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Introduction

Let's Put Our Differences to Work for Us

“**W**hat’s this book about?” my colleagues asked as I was writing.

“Have you ever put a ton of effort into implementing a new education initiative, only to have the pendulum swing back to the way things were after just a few years—or a few months?” I’d reply. “Or witnessed educators gridlocked over an issue, unable to move forward?”

“Only all the time!” was everyone’s response.

Unleashing the Positive Power of Differences provides tools and processes for avoiding those pendulum swings by listening to the wisdom of multiple points of view—and then strategizing to move forward. We’ll explore *polarity thinking* to clarify the goals, values, and fears of each side in language that compels everyone to collaborate rather than compete.

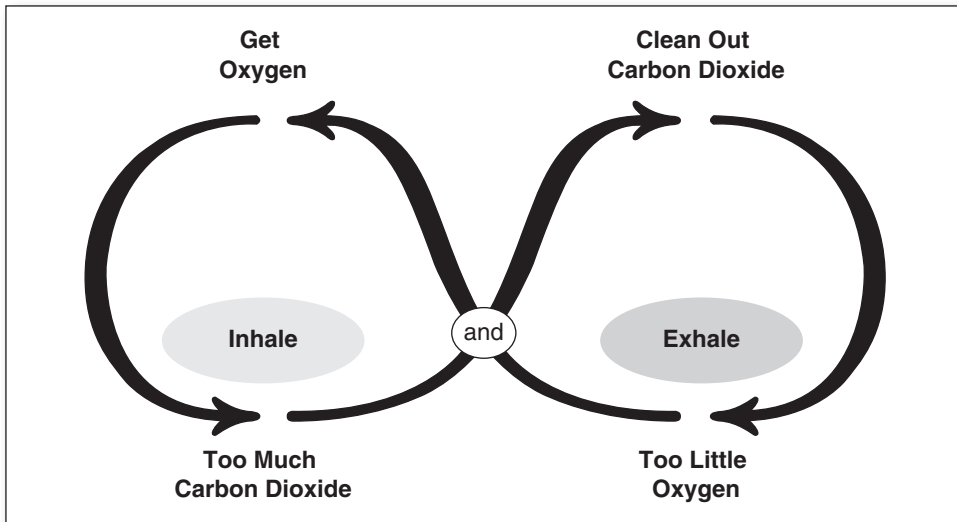
What is polarity thinking? Here’s a quick illustration. Take a deep breath. Inhale slowly. Now exhale.

Which is better, inhaling or exhaling?

It’s a silly question, isn’t it? Our bodies require both. You can “map” this energy system that is reality for the breathing cycle (see Figure 1.1).

Inhaling brings needed oxygen, but breathing in for too long causes a problem: too much carbon dioxide. Exhaling releases that carbon dioxide, but eventually a new problem will arise: too little oxygen. We can’t choose either inhaling or exhaling. We need both. It’s a polarity. Each pole accurately describes something we need, yet neither side is complete without the other. They’re interdependent. In fact, you can’t exhale unless you’ve inhaled, nor inhale unless you’ve exhaled.

Polarities are thus part of our lives literally from our first breath. However, learning to handle them *well* can take years. Take the polarity of

Figure 1.1 The Breathing Cycle

Individual AND Family, for example. My dad insisted we see other points of view with his oft-repeated phrase, “Your rights stop where your brothers’ rights start.” With five children sharing two bedrooms, Dad’s maxim had practical origins. He and Mom wanted peace in the house, good relationships among siblings, and children who solved their own problems.

“If you can’t be civil, take it outside!” We heard that whenever our attempts to sort out whose rights were impinging on whom got too boisterous.

We lived in Minnesota.

It’s cold outside half the year.

We learned to respect each other’s rights AND look out for our own.

Once-and-for-all solutions were rare, though. Yes, we all agreed on *Get Smart* for Sunday night television, but the week The Beatles premiered on *Ed Sullivan*, my eldest brother’s right to fit in with his high school buddies triumphed over Maxwell Smart.

Our ongoing negotiations illustrate the push/pull between Individual AND Family, one of the many variations of the Individual AND Community polarity. If parents concentrate too much on the left, we raise selfish brats who dislike their siblings. If we concentrate too much on the right, we raise children who never quite find their own unique interests and potential. Astute parents help children learn to negotiate using both fairness and empathy and to examine circumstances, such as The Beatles, whose friends are coming over, or who got to watch a favorite show the night before.

Individual AND Community encompasses a multitude of issues: classroom behavior, cell phone etiquette, road rage, peanut allergies, taking (or not taking) a sick day, placing luggage in airplane overhead bins, and more. How well we work with this one polarity often affects whether others see us as kind, rude, effective, delinquent, and so on.

