Teacher Activism: 
Mobilising the Profession

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I begin this paper where I left off in my recent book *The Activist Teaching Profession* (Sachs 2003) with a call to action for the teaching profession. I am aware that the word activism and activist have a checkered history and in some peoples’ minds these words evoke images of chaotic demonstrations and rabblerousing. My use of the words is not a naïve claiming of the turf of dissent, instead I come to the project with a new and strategic energy. My final words were:

An activist teaching profession is an educated and politically astute one. The will to achieve this is lying dormant in many of us, and now is the time to work towards its development and realization in systematic and collective ways. Teachers in individual schools can work at the school level, regionally, or as some of the examples presented here, at the national level to achieve socially responsible goals. Teacher educators, bureaucrats, unionists and others interested in education also need to join together in order to make public and to celebrate the achievements of teachers. They also need strategies to inform those in positions of power and influence of the importance and necessity of a strong teaching profession. It is this kind of profession that can educate our children to be socially active and responsible citizens. There is no time to lose, we can frame the future agendas for schooling and education, we just need to harness the various intellectual, social and political resources available to us in order to achieve it. (p. 154)

Since writing *The Activist Teaching Profession* I have had time to reflect on the work and conditions of teachers working in a variety of settings. I have also attempted to model some of the strategies I advocated in my own work. I have had various degrees of success in doing this, especially at the whole university level where my current position as Chair of the Academic Board gives me access to Faculties and the governing body through the development and monitoring of policy relating to all academic matters. In this paper I want to extend my previous thinking and sketch out a strategy for the development of an activist teaching profession.

First and foremost, I still hold the strong conviction that the development and mobilization of an activist teaching profession is possible. Indeed, I am more

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convinced of its need, especially as a strategy to re-instate trust in the teaching profession by the community at large and to counter the de-skilling of teachers by governments who want to control teachers and the teaching profession. To this end this paper is an unabashed call to action for teachers and the teaching profession. Like many other professions the teaching profession is seen by some as being in a state of crisis. Poor morale, bad press, problems in recruitment and retention can all be seen as indicators of a profession in trouble. Indeed an unsympathetic press and various dubious representations of teachers in television series as either heroes or morally suspect makes it difficult to give the profession a clean bill of health. These representations give its critics further ammunition to fire another salvo of claims of declining standards of education and a profession that needs tighter regulation and control. While not denying that there may be some truth in these claims I want to argue for a much more optimistic future for the teaching profession, one that is informed by practice, if you will, a counter pessimism strategy, what I refer to as an activist teaching profession.

I endorse the need for governments and communities to provide teachers individually and collectively with resources to ensure quality student learning outcomes. Furthermore, I am equally committed to the view that the activist teaching profession is an idea whose time has come and accordingly strong leadership is required from a variety of quarters. There is evidence that teachers are working with their communities in activist and political ways. There is other evidence indicating that teachers are developing new ways of working with each other and with their communities that moves them beyond what have been orthodox forms of association to more progressives and participatory ones.

My reflections and ruminations have led me to pose the following two questions. First, what are the conditions that are working against the teaching profession at present? Second, how can the teaching profession regain public confidence? In developing a response to these questions I examined some recent literature on social movements and community activism. Accordingly, I have structured the paper into three parts. The first part examines some of the conditions that are shaping teachers’ practice and public discourse; the second presents a platform upon which an activist teaching profession can be built. Finally, I identify some strategies that can be used to mobilise an activist teaching profession.

**Conditions confronting the teaching profession**

Schools reflect issues in the broader society and many of these are shaping the policies and practices that teachers must enact in schools. In both the UK and Australia it is becoming increasingly clear that our governments misled the electorate and community on evidence of weapons of mass destruction that
legitimated the invasion of troops from the US, UK, Australia and Poland into Iraq. Sadly truth has not been the only casualty. In short there has been an erosion of trust in government and government policy. Associated with this is how education policy and practice becomes a site of struggle between various political and social interest groups. The media have become powerful in setting education agendas, with many politicians being more responsive to issues raised by the tabloid press and talk back radio than the more considered advice of education bureaucrats, let alone academics. Thus, the idea of moral panic as a social pressure confronting education must be considered. A potent social cocktail is in place: the erosion of trust, compounded by the power of moral panics, develops a dynamic of risk aversity or even risk anxiety. Under these conditions education debate and practice comes under a state of near paralysis – people are fearful to commit themselves to ideas which might have some risk associated with them.

