A tug-of-war is taking place in education. On the one hand, change is inevitable. On the other hand, change can be difficult and is often resisted.

Understanding the change process is important, not just from a step-by-step perspective, but from the perspective of being aware of how people respond emotionally to the prospect of change. Being open to potential areas of growth, while understanding the emotional journey, allows teachers to navigate their way through an education system that continues to evolve.

Innovative assessment and grading practices may not change the world, but they can and will significantly improve the experiences and success of the students in our schools. Although the prospect of change can be daunting, the time to act is now. The best educators are continually renewing, reflecting, and growing. Change presents new opportunities to learn professionally and to work more effectively with students. Never allowing themselves to settle professionally, effective educators seek new knowledge, understanding, and strategies to make the classroom experience the best it can be for their students.
Big Idea: Change Is Up to You

“Change is inevitable. Change is constant.” These words by Benjamin Disraeli, a literary figure and British prime minister twice in the 1800s, could not be more relevant to our discussion of education. In many ways, today is the best time in history to be an educator. We understand more about student learning and achievement than we ever have. Whether it is new understanding of brain research, instructional practices that produce unparalleled results, or our ability to teach and support all students, including those with special needs, the potential effectiveness of our school system has never been greater. Trying to maintain some sanity while keeping up with the emerging body of research, however, can leave even the most seasoned teachers intimidated. The research on best practice often feels relentless and overwhelming. That said, change within our education system is going to happen whether we resist it or not.

It is important to set the context.

The focus of this book is not on change for the sake of change. Rather, the focus is on meaningful change for the purpose of professional growth and, ultimately, the success of our students. Change is often encouraged for the wrong reasons and, as a result, is doomed to fail from the beginning. Whether a colleague is completing a master’s degree, an administrator wants to leave a legacy, or you want to establish yourself as a leader, implementing anything without a minimal level of research, planning, or support will have limited (if any) success and likely won’t be sustainable. Others will be left feeling as though they’ve been tricked, that the implementation was self-indulgent, misguided, and unnecessary. This perception will have ramifications when the next latest and greatest idea comes along. We can’t implement every suggested idea without confirming its validity. Meaningful change—change that we feel compelled to implement because of the empirically sound research and the potential benefit to our students—is our professional responsibility.
Challenged by Change

Change is something that, for the most part, happens to us.

The most obvious example of change in our society is technology. The rate at which the newest electronic devices become obsolete is staggering. While it might feel as though we’ve always had the Internet, only during the mid-1990s did the Internet become accessible and usable for the average person. When I began my teaching career in 1991, the Internet, while in existence, was not a tool I had access to. In fact, I didn’t even know it existed. Our students, though, don’t know a world without laptops, cell phones, text messaging, flat-screen TVs, GPS, Facebook, and Twitter. While all of these technologies are prominent now, that wasn’t always the case; someone had an idea, people took action, and our lives were changed forever.

Technology evolves to address a need for improvement. When new technology falls short, corrections are made and new versions are released. When technology falls short, we don’t say, *I knew cell phones wouldn’t work or whoever thought a laptop computer was a good idea didn’t have his head screwed on tight enough.* We wait for the next model.

The world’s first commercial, hand-held cell phone, Motorola’s DynaTAC 8000X, received approval from the U.S. Federal Communications Commission in early 1983. On March 6, 1983, the DynaTAC 8000X was made available for purchase. The idea of portable communication was revolutionary. Consumer demand for the phone was high, despite the hefty price tag of about $4,000 (in 1983 dollars)—waiting lists were in the thousands. The phone measured 33 centimetres (13 inches) long by 4.5 centimetres (1.75 inches) wide by 9 centimetres (3.5 inches) deep. The DynaTAC 8000X lasted eight hours between charges, provided 30 minutes of talk time, and took 10 hours to charge. The “brick” phone, as it is now sometimes referred to, changed personal communication forever.

Today, a cell phone measuring 33 centimetres (13 inches) long would be unmarketable. Cell phones are much smaller, more powerful, and far more diverse. The DynaTAC 8000X allowed no
access to the Internet, no email, no text messaging, and no picture-taking capability.

Our ability to embrace new technology stands in contrast to our lack of desire to embrace the new “technology” of education in our profession. If we have no problem with the new features of our updated cell phones, why is it so difficult for some educators to embrace pedagogical advancements that could revolutionize our classrooms?

