

CHAPTER

1

One Plank at a Time

The Steady Discipline of
Instructional Improvement



Rotting Ship at Sea

KEY PRINCIPLE

Systematic improvement requires a balance of urgency and intentionality: urgency to pursue and resolve compelling problems but patience and discipline to investigate one plank at a time.

Several years ago, Brad (first author) and a team of UCLA colleagues presented research findings on instructional improvement to a group of regional superintendents overseeing a large urban school system. After listening intently to the presentation, one superintendent asked how long it would take for an instructional inquiry model to yield tangible achievement results across all the district's schools. Hearing it would take at least five to seven years and likely much longer, the group responded with dismay. A few superintendents laughed, and one district representative said, "We can't wait that long. Is there a way we can move this faster?" We responded, "Have you been satisfied with results over the last decade? What if you began this work 10 years ago and now started to experience steady gains? The next 10 years offer the same challenge and opportunity." The room was silent; a few administrators nodded their heads, but most remained resistant and skeptical.

A few years later, Genevieve (second author) met with a team of school leaders to discuss implementation plans for a teacher-led curriculum development project. She inventoried existing settings, which included several annual pupil-free days and subject-area collaboration meetings scheduled two or three times per month. After factoring in holidays and other special events, she calculated just over 30 hours available per year for teachers to complete the work. Based on these estimates, she explained it would take approximately five years for the school to map out and refine a coherent curriculum plan for each of their courses. The team paused in disbelief. One member said, "Can't we finish that in about six months?" Genevieve explained it could possibly be reduced to three years but only with additional teacher settings dedicated to this work. Either way, accomplishing the project goals would require a sustained, multiyear commitment.

Examples like these are prevalent in districts and schools throughout the United States. Slow, steady, continuous improvement is hard work, requiring significant time, focus, and commitment. But these are tall demands in a system overwhelmed with successive waves of politics and programs aimed at quick results. Absent the patience for a serious improvement agenda, the majority of reform policies and initiatives have relied on new standards, high-stakes assessments, teacher evaluation, and increased accountabilities, with minimal resources devoted to support professional learning. A narrow emphasis on management and control, combined with a culture that celebrates quick wins over complex solutions, has fostered an education system antithetical to steady, continuous improvement. As Hiebert, Gallimore, and Stigler (2002) explain, "The history of American education includes a graveyard of good ideas condemned by pressure for fast results" (p. 13).

This pervasive problem raises important questions: How can schools embrace slow, steady improvement while facing annual accountability pressures and immediate needs of the current student population? How can schools embrace and sustain systematic effort within a culture that focuses on quick solutions, catchy slogans, short sound bites, and latest trends? The answer to these questions lies in the delicate balance between intentionality and urgency. Being systematic requires more than simply easing up on the accelerator. Working with urgency also requires much more than turning up the heat and keeping a frantic pace. This challenge is comparable to the task a crew of sailors must confront while repairing a rotting ship out at sea.

PORTRAIT #1: Rotting Ship at Sea

The rotting ship is a metaphor first conceived by Australian social scientist Otto Neurath (1882–1945) to describe the delicate and steady process of scientific research. The metaphor is equally applicable to anyone engaged in continuous improvement and the pursuit of building knowledge about professional practice. Neurath (1944) explains the metaphor as follows:

Imagine sailors, who, far out at sea, transform the shape of their clumsy vessel from a more circular to a more fishlike one. They make use of some drifting timber, besides the timber of the old structure, to modify the skeleton and the hull of their vessel. But they cannot put the ship in dock in order to start from scratch. During their work they stay on the old structure and deal with heavy gales and thundering waves. In transforming their ship they take care that dangerous leakages do not occur. A new ship grows out of the old one, step by step—and while they are still building, the sailors may already be thinking of a new structure, and they will not always agree with one another. The whole business will go on in a way that we cannot even anticipate today. That is our fate. (p. 47)

Applying this metaphor to the context of schools, a group of educators might think of their instructional practice as this perpetually deteriorating ship, far out at sea, which is in continuous need of repair or even transformation. As crew members and sailors on the ship, school leaders and teachers are faced with the challenge of collaboratively rebuilding and modifying their

practice at just the right increments while balancing competing concerns. They are simultaneously responsible for redressing serious gaps in teaching and learning while also staying on course and navigating a demanding curriculum. There is no option for placing school on hold for six months, docking the ship, and restarting again in the spring.

Managing this complex set of conditions requires diligent and systematic effort to maintain the functionality and navigational capacity of the vessel while focusing attention on one particular weak plank at a time for more serious work and repair. It also requires a well-established set of procedures for working together productively and a clearly specified process for efficiently identifying gaps, choosing the best timber available to fill these gaps, and skillfully replacing each plank. Once repaired, the sailors (or educators) can then rely on the newly restored plank for solid footing as they shift their attention to other weak planks that are threatening the stability of the ship. As Campbell (1988) notes, “the proportion of the planks we are replacing to those we treat as sound must always be small” (p. 363).

This metaphor is provocative, but helping educators strike this shrewd balance between urgency and intentionality also requires concrete illustrations of what systematic “ship repair” can look like in an educational context. Part of the challenge is that terms such as *inquiry*, *reflection*, and *collaboration* have been popularized in U.S. schools but are quickly assimilated with existing practice and routines without sufficient knowledge of the profound changes needed to adopt these ideas with fidelity. Educators assume “we do that already” and perhaps even write off the ideas as ineffectual.

Because there are few examples of sustained instructional improvement in U.S. schools, it’s important to look outside our system and learn from alternative images of practice. Next we provide one concrete example from Japan’s purposeful and systematic approach to integrating classroom technologies—an example that clearly illustrates the time and disposition required to engage in collaborative, systematic improvement one plank at a time.

Lessons Learned From a Chalkboard

In the winter of 2014, while observing and recording classroom lessons in Saitama, Japan, we captured 17 lesson videos from various subject areas across 1st to 12th grade. During our observations, we were surprised to hear