The erosion of trust

Onora O’Neill (2002) in her recent BBC Reith Lectures titled ‘A Question of Trust’ begins her first lecture with the simple but apposite statement: “Each of us and every profession and every institution needs trust. We need it because we have to be able to rely on others acting as they say they will, and because we need to accept that we will act as we say we will”. Mistrust and suspicion has spread across all areas of life: the recent corporate collapses of Enron and Worldcom among others have given some reason for mistrust of corporate governance. O’Neill (2002) claims that citizens no longer trust governments or politicians, or ministers or police, or the courts, or the prison service. Consumers no longer trust business, especially big business, or their products. None of us trusts banks or insurers, or pension providers. Patients no longer trust doctors, and in particular no longer trust hospitals or hospital consultants. She goes on to add “Loss of trust, is in short, a cliché of our times”.

More recently in an Australian radio broadcast former Liberal Party Senator and former President of the anti Discrimination Board Chris Puplick (2003) indicated his concern that in the public area governments were spinning a line rather than uncovering the truth. He commented:

I think it is tragic that we are now at the stage that we expect our politicians to lie to us, or at least not to tell the whole truth, and when this behaviour is confirmed to us, we accept it, supinely. ‘Ah,’ we say, ‘it was ever thus.’ And we go on about our daily business, unfazed, unsurprised, unaffected and ready to re-elect them. After all, that’s what politicians do, isn’t it.

Both these scenarios speak of what Robert Putnam (2000) refers to as the decline in social capital and civic engagement in the past few decades. Social capital here
consists of the stock of active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviours that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible (Cohen and Prusak, 2001: 4).

The decline in social capital has had an effect on the teaching profession; it has had its reputation tarnished, and some of its trust diminished. In Australia and elsewhere, recent cases of child sexual abuse in government and church schools have provided some basis for this. Child Protection policies developed by education bureaucracies have made the physicality and emotionality of teaching an issue. While teacher unions are quite clear in their instructions to teachers: “DON’T TOUCH” education bureaucracies are revising their policies to enable teachers to touch children when protecting them from danger, to comfort distressed or hurt students and to engage in reasonable contact during classes. Nevertheless, touch and duty of care are not straightforward, nor are they unambiguous, in ways that can be controlled by bureaucratic fiat.

It is not surprising that within such a context there has been the development of a culture of suspicion, where increased regimes of accountability and audit are meant to reduce risk and improve trust. A crisis of trust has been suggested by some of the more tabloid writers, and indeed government responses to child protection have created a moral panic, where teachers are seen as possible perpetrators of harm to children. What these policies fail to do is protect teachers from vexatious students and parents. Indeed, in some instances teachers have become the victims and at risk themselves. My own recent research on the impact of child protection policies on teachers’ practice and professional identity serves to reinforce this view.

Given these conditions it is not surprising that governments and the community continue to place teachers under close scrutiny both at the public and private level. Supposedly poor standards in student achievement have led to a view in the community that teachers are solely responsible for students’ learning and are also responsible for their failure to learn. The development and implementation of standards regimes in the UK, the US and elsewhere can be seen in this light. Governments want control over a compliant teaching profession and see that standards regimes provide the regulatory framework to achieve this end. Unfortunately, they fail to examine the costs of this compliance not only in fiscal terms but also the intellectual resources that are required to implement and monitor it.

These initiatives need to be seen as co-extensive with other contemporary public sector reforms that have led to the development of ‘the audit society’ and ‘audit
cultures’ with their emphasis of regimes of verification (Power 1999, Strathern 2000).

Under the structures of an audit society surveillance and inspection go hand in hand. Regulation, enforcement and sanctions are required to ensure its compliance. Of its professionals it requires self-ordering, not based on individual or moral judgment, but upon meeting externally applied edicts and commands. It requires ‘regulatory mechanisms’ acting as ‘political technologies’ which seek to bring persons, organisations and objectives into alignment (Shore and Wright 2000: 61).

