TOMASZ HERZOG

University of Maine at Presque Isle, College of Education (USA)

Bowling Together:
On Selected Aspects of Professional Capital in 21ˢᵗ Century Education

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Professional Capital, *Professional Communication*, *Civic Participation*, and *Community* are the ideas about teachers as social change agents that have recently come into particular focus in thinking about today's education. In the first part of this paper these ideas are examined in their broad political, social, cultural, and economic contexts. The second part looks more closely at the important aspects of communication and their implications for education and educators.

KEY WORDS: education, 'professional capital', communication, democracy, community

> *No man is an island,*
> *Entire of itself,*
> *Every man is a piece of the continent,*
> *A part of the main.*
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> *No Man Is an Island* by John Donne

Education and educators don't exist in a social, cultural, political, or economic vacuum. They are not a lonely island; they don't exist in isolation, free from outside influences. There are two goals

sought in writing this article; first of all, to identify and re-examine the forces that shape education in the 21st century. Secondly, some communicational aspects of professional capital in the contemporary educational context will be scrutinized in the latter part of this article. It can be viewed as a call for a continuous effort to rediscover the importance of a communal character of teaching.

From the beginning of human history a great deal has been written or said about the importance of freedom of expression. Countless books, articles, poems, songs, or scholarly conferences have been dedicated to this important matter. It isn't by chance that, over and over again, totalitarian or authoritarian regimes' first goal is always to seize mass media, to pacify universities and schools, to silence outspoken opponents, and to get rid of the language of the free people, replacing it with some Orwellian newspeak full of lies (these days often referred to as post-truths). The works of such authors as Hannah Arendt, George Orwell, Viktor Klemperer, Czesław Miłosz, Vaclav Havel, or Margaret Atwood remind that any abuse of free communication is a major threat to democracy, to the ideals and practices of an open society.

Only in the atmosphere of an unconstrained communication, something very important is born among people – a sense of belonging, mutual trust and collaboration (see, for example, Jeffrey C. Goldfarb's *Beyond Glasnost. The Post-totalitarian Mind*[1]). That's what impressed Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville about the United States during his first-hand observations in the 1830s and made him write about it in *Democracy in America*[2]. People like Vaclav Havel, his mentor Professor Jan Patocka, Tomas Halik, and many other Central Europeans understood it very well and dedicated themselves to building a *parallel polis*, to publishing in *samizdat*, to organizing educational initiatives out of the ideological control (e.g. so called the *Flying University* in Poland) during the Communist era.

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[1] J.C. Goldfarb, *Beyond Glasnost. The Post-totalitarian Mind*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992.

[2] A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Penguin Books, New York 2003.

When people collaborate and communicate freely, networks of interactions are established and reciprocal relations and transactions take place which result in building *social capital* (for more in-depth analysis of the role of trust in building civil society see Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work*[3] and Francis Fukuyama's *Trust*[4]). Unfortunately, over the last several years opposite economic, social, and political trends have been identified and studied by many social scientists or reported on by civic journalists. Neoliberalism, argues Guy Standing in his seminal work *The Prekariat: The New Dangerous Class*[5], has led to very destructive changes, undermining the very foundations of prosperous societies and leading to the shrinking of the *middle class* and pauperization and ongoing marginalization of millions of people around the globe. The logic of free market, where everything is valued as long as it is profitable in economic terms, is often seen as the only justification for redefining many public policies. As Zygmunt Bauman poignantly wrote in many books during the last several years of his life, neoliberalism has had its pervasive impact on many contemporary societies both on individual and collective levels.[6] On an individual one – by stripping many women and men not only of the sense of economic stability and security, turning them into *disposable* people and their lives into *wasted* ones and, on a collective one – by weakening social bonds among individuals and whole social groups, planting seeds of fear and uncertainty, promoting *social Darwinism* instead of social justice, greed instead of collaboration, feel-good mentality instead of empathy, exclusion instead of inclusion. Bauman's observations have found confirmation in the body of work gathered by a re-

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[3] R. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 1993.

