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# It's Like They're Building the Airplane While It's in the Air

## **Abstract**

One of the things I was most concerned about when I left the classroom to become a teacher educator was losing my credibility. Everybody knows the rap on teacher educators: they're out of touch, too theoretical, disconnected from the everyday life of the classroom teacher. Of course, sometimes criticism is like a good joke. It's only funny because it's true—sometimes. [*excerpt*]

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## **Disciplines**

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# 'It's Like They're Building the Airplane While It's in the Air'

By Dave Powell

One of the things I was most concerned about when I left the classroom to become a teacher educator was losing my credibility. Everybody knows the rap on teacher educators: they're out of touch, too theoretical, disconnected from the everyday life of the classroom teacher. Of course, sometimes criticism is like a good joke. It's only funny because it's true—sometimes.

Lucky for me, I'm married to a teacher. I don't know how much credibility I've lost in the seven years I've been a teacher educator, but that fact alone has kept me grounded. My wife teaches English language learners at a number of different schools, which gives her an opportunity every teacher could benefit from: she gets to watch other people teach, and learn from them, almost every day. Yesterday she sat down with the assistant principal who coordinates testing in one of her schools to discuss implementation of the [PARCC Accessibility Features and Accommodations Manual](#), which, according to [PARCC](#) (that's the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, if you're unfamiliar), is "a **comprehensive policy document** that provides guidance to districts and decision-making teams to ensure that the PARCC mid-year, performance-based, and end-of-year assessments provide valid results for all participating students." The emphasis is theirs. The manual is in its third edition.

The problem was that when they got to Appendix C—"Protocol for the Use of the Scribe Accommodation"—there wasn't anything there. My wife joked, "It's probably because they haven't written it yet." The AP replied: "No, seriously—they haven't written it yet," and pointed to the space where the guidelines should be. There, it said: "*Transcription edits are currently being made. An updated copy will be posted in late winter 2014.*" The

test, of course, will be given in late winter, 2014. My wife sighed. "It's like they're building the airplane while it's in the air," she said.

That comment, to me, pretty well sums up what's wrong with education reform right now. You might expect a "comprehensive policy document"; in its third edition, no less—to have all the Is dotted and Ts crossed well in advance of test day. But this test will be given to students in March, less than eight weeks from now, and the guidelines still aren't finished yet. This is not an isolated problem. My wife's airplane metaphor perfectly describes the breakneck pace of educational change we have all endured since the passage of the No Child Left Behind law in 2002. *Let's hurry up and get the plane in the air now*, they thought. *We can worry about installing the landing gear later.* Can you imagine flying in an airplane that's still under construction? You probably can if you teach in a public school in America these days.

In some ways, being a teacher is worse. Anyone who has ever spent time teaching knows that patience is the key to unlocking the mysteries of education. But when people counsel patience these days, they're criticized for holding up progress or being selfish. Meanwhile, the impatient are **lavished with grant money** and **tax dollars** and encouraged to make **outlandish claims about their effectiveness** to justify the money being spent on their behalf and in pursuit of their ideas.

If patience is a sign of maturity, how did we end up with such an immature approach in education?

It seems to me that we have two problems on our hands here. One is the desire for instant success and gratification. Many policymakers want what they want now, and they don't want to wait for it even if they don't know exactly what it is. For many of these decision makers (and this includes people making education policy, obviously), the time to make an idea public, it seems, is the second it pops into someone's head. Worse, the period between when an idea "goes public," so to speak, and when it begins to get implemented seems to have shortened considerably. Take, for example, New York state's decision to require students to take Common Core-aligned tests before fully implementing Common Core. What a great idea that was.

Or consider the Obama administration's hasty decision to require that states [link student test scores to teacher evaluations](#) using "value added" approaches to data analysis. It's bad enough that [statisticians are horrified](#) by the problematic nature of such an approach and that teachers (and many others) recognize the absurdity of evaluating the quality of teaching based on the performance of kids taking tests that were never designed to evaluate teaching at all. What's particularly galling is that the administration allegedly [values evidence above all else](#) but, because of its impatience, never took the time to impartially collect evidence before issuing mandates disguised as waivers from the requirements of a law that never had a chance of being met in the first place. [Not everyone agrees that testing is such a bad thing](#), and it's even possible to argue that properly-aligned tests can tell us a lot about the effectiveness of teacher. But we're not even close to reaching consensus on this. The administration wanted change to happen quickly, so it used an opening a mile-wide (the failure of NCLB) to push states to make policy changes that haven't been fully evaluated yet. (I [issued a similar warning in an earlier post](#) about how Republicans might try to exploit dissatisfaction with testing to drastically reduce, if not eliminate, the federal government's role in shaping education policy, which I consider a step backward.) In the process, the Obama administration has made enemies out of a lot of people who really ought to be its friends. So much for circumspection and evidence-based social policy.

But as strong as the pull of immediate satisfaction is, we also seem to be pulled into the future by an intense fear of it. That's the second problem: the desire for quick fixes is driven by fear of what comes next. It's one thing to want instant gratification because it feels good now. It's another to want it only because we're afraid of how we might feel sometime in the future.

This is a dangerous approach to doing anything, let alone making social policy. A smarter approach would be to continue to let ideas flourish, but to spend more time analyzing their impact before trying to see if they can be "scaled up" effectively. This was supposed to be the idea behind the charter school movement before charter ["networks"](#) and [state departments of education](#) and [social engineers](#) got involved. The mindset that we should do something now, and fast, before everything goes to seed seems to have originated in consumer culture—in the idea that the next product is

always better than the one we currently have—and in the culture of fear that dominates our politics. It makes sense, in a way. Technology has been advancing rapidly, as has the pace of social change (these two things obviously being related). The acceleration of change naturally makes people nervous, and many people who are scared become angry. Others try to take advantage of the change they see happening so they can profit from it. In education, this translates into an approach to making policy that is short-sighted, is often punitive, and is usually self-serving. That's not a recipe that would ever work in a classroom.

What if we stepped back, took a deep breath, and spent some time talking about all the changes that have been swirling around us before deciding what to do next? What if we asked: is what we're doing actually making kids' lives better *now*? Everybody knows that you can only say you were flying if you land successfully; otherwise, you're crashing. Are we crashing or are we flying? Let's ground all (or at least most; I'd settle for some) of the planes until we figure this out. A moratorium on high stakes testing is a good place to start. Too many teachers have invested too much time and energy in Common Core for us to abandon ship on that, but we can certainly put the brakes on evaluating teachers based on how well students learn the curricula derived from the standards that the teachers are now just learning and creating themselves. Imagine the positive effect just those two simple changes would have immediately.

Maybe it makes sense to get the airplane fully assembled before we start boarding the passengers. If only we could be so patient.

*Dave Powell taught high school social studies for six years in suburban Atlanta and is now an assistant professor of education at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. He teaches courses on the foundations of education, educational psychology, social studies methods, and teacher action research.*