The erosion of trust in education policy and practices can be seen to have been exacerbated by the mobilising capacity of moral panics (Cohen 1972) to build up anxiety in the community about education and schooling. Child protection and concerns about children’s safety and even student learning outcomes have all, in one way or another, created an atmosphere of concern by the general public about the quality and standards of schooling. The media, especially tabloid newspapers and talk back radio have found fertile grounds for the engendering of public concern. Unger (2001:280) referring to the capacity of talkback radio in particular observes: “Talkback radio is a ‘blunt instrument’ capable under some conditions of allowing the voices of ordinary citizens to be amplified and heard”.

The effect is that it is the ‘outrage’ of ordinary people that carries weight in how politicians and bureaucrats respond to anxiety in the public realm about education. Newspaper reports then pick up this current, and with the use of emotive language help to fuel a sense of crisis, especially around issues of child abuse – sexual and emotional. Hunt (1997:646) provides an interesting insight: “moral panic was not only a way of diagnosing the crisis, it also appeared to provide a moral vocabulary to meet it”. Problems with teachers’ public, private and professional behaviour and perceived diminution of standards in students’ achievement provided much fuel for the tabloid press to create a panic about a crisis in education and schooling.

Given this situation then, we need to ask how can we reinstate trust within the beliefs and behaviours of all members of the community? First and foremost we have to reinforce the position that trust is “a quality which demonstrates a confidence in the behaviour of another person, group or institution. It is an expectation that one can rely on that behaviour to be exercised in honest and honourable ways, whether it is the behaviour of a friend or associate, or of a teacher …” (Groundwater Smith and Sachs 2002:342). Importantly, trust demands increased visibility of social relations. Scott (1999) suggests that where the environment has been volatile, hostile and uncertain then trust cannot be immediately and uncompromisingly established. In such circumstances ‘wary trust’ is developed. Perhaps where trust has eroded
completely, wary trust is a starting point for re-engagement and working towards reconciliation.

Recasting teacher professionalism in a more activist form calls for new kinds of social and professional relationships where different parts of the broader educational enterprise work together in strategic ways. Rather than sectional interests working independently and sometimes oppositionally, (for example teachers’ unions and subject associations not agreeing on the content of the curriculum) trust conceptualised towards activist ends requires debating and negotiating a shared set of values, principles and strategies. While on occasion it might be more strategic and in the interests of various sectional groups to act independently and autonomously, the larger political enterprise of defining notions of teacher professionalism and reclaiming moral and intellectual leadership over educational debates are the chief priorities. To this end, I am reclaiming the word activist and renewing its meaning rather than harking back to some earlier political period with its associated agendas and actions.

In activist professionalism trust, obligation and solidarity work together in complementary ways. As David Hargreaves (1994: 424) claims that “Teachers are not merely working more co-operatively; they feel a stronger obligation towards and responsibility for their colleagues”. This type of activity is central for the generation and sustaining of trust. They are the cornerstones of engagement among the various interest groups.

Trust then, has to be built and sustained, it has to be active. It is about what Fox (1974) calls ‘trust relations, which he maintains need to be reciprocated. Put quite simply ‘trust tends to evoke trust, distrust tends to evoke distrust’ (1974: 66). Importantly trust involves the development of relationships among teachers themselves and teachers and their communities. It is not a personal attribute but needs to be seen as a characteristic of systems (Schuller, Baron and Field 2000). The development and sustaining of and activist teaching profession demands that active trust, respect and reciprocity stand at its core. The challenge in becoming an activist professional is that it requires strong commitment of time, energy and intellectual resources to agree on what is at the core of the activism.

Quite simply in order to achieve an activist agenda for the teaching profession trust in people, processes and institutions is essential. Without it, a shared vision and collective action cannot be initiated let alone sustained.
Risk consciousness

The development of risk consciousness across public and private spheres alike can be seen in the light of an erosion of trust. Risk, danger and blame characterise institutional responses to uncertainty and ambiguity. As Caplan (2000:23) observes “one aspect of risk management is that, in its name, control can be asserted by governments and other bodies over populations”. Indeed, as Douglas (1992) has rightly observed the discourse on risk is politicised and the language of risk is reserved as a specialised lexical register for political talk about the undesirable outcomes. Risk is involved for a modern style riposte against abuse of power” (p. 24). By its very nature risk is about power and control – who has the power to make decisions about what constitutes risk and what kind of strategies or regulatory frameworks are to be put in place to ensure compliance. The strong and sustained push for accountability required by governments and various risk management and quality assurance methods developed within various education constituencies to ensure that this is done has to be seen in this light. In practice it ensures the external control of the teaching profession. Regulatory frameworks serve to constrain teachers’ practices and to emphasize a conservative and reactive form of teacher professionalism. It also helps to reinforce and give credence to those who question whether or not teaching is considered to be a profession. Risk and professionalism then are not complementary concepts. Indeed under current conditions the teaching profession, through its actions and the policies it is required to implement and monitor, becomes highly risk averse.