[4] F. Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, Penguin Putnam, New York 1995.

[5] G. Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Bloomsbury, New York 2011.

[6] See, for example, Z. Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2007.

nowned Polish reporter and writer Artur Domosławski in his recently published (in Polish) book *Wykluczeni* (*The Excluded*)[7]. Since Donald Trump's presidential inauguration all those negative trends have accelerated in the United States and, in many ways, have had both a domestic and global impact.

What does all of this have to do with education and educators, one may wonder? A great deal, actually. In the US, for many years, it's been of a great concern that a significant number of teachers, especially those during the first five years of teaching, leave the profession. Among many identified factors, salary, heavy workload and isolation are often regarded as the cause of problems with attrition to the level of nearly 50% of new teachers who leave teaching during the early years. A longitudinal study released in April, 2016 by the US Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics entitled "Public School Teacher Attrition and Mobility in the First Five Years"[8] is particularly important and relevant to what is being examined here. According to the findings presented in the report, new teachers who are assigned mentors are more likely to continue teaching than those who don't have any professional peer support. In 2008–2009, 92 percent of those who had first-year mentors were still teaching, compared to 84 percent of those without mentors. By 2011–2012, 86 percent of those who had first-year mentors were still teaching, compared to 71 percent who did not have mentors. What these, and many other available data seem to suggest is the need for a paradigm shift, for a change of the culture of teachers' work at school. In order for that to happen, suggests Henry Giroux, educators need to reclaim the language of education, to rediscover themselves not only as school personnel but, more importantly, as critical intellectuals opposed to viewing schooling "as preparing people for jobs and setting up policies that remove critical thinking as a serious condition for independent action and

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[7] A. Domosławski, *Wykluczeni*, Wielka Litera, Warszawa 2016.

[8] US Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics, *Public School Teacher Attrition and Mobility in the First Five Years,* http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015337.pdf [dostęp: 2.12.2016].

engaged leadership."[9] To quote the former President of the National Education Association – Dennis Van Roekel, "It is time for the teaching profession to be led by, for, and with teachers, and for others to join in concerted action to support that transformation."[10] It requires the transformation towards what Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan coined *professional capital*. Professional capital can be defined as a function of human capital (personal skills and competencies), social capital (interpersonal relationships), and decisional capital (the ability to make discretionary judgments.) If the educational system is going to grow and develop it will be because the professionals who lead and work in the educational system grow and develop. However, given the current trends in the US, the national approach is exactly the opposite of what Hargreaves and Fullan's research shows to be best practice.

A *business capital* approach in American schools currently dominates, one that is focused on short-term maximum gains with a heavy turnover of staff (50% of those who start teaching with proper academic credentials leave within 5 years; 80% of teachers start with alternative credentials.[11] A *professional capital approach* takes a more long-term approach and works to develop human, social, and decisional capital throughout the organization. Building professional capital is therefore an opportunity and a responsibility. It's a shift in the professional self-image of teachers from agents of socialization to active advocates of human flourishing, social justice, and world betterment. This change of the whole system is doable and attainable.

Finland, say Fullan and Hargreaves (and echoed by Sir Ken Robinson[12]), can serve as a role model since schools in that Scandi-

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[9] H. Giroux, *Education and the Crisis of Public Values: challenging the assault on teachers, students, and public education*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York 2012, p. 95.

[10] A. Hargreaves, M. Fullan, *Professional capital: transforming teaching in every school*, Teachers College Press, New York 2012.

[11] W. Huitt, *Stages of mastery.* http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/topics/teacher/stgmstry.html [dostęp: 2.06. 2016].

