



IT AIN'T EASY TO CHANGE THE NARRATIVE

By Rafael Heller | Nov 25, 2019 | Editor's Note

Back in the 1990s, when I was in graduate school studying rhetoric and writing instruction, my colleagues and I had a big chip on our shoulders. As we saw it, rhetorical education is the lifeblood of deliberative democracy. Because an open society relies on the back-and-forth of arguments and counterarguments to determine the best course of action, nothing could be more important than to teach young people to argue persuasively (and to be open to others’ persuasive arguments). Outside of our graduate program, though, rhetoric got no respect. To some people, teaching students to tailor their writing to be persuasive in a particular situation and for a particular audience amounted to teaching them to be deceitful, manipulative, and disdainful of the truth. Suspicion of rhetoric runs deep (and goes all the way back to Plato).

But times have changed since I was in grad school. Not only has rhetoric become a thriving field of study at the university level, but throughout the education world, people have become much less squeamish and much more thoughtful about the use of words, stories, symbols, and images to influence policy and practice. Having spent several years working in strategic communications for education advocacy groups, I can assure you that pretty much every nonprofit organization now pays attention to (and, if they can afford it, hires consultants or staff to help them with) branding, messaging, and public relations. These days, everybody in K-12 education seems to be trying to “[change the narrative](#)” or “[reframe](#)” the debate (or, to have it both ways, “[reframe the narrative](#)”).

It thrills me to see so much new energy behind efforts to celebrate the civic mission of our public schools, boost the image of the teaching profession, and give educators the tools to tell their own stories, make their own movies and podcasts, and participate more actively in local and state policy debates. I worry, though, that advocates are too confident in their ability to change the prevailing narratives and reframe the public discourse about school reform. Rhetoric isn’t magic. You can’t just tell a new story or use a new metaphor and expect to win hearts and minds just like that. It takes hard work, practice, and patience for, say, a policy organization to persuade voters to support a bill. It’s no different in the world of education. The rhetoric of school choice, for example, wasn’t built in a day.

In the best of times, it’s difficult to persuade people to support your policy or vote for your candidate, much less persuade them to think about teaching, learning, and schooling in a whole new way. And these aren’t the best of times. As Mark Hlavacik describes in this issue of Kappan, it’s not clear where we can turn, at present, for rhetorical leadership in public education. Over the last 40 years, when it comes to defining and rallying support around a common agenda for school improvement, the U.S. secretary of education has been our single most powerful voice. However, the current secretary shows little interest in playing that role, choosing to amplify our current political and cultural divisions, instead of bringing people together around shared educational interests, values, and goals. We will have to look elsewhere, and find new platforms, for language that unifies us. If we hope to change the narrative and reframe the discourse of K-12 education, we must not only be savvy about the language we choose but also find new sources of eloquence and leadership.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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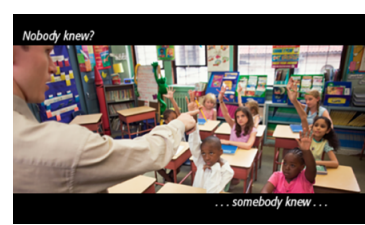
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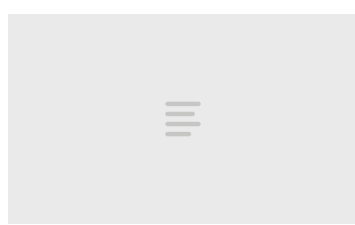
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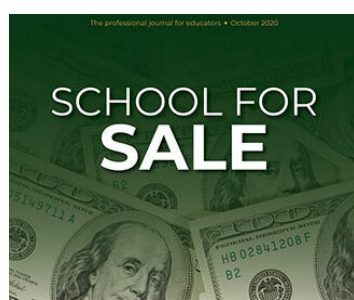
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