Having presented what I see as some of the conditions that are shaping education policy and practice, I now turn to outline elements of what constitutes an activist teaching profession.

The Activist Teaching Profession

The development and sustaining of an activist teaching profession has a strong foundation on the following elements: social capital, engagement, collective action, transformative politics and strategic positioning. I outline how each of these elements contributes to an activist teaching profession in turn.

Social Capital

The development of an activist teaching profession requires a reinstatement of trust and the restoration of social capital. The latter is significant because social capital acknowledges the value of social networks - that is, who people know and the opportunities that arise from these networks to do things for each other – norms of reciprocity. Social capital works through four interrelated channels: information
flows, norms of reciprocity, collective action and the development of broader identities. To achieve the agenda of an activist teaching profession social capital acts as a glue to cement the movement from an individualistic “I” to the collective “we”. As Putman (2000) asserts, it has value through the benefits that flow from the trust, reciprocity, information and cooperation associated with social networks.

*Information flows* act as another channel for social capital. These information flows have to be clear and accessible, and they have to inform a range of constituencies using a variety of strategies and linguistic registers. They are formal and informal. Through effective information flows the public is better informed public and high quality education is valued and publicly acknowledged.

*Norms of reciprocity* grow out of these shared information flows which are in turn dependent on social networks. These norms of reciprocity can be either particularized or generalized and are enacted through two types of networks: bonding networks for the former and bridging networks for the latter. For an activist teaching profession bonding networks join teachers with each other, while bridging networks operate to bring diverse groups together who have a joint interest and concern with issues relating to education.

An activist teaching profession is dependent on *collective action* and such action is reliant on social networks. These networks are not necessarily static but can form and reform around various issues as they emerge. Collective action is the platform on which an activist teaching profession is enacted and mobilized. Collective action is more that the sum of individual aspirations and agendas. Rather it draws on the skills and experiences of a variety of groups which in turn makes for ‘intelligent’ and strategic decision-making. Collective action should not be confused with group think.

The final channel through which social capital develops and which is developed out of collective action is the movement from individualistic identities to a pluralistic or a ‘we’ mentality. Again social networks provide the structures, processes and relationships for this to occur. Having argued for the importance of social capital and trust in the development of an activist teaching profession let me indicate some of the other properties required for its development, implementation and maintenance.

*Engagement*

Being included in what matters is a requirement for being substantively engaged. Wenger (1999) uses the term mutual engagement, which he argues, “not only involves our competence, but also the competence of others. It draws on what we do and what we know, as well as our ability to connect meaningfully to what we don’t
do and what we don’t know – that is, to the contributions and knowledge of others” (p. 76.)

To be effective engagement requires reciprocal forms of association, which I suggest have three purposes. First, all parties work towards building joint endeavours that are themselves concerned with promoting further collaborative development. In practice the development of collaborative research projects. Through such joint endeavours, all parties begin to understand and extend how each of them works in their various contexts, and they experience opportunities to exchange expertise. Second, by promoting collaborative development, school-based practitioners, academics, bureaucrats and union officials are all given the opportunity to elaborate practical theories. This enables and encourages them to examine the relationship between their espoused theories and their theories-in-use as they define and direct their separate and shared improvement efforts. In so doing, teachers and academics generate and sustain the energy for change within their evolving relationship. They become mutually engaged towards common goals. Finally, such practices enhance professional dialogue, generating analytical insights into and improvements of classroom practices in a variety of settings (Yeatman and Sachs, 1995).