[12] A. Hargreaves, M. Fullan, *Professional capital: transforming teaching in every school*, Teachers College Press, New York 2012.

navian country are doing an excellent job in this regard. How? Answers to this question bring books written or co-authored by well-known Finnish education reformer Pasi Sahlberg: *Finnish Lessons*[13] and the more recently published *Beyond Bystanders*[14] and *Empowered Educators in Finland.*[15] The best performing education systems focus on improving the entire profession, not just lauding the highest performers and lopping off the lowest. *Professional capital* involves and absolutely requires individual and collective acts of investment in an inspirational vision and a coherent set of actions that build everyone's capability and keep everyone learning as they continue to move forward. That said, the building of *professional capital* depends heavily on communication among participants. And as such, caution communication experts, it is not free from potential challenges and obstacles of a cultural and communicational nature. Let's take a moment to examine them here.

Students of communication identify three biggest communication challenges, which might imperil the successful development of *professional capital*:

1) culturally sensitive communication
2) dealing with communication overload
3) communicating across generations

1) Culturally sensitive communication

Today's schools are much more diverse and will only become more so in the future. This is positive in many ways, but, from a communication standpoint, it presents some challenges. Chances are very good that teachers will need to practice culturally sensitive

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[13] P. Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons 2.0: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?*, Teachers College Press, New York 2014.

[14] P. Sahlberg, *Beyond Bystanders: Educational Leadership for a Humane Culture in a Globalizing Reality,* Sense Publishers, Rotterdam 2017.

[15] K. Hammerness, R. Ahtiainen**,** P. Sahlberg**,** *Empowered Educators in Finland: How High-Performing Systems Shape Teaching Quality*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco 2017.

communication in order to build relationships, or to perform in their job, or to simply just be cordial when they inevitably encounter someone from a different culture than their own.[16]

Obstacles

The most common communication stumbling blocks in a culturally diverse educational environment include:
- **Language barriers**: These can occur when the people communicating don't speak the same language or when there is a different level of understanding of the language being spoken (e.g. English as a second language).
- **Bias and stereotyping:** Bias is prejudice either for or against a person or group compared with another. Stereotyping is making assumptions regarding a person's background due to factors such as their culture.
- **Lack of empathy:** Empathy is the ability to put yourself in another person's situation in order to understand the feelings of the other party. A lack of empathy will show in conversations when one person doesn't maintain patience and understanding with someone who is struggling with language and cultural barriers.
- **Limited cultural awareness:** There are communication norms for each culture, including tone and rate of speech, non-verbal cues such as eye contact, spatial comfort zones, and even who gets to speak first.

When someone is not understood or when they feel they're being judged they can become defensive. This can escalate into a full blown conflict which creates a whole host of problems. From the standpoint of communication in the workplace, misunderstandings that result from these stumbling blocks can lead to loss of engagement and low employee morale. Even unintentional culturally

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[16] K. O'Sullivan, *Understanding Ways: Communicating between Cultures*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney 1994.

insensitive communication can lead to feelings of disrespect and tension.

In order to become a better communicator, a few effective techniques may guarantee a successful cross cultural communication:

– **Employ active listening…not hearing.** This is an essential part of effective communication. This includes concentrating on the whole message, providing accurate feedback, showing empathy and interest in what is being said, maintaining proper eye contact, using open body language, asking questions, and paraphrasing to reinforce understanding.

– **Use appropriate speech.** Use speech appropriate for your audience. Minimize the use of jargon or slang when speaking to someone from a different culture than your own to lessen the chance of confusion and misunderstandings. Generally, less jargon is always better no matter who your audience is.

– **Train school personnel early and often.** Many of the pitfalls of misunderstanding and cultural confusion can be prevented with early and ongoing training. Be sure the teachers and the staff have the knowledge and skills to appropriately handle the most common cultures they will interact with. This should include appropriate greetings, acceptable gestures, key phrases, etc.

– **Assign or seek a mentor.** When a teacher will be working with students or co-workers from a culture different than their own, having a mentor with experience and/or knowledge about that culture can help the educator navigate hurdles.

2) Communication overload

People are drowning in data. The number of text messages sent and received every day exceeds the total population of the planet. One week of reading the New York Times provides more information than a person would likely have come across in his entire life in the 18th century. The number of Facebook users has already reached 1 billion people.[17] We literally have, at our fingertips, the

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[17] *Did you know?* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u06BXgWbGvA [dostęp: 2.12.2016].

ability to communicate with anyone, anytime, and anywhere we want. Cell phones, Facebook, instant messaging, teleconferencing, etc. are not going away and there are many benefits. But, if not managed, these can be overwhelming.