Putting It into Practice

_If change is inevitable, why is it so hard to achieve? Teachers need to address this question._

It is human nature to resist change. In fact, it is a foible as human beings to stoutly defend an established position despite overwhelming evidence against it (Hawkins, 1995). People are creatures of habit who find comfort in their established daily routines. For many, these routines bring a sense of predictability to lives that can, even at the best of times, feel chaotic. While some industries thrive on progress and the latest advancements, education systems, despite the efforts of individual teachers, can be unusually slow at adopting and adapting to the new knowledge that emerges from the research.

Even if the situation is ideal, people still have a social-psychological fear of change (Fullan, 2001). This fear, coupled with a lack of technical know-how or skills to make the change work, makes it difficult for teachers or schools to move forward. Resistance to change is normal. In fact, Fullan suggests we should embrace those who resist change for two reasons:

1. Resistors sometimes have ideas that we might have missed. People’s reasons for resisting change are valid to them. We need to respect them enough to hear their views as it is possible they have an idea we have never thought of.
2. Resistors are important to the politics of any implementation plan. Ignoring resistors will eventually take its toll on the planned implementation. Whether during or before, it is easy to sabotage any new direction if one is determined to do so.

The bottom line is that we need to understand that change, while inevitable, can be difficult for some people to embrace. Many of us have difficulty changing our morning routines, let alone changing important things such as not smoking, eating healthier, or exercising. Our habits bring us comfort, but they can also be our demise. As changes are proposed, it’s important to remember to keep an open mind.

**Keeping an Open Mind**

One thing that has fascinated me over the course of my career is the mindset that develops within the teaching profession. This mindset has intrigued me so much I began to think about the things teachers say and how they would translate to other professions. Keeping an open mind implies not being stuck in a mindset where change is next to impossible. Below are four examples of quotations we would never hear in other professions, but that, unfortunately, are all too common within education.

“I’ve had this computer since 2000. Why would I change computers now?”

It would be inconceivable to hear this kind of proclamation from any other profession. Even teachers are more apt to embrace a change in technology versus a change in pedagogy. In Grade 11, I took Chemistry. My sister, 10 years my senior, had the same teacher for Chemistry. She described his methodical practice of keeping all of his lesson plans in manila envelopes and how he painstakingly pulled the plans out of the envelope for fear they might be damaged. My sister kept all of her high-school notebooks in our attic so, 10 years later, we were able to compare her Chemistry notebook with mine. What surprised me, even at 16 years of age, was that they were identical. My sister’s notebook was much more tidy, colourful, and pristine (even after 10 years in the attic!)
than mine, but the content was identical. Now to my teacher’s
defence: Chemistry is, by and large, Chemistry, and just as the
events of the Roman empire don’t change in the 21st century, basic
chemical laws are essentially fixed. However, even though I bene-
fitcd from not having to take notes for the rest of the semester,
I felt that the teacher had taken the easy way out.

“I’m too busy performing heart surgery to pay attention to the latest
research techniques.”

If your prospective surgeon said this, you would likely walk
out of the surgeon’s office, never to return. However, some teach-
ers maintain a similarly cavalier attitude about research in educa-
tion. Teachers are too busy to review several journals every month.
It is our professional obligation, however, to keep ourselves current,
much in the same way surgeons had better know what the latest
research suggests about the surgeries they are going to perform.
Making the time to stay current, either by choosing one educa-
tional journal to review or committing to one article per month,
will help keep us aware of what’s happening in our field. Education
continues to evolve, and we have to keep up if our classrooms are
going to remain relevant to the students we teach.

“I’m sorry, Kevin, your second driving test was excellent, but when
I average it with your test from September, you still fail.”

Reporting to parents, as we will discuss later, is arguably one of
the most important things we do. How we construct the grades we
report is equally important; otherwise, the grades become mean-
ingless. This notion will get significant attention in Chapter 9 when
we examine improvement. Often, student improvement is masked
in a mathematical calculation (averaging) that makes reporting a
student’s current status next to impossible—past performances lin-
ger. We must consider that student achievement evidence from
six months ago may not be reflective of where the student is today.

“It’s February 17th. That means I’m doing a root canal. I always
do root canals on February 17th!”