These new kinds of affiliation and collaboration move all parties beyond traditional technical notions of professional development and create spaces for new kinds of conversations to emerge. They provide opportunities for all groups to be engaged in public critical dialogues and debates about the nature of practice, how it can be communicated with others and how it can be continually improved. All parties move from peripheral involvements in the individual and collective projects to full participation. Dialogue is initiated about education in all of its contexts and dimensions, and about how people can learn from the experiences and the collective wisdom of each other. Dialogue becomes an integral part of the strategy for activating a community of activist professionals. It is on-going, and while there are interruptions when the exigencies and pressures of life and work get in the way, the learning emerging from the dialogue can be returned to, reflected upon and provide the basis for new dialogues, positions and strategies.

*Collective action*

Collective action is rooted in the processes and procedures of democratic participation. It is a complex choreography of relationships between individuals and groups and involves navigating the uncertainties of institutional structures, policies and processes. It its most robust forms it breaks down isolation within diverse constituencies. It acts as a strategy to ‘take stock’ of what is happening in communities, schools, and classrooms. People working collaboratively in a shared enterprise of improving the status of teaching and having students benefiting from
this are able to sustain their interest and energy with other group members. They are able to motivate and inspired each other, test ideas, debate strategies and negotiate shared meanings about the various activist projects in which they are involved.

Creating political and institutional spaces in which rigorous public debate can take place is an outcome of collective action. In so doing educating and improving the relationships between diverse stakeholders and interest groups can take place. To bring parents, for example, into the debate on children’s learning, we need to ask them what they want. We may be surprised to find out that they are more interested in promoting the idea of children learning how to learn rather than being interested only in the results of testing as some are leading us to believe.

So that debates are coherent and sustained rather than episodic and factionalised consensus building is necessary. As Forester (1999:83) correctly observes “Political boundaries join as well as separate; public officials, citizens, and experts can argue, listen and learn over the course of many meetings”. Without an understanding of both the potentials and difficulties, consensus may only arise on purely pragmatic and instrumental issues and the larger political project is lost in the process.

Trust, engagement and collaborative action, when combined lead to transformative politics; the next condition necessary in the development of an activist teaching profession.

Transformative Politics

Activist teacher professionalism is essentially about a politics of transformation. Its spheres of interest are concerned with changing people’s beliefs, perspectives and opinions about the importance of teaching, the social location of teachers and the role of competent and intelligent teachers in various education institutions. A politics of transformation is not self interested; its concern is with wider issues of equity and social justice. Its focus is on the long rather than the short term, even though short-term gains are important in sustaining the energy and interest of members participating. The politics of transformation are rooted in everyday life and this is its strength. Cunningham et al (1988) suggests that a politics of transformation challenge not only dominant interests but the beliefs and practices that sustain power in everyday life: a politics that could thereby “reflect and validate our role as agents of change rather than as simple victims in making the history” (cited in Caroll 1997: 7).

A politics of transformation requires various strategies to engage with and change taken for granted assumptions about the role of education in society and the place of teachers within current and future education policy and practices. It requires new
forms of collective identity, which not only transform people’s self understandings but create cultural codes that contest the legitimacy of the dominant discourses circulating in society about education and teachers.

A politics of transformation is concerned with engaging with the discursive practices that construct new political subjects and create new political spaces in which to act and as such requires both individual and collective participation. It is through such processes that may ultimately lead people to rethink what they mean by community or power, or reason or democracy (Magnusson and Walker, 1988). Indeed it is the responsibility of individuals and groups in their ‘disruptive’ work to mount a symbolic challenge to the dominant codes, norms, identities that act to regulate social life. This disruptive work has two main aspects. “The first is the production of alternative frameworks of knowledge and meaning in the process of collective action. The second is the experimentation of new ways of living and new forms of relationships in daily practice. (Masson 1997: 60) In practice this means that the emphasis is on the capacity of a new form of teacher professionalism to engage with and to consequently reshape the discursive terrain of politics in distinctive and different ways. It means not only capturing the policy debates, it requires capturing the language that it used to talk about education in political, scholarly and public discourses. For teachers and people in the broader society it requires a rethinking of the form, content and assumptions underpinning teacher professionalism and professional identity. (see Sachs 2003)

What then are the desired outcomes for a politics of transformation? First and foremost it means that there is a change of existing structures and processes around which debates about teacher professionalism are circulated. It means that the structures that are in place to currently curtail teacher professional autonomy such as standards boards, and accreditation instrumentalities are taken away from governments and given to teacher professional associations. Second, it demands that resources are made available so that this may be achieved. Third, it requires high levels of risk and trust on the part of all people associated with the endeavour. Finally, it calls for the establishment of what might be called mobilising structures such as networks to sustain the commitment and energy of members because it is the shared interests of members that underlie the process of mobilization as well its sustainment.