Obstacles

So what are some of the problems as a result of this relentless flow of communication?

- Inability to process information – Information overload occurs when the volume of information received exceeds the person's capacity to process it. This creates noise and chaos in the communication system- information is overlooked/ misinterpreted when we can't process it fast enough.
- Paralysis of analysis – this term denotes the situation when employees feel overwhelmed by the volume of information they must process. This stems from the expectation that managers or employees should be capable of multi-tasking, but to the extreme.
- Physical and psychological problems – 1) Stress brought on by constant and frequent communication; especially from more than one source, 2) Mood swings including depression, anger, anxiety, and irritability, 3) inability to be productive, focused, and effective, 4) Physical ailments like fatigue, headaches, sleep disturbances, and increased blood pressure
- Interpersonal ramifications – an overload of information causes relationship conflicts and dissatisfaction at work.

How to become a better communicator – tips for managing communication overload:

- Designate specific times throughout the day to check and respond to messages. Don't constantly check to see who is texting or emailing you, or leaving phone messages, etc. Make sure that an open door policy doesn't lead to constant interruption.

– Technology makes it easy to do many things at once. When working online, do only the task at hand. Try to avoid working, chatting, talking, and other types of activities that require communicating with others.
– Unplug from technology. If you cannot unplug completely only use what is necessary for a few days to a week. Set time to be still. Take a break.
– Increase your capacity for processing information – learn to read faster, scan documents more efficiently, and remove distractions that slow processing down. Practice effective communication to avoid having to repeat yourself.
– Reduce your information load – read messages that are considered essential, act on what's most important, ignore less important information (junk mail/spam).

3) Communicating across the generations

For the first time in American history, there are **four different generations** working side-by-side in the workplace.[18] Remember, if you are old enough, when older workers were the bosses and younger workers did what was asked of them, no questions asked. There were definite rules as to how the boss was treated and how younger workers treated older workers. That is no longer the case. Roles today are all over the place and the rules are being rewritten daily.

An age-diverse workforce can result in improved collaboration, creativity, and decision-making. Yet this vision is far from reality in many companies. At the crux of the workplace generation gap lie vastly different communication styles and preferences. Research indicates that people communicate based on their generational backgrounds. Each generation has distinct attitudes, behaviors, expectations, habits, and motivational buttons. Learning how to com-

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[18] F. Widman, V. Strilko, *Communicating Across Generations,* https://advising.ucsc.edu/advisers/forum/docs/2014/WBComm%20Across%20Generations%20Diversity%20Inclusion.pdf [dostęp: 2.06.2016].

municate with the different generations can eliminate many major confrontations and misunderstandings in the workplace.

So who are we talking about and how do they communicate?

- **Traditionalists/Veterans –** born between 1922 to 1943, they:
    – Like formal, respectful communication. They prefer memos and letters, and could be offended by a shout across the room.
    – Value a top-down approach.
    – Don't need a lot of feedback. A job well done is self-satisfying and no one needs to tell them that.
    – Are hard working.
    – Expect and accept command-and-control leadership.
    – Are motivated by passing on their wisdom…They embrace mentoring opportunities and part-time options.

- **Baby Boomers –** born 1943 to 1960, they:
    – Prefer direct, personal communication used to build rapport.
    – Value respect and favor a top-down approach.
    – Don't need a lot of feedback, but prefer it to be documented when you give it.
    – View work is an adventure.
    – Prefer a team-oriented environment.
    – Are motivated by passing on their wisdom and appreciate flexible hours…These are the people who are part of the sandwich generation caring for aging parents and children at the same time.

