life became apparent to me with the utmost clarity. In short order, they were: my God, my family, and my country. I saw clearly for the first time that only about 10 percent of the things in my life were really important. I determined that if I got another chance to live my life, I would make every effort to focus on that 10 percent, and I'm doing exactly that today."

Scott O'Grady now attends a seminary and takes his message of hope and spirituality to people everywhere. Each and every one of us has the same opportunity he has given himself, he said, to focus on the things that are really important in our lives. "Don't wait to have death staring you in the face to realize what I realized" was his message. It was one that resonated with the audience. And yet, as inspirational as it was, his talk was only a piece of the learning puzzle. No matter how inspired we all were, in the end it will be our individual efforts, our own attempts to live a good and decent life, that will define us as human beings. Captain O'Grady started us on the road to learning, but each person in the audience will have to complete the journey in his or her own special and individual way.

Suddenly, it dawned on me that the campfire is not necessarily inconsistent with the idea of personalized learning. Just as Scott O'Grady was able to find common ground with his audience of 1,000, so too can a teacher find common ground with her classroom of 30. But unlike the pilot-hero, who will go on to inspire other audiences around the world, what happens after any typical "story" in class remains the business of the teacher. She will be measured not only by her ability to motivate, but by the level of effort her exhortations inspire. Take away the campfire, and you have suddenly weakened the teacher's hand considerably because without motivation, there is no engagement, and without engagement, there is no learning.

My new tolerance for the campfire reminds me of a "Seinfeld" episode on television, in which Jerry Seinfeld talks about a survey showing that, to many people, the fear of public speaking is actually greater than the fear of death. Jerry concludes: "Think about this. The poor guy asked to deliver the eulogy at a funeral would rather be in the casket than at the podium."

Morbid humor aside, the art of public speaking, so long venerated in our leaders, is not appreciated today as it once was. When was the last

I'm still an ardent fan of student

great and memorable speech you heard? Churchill's "We Will Never Surrender" speech or Roosevelt's "Day of Infamy" speech are moments that will live forever.

Though most of us will never be called upon to deliver a Gettysburg Address, wouldn't it be nice to know we could? More and more, the need to present to small and large groups is becoming a necessity for today's knowledge worker. That means, by becoming an essential part of our skill-set toolbox, the campfire may be poised to return to its pre-eminence as an art form.

And so I'm writing this to tell the world that I am a reformed radical. I'm still an ardent fan of student empowerment, but I no longer believe that it is completely inconsistent or incompatible with some of the traditional teaching styles, such as the lecture format. Having said that, I still believe that this format must be used carefully. Better that it be employed by a Scott O'Grady who can change lives from his lectern than by a classroom teacher who is a bad storyteller. To the teachers, I would say, if you see your students' eyes glaze over, it's a pretty good bet you aren't doing an O'Grady. That may be the cue to change formats and give your students some much-deserved "watering hole" time.

And with that, I will retire to my cave.

Prakash Nair, an architect and school planner, is the president of Prakash Nair Consulting, in Forest Hills, N.Y. His address online is Prakash@Designshare.com.

Prakash Nair, an architect and school planner, is the president of Prakash Nair Consulting, in Forest Hills, N.Y. His address online is Prakash@Designshare.com.

Vol. 22, Issue 28, Page 29

empowerment, but I no longer believe that it is completely inconsistent or incompatible with some of the traditional teaching styles.