A politics of transformation is enacted through strategic positioning. It necessitates a profession in which being responsive and proactive are ‘part of the way we do things’. In practice it demands strategic positioning, the next element of an activist teaching profession.
Strategic Positioning

Strategic positioning is quite simple - it means being able to identify issues and opportunities in advance and being able to communicate to various stakeholders and opinion makers the contribution an activist teaching profession can make to the common good. It can be a collective or an individual response but to be successful timing is important. Being able to read the politics of a situation, knowing when to make a comment or an intervention can make the difference between having an idea accepted or rejected. The ability to read the strategic possibility of various situations is also important in order to take advantage of opportunities as they arise. This does not mean being blatantly opportunistic, but rather being able to identify possible benefits and positive outcomes when required.

One strategy to do this is through networks and networking. These networks create information flows, both inward and outward. They can be formal or informal. These information flows provide pathways to find out what the major political agendas and priorities are within various organisations. They also provide the means to establish personal contact with people who have influence and power. In short it connects the profession with decision-makers and power brokers.

Members of an activist teaching profession must know the environment in which they want to have influence – this could be bureaucracies, government, communities or professional associations. It means that members have to know how to listen, they must be well briefed and have a critical sense of what others may think and how they will respond to ideas and initiatives that are put to them. In short strategic positioning requires that members of the teaching profession are strategic about the issue, its placement and have strategies in place to ensure the outcome that they want. Strategic positioning is future oriented and it anticipates a desired future rather than always being on the back foot and reacting to a contested present.

Having indicated the nature and platform upon which an activist teaching profession can develop I now turn my attention to indicating how it might be mobilized.

Mobilising the Activist Teaching Profession

Richard Sennett (1999:148) makes the important observation that “If change occurs it happens on the ground, between persons speaking out of inner need rather than mass uprisings”. This too can be said for an activist teaching profession. This inner need may be expressed at the local community level or more broadly with a profession based movement. How then is it possible to mobilize the community in support of an activist teaching profession? Where do we start and who do we involve?
Shaw (2001:2) provides us with a starting point making the claim that “Central to all social change activism is the need to engage in proactive strategic and tactical planning. Activists must develop an agenda and then focus their resources on realizing it.” He goes on to add “Unfortunately, many activists have failed to establish and implement their own agendas and instead have focussed on issues framed by opponents” (p. 2). Certainly, teacher organizations and unions have consistently been left responding to the demands and agendas of government. A different dynamic would occur if the teaching profession took the opportunity to inform and lead debate.

Strategies and Tactics

I indicated at the beginning the word activist carries with it some negative baggage and stereotypes. We need to recast activism into positive and community building discourses, in other words, we have to wrestle it back from an old left framework. Having a clear set of strategies and tactics is an important beginning point in mobilizing an activist teaching profession. Often when we are talking about strategies we are actually devising tactics. Following Bobo, Kendall and Max (2001:30):

> We can use the media, the courts, the electoral system, or public education as specific ways to apply pressure to someone, but a strategy is the design of the campaign combined with power relationships. Tactics are the individual steps in carrying out a strategy.

Getting the strategy right is the beginning point. To do this choosing an issue is paramount. Bobo et al (2001:35) identify three major criteria for choosing an issue? Do they:

1. Win real improvements in people’s lives?
2. Give people a sense of their own power?
3. Alter the relations of power?

For an activist teaching profession consideration needs to be given to what might the issue be and how to go about realizing it? Obviously the beginning point is to get a group of like minded people together whose common goal is to improve the quality of education and student learning outcomes. This could be said to be a ‘big picture’ group. Sectional interests are put aside. This phase involves the development of long term, intermediate and short term goals.

Long term goals are aspirational and are the ones that provide the broader vision. They are the ones that you eventually hope to win. For our purposes here these would be the establishment of an activist teaching profession. Here various groups
will come together to work towards improving the provision of education across the board.