- **Generation X –** born 1960 to 1980, they:
    – Prefer immediate, efficient communication…just cut to the chase and don't waste time in unnecessary meetings.
    – Are the latchkey kids…they are skeptical, self-reliant, self-accountable and tend to go after what they want.
    – Seek constructive criticism…they don't need to be coddled, but want to know where they stand.
    – Are driven, go-getters, open to risk, and not afraid of diversity.
    – View work as a challenge (a bit of a competitive edge).

– Prefer leadership that will allow them to ask, "Why?"
– Are family-oriented, so they like telecommuting, flexible schedules and jobs that help them achieve balance.

- **Millennials/Generation Y –** born 1980 to 2002, they:
    – Are driven by technology and prefer to communicate that way, but often express their feelings explicitly, because they want to be heard!
    – Love being social and embrace diversity.
    – Expect feedback and prefer it electronically.
    – Find work fulfilling…it's about knowing that their work matters (civic engagement), but they tend to have little regard for authority
    – Prefer to multi-task…work where there are multiple assignments.
    – Are motivated by career development and responsibilities. They're optimistic, confident, strong achievers if properly motivated. Almost 70 percent of them make giving back a high priority.

Obstacles

It's noticeable that these four very different generations are very distinct. Certainly not every person will share all of the various characteristics of their generation. These are general beliefs and behavior patterns based on years of research. A person at the end of his generation may have overlapping characteristics with members of the next generation – a sort of in between individual who can be comfortable or not with traits from both generations.

In general, the generational perspective is the driving force behind these behaviors, including communication style. Think of all the changes that have happened in the past 60 years. People born before 1946 lived through the Great Depression and World War II. They tend to be frugal and respectful of their elders, formal in their communication and conservative with an emphasis on family.

A Gen Y-er tends to be highly social and confident; communication is less personal than it is technology-based, and they voice strong opinions. When you blend these two, so significantly different people on a team, it becomes easy to see how this might generate some problems.

The stereotypes that get in the way of culturally sensitive communication also come into play with generational communication. A younger person may have the stereotype that older people are slow or don't know enough about modern subjects to be interesting in conversation. Older people may stereotype younger people as disrespectful, rude, or given to interrupting. These expectations can influence how a conversation between generations will take place.

A study published in the Journal of Language and Social Psychology found that older people and younger people do speak to each other in certain ways based on their generational communication styles. The older speakers showed little variation in response to listener age or task difficulty, while the young speakers adopted a simplified speech style when addressing the older listeners. Because of the evolution of vernacular, older people may have a hard time understanding the kind of slang words or phrases a younger person is using, and vice versa.

Become a better communicator

Helpful ways to encourage effective communication between the generations include:
- Focus on the similarities rather than differences. Instead of dwelling on the fact that you have to work with a younger or older person, focus on the task at hand and the fact that you are on the same team. The gaps may be smaller than you think. Every generation has had its successes and failures, and there is a lot of similarity in how these are perceived. When the television was invented, the generation prior was slow to

embrace it, much as the TV generation was slower to embrace computers.

– Learn to accept change. Education, like the rest of the society, is always evolving. Older generations are particularly prone to being more resistant to some of these changes, but change is inevitable. Instead of resisting it, apply your experience and wisdom in ways that can help you manage the change. Change usually comes in stages; very often it's a gradual change, not a radical one.

– Conversely for younger people, there is a tremendous value in experience. New, fast, and slick doesn't always mean better. Accept the advice of older employees who may have a perspective that was overlooked in the race for advancement.

– Develop a curiosity for the unknown. Encourage older employees to learn about the latest technologies and younger employees to learn about the history of the company. If you are a manager, be conscientious about not always having older employees be the team leader or having the younger employees do the task requiring some advanced technical skills. To sum up, in this article an emphasis was placed on the importance of *professional capital*, communication, and collaboration in education. The bottom line is that clear, thoughtful communication will always prevail regardless of culture, technology, or age barriers. By becoming a more effective communicator, one can greatly increase his or her chances of avoiding conflicts, being more productive, developing meaningful relationships, and having a more fulfilling career. Those who don't understand, or reject, the logic of this process are destined to fail.

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