Education, like dentistry, is a people business. Dentists would
never scope-and-sequence their patients’ appointments. Dentists
respond to the needs of their patients; we need to respond to
the needs of our students. Some students master the content or
skills long after the initial teaching date. We can no longer say to students that we’ve moved on. We must validate learning whenever it occurs, even if it is long after we taught it. Several strategies that allow us to do that are outlined in this book, but the first step is to be open—open to learning something new and finding a more effective way to fulfill our mission of helping every student maximize his or her potential. After all, a dentist would never tell a patient, “I’m sorry. I know you have a cavity, but we did fillings back in September. It’s too late. We can’t go back.”

**Being the Change**

Being the change means taking a risk. While we can strategically plan what we do, the most important aspect of being the change is to take action. Some might argue in favor of exercising professional judgment, that we can’t simply try every new idea without vetting it through our own personal experiences. Professional experience does matter in helping us sort out which practices are worth the effort and which we should ignore; however, when it comes to judging something to be a poor practice and lacking desire to change anything, the line can blur.

We spend too much time predicting how students are going to react to new practices or innovations without hearing from them. Sometimes these predictions are true, but other times they are simply an exercise in opting out because the person doesn’t want to change anything. In subsequent chapters we discuss important changes we need to consider. The point here is to be open, to make professional judgments about what works, and to grow from the experience. “Try-learn-grow” is how we get better at anything we do, including teaching. Although the classroom is not necessarily an experimental lab, the best message we can send to our students is that we are still searching for the most effective and efficient ways to maximize their achievement and well-being.

Andrea DeVito is a middle school vice-principal who spent most of her career teaching high-school English. She recounts a time when she sought student feedback about her initial attempts using assessment for learning strategies in her English classes.
A few years ago I joined a group of teachers to collaborate on assessment for learning. We had all been working on changing our classroom assessment practices for awhile and felt that we had been doing a “pretty good” job of implementing several assessment for learning strategies. The question soon emerged: How do we know if what we are doing is working? As a group, we decided that we would do a survey with our students, giving them an opportunity to provide us with anonymous feedback (noting only student numbers), about how they were feeling about the learning environment in our classes.

The questions on the survey were designed as statements so that students had to rate their thoughts or feelings on a five-point scale, 1 being not very good and 5 being excellent. Statements ranged from “I feel valued as a student” to “I have multiple opportunities to self-assess” to “I receive frequent opportunities to improve my understanding.” Each statement asked the students to give a rating for both how they felt in all of their classes, and then about how they felt about the class in which they were presented with the survey. The final question asked, “If you could be anywhere right at this moment, where would it be?” The intent of this question was to tease out insights into the student’s interests, hobbies, favourite subjects, and so on.

Here’s where it got personal. I handed out the surveys to all of my classes, but in my English 12 class I received the biggest “wake-up call.” Once my Grade 12 students had completed the survey, they set to work on an in-class writing assignment. While they worked, I casually glanced through their responses, expecting to see that I was doing a fantastic job, and weren’t these kids just so lucky to have such an open-minded, progressive teacher.

First—the responses were mixed—not a slew of “5s” by any means. But one of the surveys really stood out. Student #53049 had responded, under the “this class” column, with a litany of 1s. (That wasn’t very good—I know, because I had to double-check.)

For the final question—if you could be anywhere right at this moment, where would it be?—the student’s response was “Anywhere but in English class.”
I scanned the class. Who is this student? This can’t be right. Who of my lovely English 12 students could feel so negatively about this class, about my assessment and instructional practices, and about me? While I had my guesses, I couldn’t be sure.

This, to me, necessitated the breaking of the anonymous code. I scanned the student numbers, and was shocked to find that it was “Kyle,” a quiet, bright, A– student. I knew I needed to talk to Kyle privately about his responses on the survey.

Kyle and I had a chat. Turns out, his lowest grade was in English, and this grade was seriously compromising some of his scholarship opportunities. His frustration level in the course, and with his seeming inability to break 90 percent on a paper, was escalating at Mach speed. He wanted to improve his writing and was frustrated by the fact that my feedback to him was not providing him with the necessary guidance to do so.

We came to an agreement that he needed to revisit his essays, and that I needed to be more descriptive with my feedback so that he had a better understanding of what to do to improve.

After that day, my relationship with Kyle, and how Kyle felt about English class, improved tremendously. Most important, Kyle became a more confident, articulate writer, and he had the opportunity to break through his 90 percent.