Life is full of universal polarities:

Continuity AND Change

Individual AND Team

Top-Down AND Participatory Leadership

You could easily add a dozen to this list, right? And you could quickly think of an example for each where one side “won” and jettisoned just about everything the other side valued. Problem solved!—until the downside of their own position surfaced, for which the solution was the other side. Thus, the pendulum swings back and forth because each solution is incomplete—just as inhaling, great as it is, is incomplete without exhaling. Things spiral down. No one wins.

The question isn’t, “Have you dealt with polarities?” They permeate our lives. The question is, “*How well are you leveraging the value of each pole?*”

On many fronts in education right now, the answer is, “Not so well.”

Think about the contentious debates, policy conundrums, and reversals in educational practices, whether you’re looking at a school, a district, a state, or the nation. Reformers announce, “This is the problem. We have the solution.” The solution gets implemented. And we end up with a *different* set of problems.

Education “reform” parallels the results my parents would have gotten if they’d solved squabbles with, “Stay away from your siblings.” Maybe we’d have spent less time negotiating our differences, but we’d have missed the upsides of learning to work things out and building the relationships we still have today.

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (*Columbia World of Quotations*, 2013). Shouldn’t adult educators be modeling this ability and then passing it on to students? We can, if we stop using right/wrong and either/or thinking and instead learn to listen to the reasoning of those with whom we disagree, validate their needs and fears, and vow to work together, no matter how difficult it is.

In short, this book is about reframing conversations about many educational issues as polarities. When we choose to see two points of view, we expand our own knowledge of an issue, we better understand how

someone else can hold a different opinion, and we find far more common ground and ways to work together than we suspected were possible. We can even use these tools to help our students think at higher levels.

None of this is easy, but unless we learn to listen to the values and fears of those who disagree with us, we'll continue to come up with half-right, nonsustainable "solutions." My dad would say, "Half a job." Or "There's just no sense in it." Or both.

Either way, Dad would be right. We *need* new tools, or we'll continue to swing from one reform to another. Join me in exploring how thinking in terms of polarities can help us stop wasting energy on debates, find common ground, and together, move forward. After all, we *are* all on the same side, that of the children, aren't we?

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Part I of *Unleashing the Positive Power of Differences* introduces the process of mapping polarities through a dilemma just about all educators have faced: helping students become responsible *and* providing support to ensure students succeed.

Then, decide what you need most right now.

If you're interested in exploring how polarity thinking could influence some of the bigger issues facing education today, continue with **Part II**.

If, after reading Chapter 1, you want to start using polarity thinking tools right away, turn to **Part III**.

Part II explores four major education issues that are being approached as problems to solve when in fact polarities are involved.

Chapter 3 explores *why* we provide education, through the polarity of Academic Success AND Whole Child Success

Chapter 4 looks at *who* should teach, through the lens of teacher effectiveness through Evaluation AND Professional Development

Chapter 5 examines *how* we teach with an in-depth look at the "math wars" and the polarity of Mastery of Knowledge AND Mastery of Problem Solving

Chapter 6 focuses on *what* we teach and the polarity of Standardization AND Customization

Part III provides the practical tools you need to start embedding polarity thinking in your team or organization's short-term and long-term approach

to many issues. While you can probe the depths of polarity thinking for years, you can also make use of the tools immediately.

Chapter 7 provides a script, slides, and examples for introducing polarity thinking to a team.

Chapter 8 provides activities to help your team apply the tools to a relevant dilemma, using the example of Homogeneous Grouping AND Heterogeneous Grouping.

Chapter 9 provides tools for introducing and gaining acceptance for initiatives and strategies that involve polarities, using the example of Teaching Reading Skills and Strategies AND Student Choice in Reading.

Chapter 10 presents common polarities in education and tools for determining the ones on which your team might focus.

Chapter 11 provides ideas for introducing polarity thinking to students, from discussing classroom norms to lesson ideas that align with the Common Core State Standards.

Finally, **Part IV** takes a hard look at our hardwiring to better understand why great educators can hold opposing points of view. Chapter 12 explores how the personality theory of Carl Jung and neuroscience can inform our understanding of how we teach and learn. You can use polarity thinking without using personality type theory. However, time and again, I've successfully used this rich framework to help educators understand how and why they developed their beliefs about education and why those beliefs may not serve all teachers or all students well.

However you choose to journey through these pages, may the tools of polarity thinking give you new ideas for bridging what can seem like insurmountable differences. As a participant in one of my workshops put it,

I wish I had this model when I was a school administrator and was dealing with changes across the system (teachers, students, counselors, other administrators). Life would have been so much easier for me.

May polarity thinking enhance your work to improve the education of our children.