Clearly, I needed a little self and peer assessment as much as my students did.

Frustration can come in all shapes and sizes—and at all achievement levels. Andrea was not only open to receiving feedback from her students but willing to act upon that feedback to improve the classroom experience for every student, including Kyle. It is important to note that Andrea is an excellent teacher. She is a master of her curriculum, she develops exceptional relationships with her students, and she is a collaborative and supportive colleague. Her body of work throughout her career would have made it easy for her to pay little attention to what her students thought. However,
Andrea’s willingness to be the change provided her with a crucial moment that forever solidified her commitment to implement effective assessment for learning strategies. While reflecting upon Andrea’s story, we must all ask ourselves this question: *Is Andrea open to her students’ feedback because she is an exceptional teacher, or is Andrea an exceptional teacher because she is open to receiving feedback from her students?*

Leaders don’t wait for others to make the first move. Although many of the mission statements in schools mention something about developing lifelong learners, many of the teachers in those schools have not learned much of anything new about their own profession since they were first hired. Yes, they’ve learned how to take attendance, print report cards, or fill out an office referral form, but they haven’t learned anything new about the art of teaching.

Be the change strategically. Revamping your entire classroom practice all at once is not possible. As the saying goes, think big, but start small.

The question, then, is where to start.

Start with the greatest need. Examine the results of the students in your classroom to identify the greatest need. Note that once you have identified needs, resistance tends to be low since there is an identification that *something* must change, that there is a need for things to improve. Next, prioritize the needs. Once you have set priorities, you’re ready to begin searching for the research-validated potential solutions to help meet your students’ needs.

Being the change can be difficult, especially for teachers new to the profession or even new to a school. Change requires courage: the courage to be different in a profession that often thrives on uniformity. It requires the courage to stand out despite the staffroom politics and perceived hierarchy that can bring pressure, challenge, or even ridicule. When faced with a choice between protecting ourselves from ridicule or doing what’s right for our students, we have to choose our students. The desire to help students is why we chose our profession. It’s why we do what we do. Teaching is a way of life, a calling of higher purpose rather than simply a way to earn money to pay the bills. That calling compels us to do whatever it
takes to help students achieve their best possible results. Parents entrust us with their children and expect us to educate them to the highest possible quality. Staying current is not a matter of choice, but a matter of professional responsibility.

## Tips for Communicating with Parents

- Be up front with parents and students in communicating that you are a learner, too, and that if you learn about something that, you think, will create a more effective teaching and learning environment, then you will implement it, even in the middle of the year.

- Not every change you implement needs to be communicated in a formal manner. Through the various means of electronic communication, it is easier than ever to communicate with parents about what is happening in your class.

- If what you are changing is significant and represents a major shift in practice, then communicating in a more formal manner is a good idea. You might send a letter home or host a parent meeting.

- Whenever you change anything within your current practice, communicate with parents and students in a timely manner:
  - Explain what is changing so it’s clear what will remain the same and what will be different.
  - Explain why something is changing—why will this change create a more effective learning environment?
  - Explain what will be different after the change. How will this change play out and what difference will students experience in the day-to-day classroom routines?
  - Explain how parents can provide support from home. Give parents a chance to be partners within the change process you are bringing about.
Guiding Questions for Individuals or Learning Teams

1. Think of a time when you initiated a successful change (personally or professionally). What elements of that change made it successful?

2. Think of a time when you initiated a change (personally or professionally) that didn’t last. What elements that could have made the change more successful were missing from the process?

3. Why do you think human beings “stoutly defend an established position despite overwhelming evidence against it”?

4. Based upon your experience, what are the key elements to successful, meaningful change within a classroom, school, or school district?

5. As you (individually, as a school, or as a district) embark on or continue your assessment and grading journey, what will you make sure is in place when moving ahead?

Suggested Readings for Further Study

While reading these resources will deepen your understanding of the change process, they will not help you to develop the personal courage necessary to “be the change.”

- *Transforming Barriers to Assessment for Learning: Lessons Learned from Leaders* by Anne Davies, Sandra Herbst, and Beth Parrott Reynolds

- *Leading in a Culture of Change* by Michael Fullan

- *The Challenge of Change: Start School Improvement Now!* edited by Michael Fullan

- *Change Wars edited by Andy* Hargreaves and Michael Fullan