*Intermediate goals* are those that participants want to win as part of the steps to achieve the long term goals. This could be the bringing together of various constituencies to identify issues, targets and propose tactics.

*Short term goals* are steps towards intermediate goals. Depending on the magnitude of the issue, short term issue goals are not necessarily required. After these goals have been identified then they must be prioritised.

Having identified the strategies, tactics must be identified and then implemented. A rule of thumb regarding tactics is that every action must have a dimension of fun/excitement and it must demonstrate real power. Bobo et al (2001) argue that tactics for actions fall into three categories:

- Tactics aimed at the target that show your power
- Tactics aimed at raising the morale of your members
- Tactics aimed at getting media coverage

*Tactics aimed at the target that show your power* may be in terms of sheer numbers as represented by large petitions, statements of support from influential members of the community or a large turn out at demonstrations. The anti-war demonstrations earlier this year, while not preventing the Australian or UK government from committing troops to Iraq certainly demonstrated the strong sentiments of the community to their governments’ decisions. Regrettably these demonstrations of community feeling did not happen at a time that was near to elections – and governments disregarded public opinion.

*Tactics aimed at raising the morale of your members* often help to take some of the edge out of tense situations. Again using the example of public mobilization against the Iraq war, seeing street theatre in the form of Uncle Sam playing the puppeteer to the Prime minister helped to neutralise frustration of large groups of people whose ability to march through the streets had been stalled. Importantly, tactics like these should not be confused with real power.

*Tactics aimed at getting media coverage* are not about media coverage alone but to achieve a clear and identifiable result. The media coverage of the anti war movement not only served to give a message to government it also helps to act as a barometer of public feeling on the issue. That over 500,000 people of all ages, classes, ethnicity and religion took to the streets of central Sydney in an orderly and peaceful fashion did make for good media coverage but it also gave people the opportunity to express
their opposition to government policy. Sadly, despite this expression of public opposition it had little effect on the government.

The building of an activist teaching profession is not only about developing strategies and tactics, it is also about building relationships through partnerships, coalitions and alliances. Partnerships between various constituencies are usually based on mutual self interest. For an activist teaching profession this involves partnerships between teacher unions, teacher professional associations, teachers, students, parents and friends committees and communities. All of these groups serve to benefit from the partnership. However, for most benefit to be derived decisions have to be made about what kind of partnership is most appropriate: coalitions, an organisation of organisations, peak bodies, a loose confederation etc.

Coalitions and alliances then are about building power to achieve a social or political end. A coalition is an organization or organizations working together for a common goal. (Bobo et al 2001) They come is a variety of forms – permanent or temporary, single or multi-issue, geographically defined, limited to certain constituencies. Their prime goal is to bring together diverse groups of people with a common goal of initiating change. Fundamental to their success is the choice of unifying and shared issues while at the same time being willing to understand and respect self interest of the various parties. Indeed successful coalitions require competent stewardship and sensitive leadership. The National Schools Network in Australia, The Innovative Links between Schools and Universities Project and The Coalition of Essential Schools in the US are all examples of successful coalitions of education stakeholders working to reform schools and improve educational provision.

Establishing relationships is about developing mutual respect and trust. Indeed, we keep returning to the significance of trust in the creation and development of an activist teaching profession. Building relationships calls for time and effective communication. Time is required to establish common goals, expectations and strategies – as well as a common language. Communication is the process by which people come to identify, debate and resolve common issues. The messages which capture the intent of the activist teaching profession must be clear and concise and connect with the interests and emotions of the partnerships, coalitions and alliances that have been established to achieve various activist ends. It also helps to circulate among constituencies the successes and failures, from which lessons can be learnt. Having a high profile person who acts to champion the cause is also helpful as this ‘respectable or responsible’ person comes to symbolise and provide legitimacy to the overall movement.

It has not been my intention in this paper to proselytise or even develop self help program for the teaching profession. However, it has been my aim to express my
passion for the need for the teaching profession to mobilise along activist lines to regain control and to establish its power is setting education agendas that are for the benefit of everyone in the community.

**Conclusion**

This paper has been written in support of the teaching profession. Its intention is not to romanticise teachers or the teaching profession, but rather to mobilise teachers and others interested in the teaching profession to be more active, strategic and political. There is no simple formula for achieving progressive social change. Tactics that have regularly been proven successful in a particular context are not guaranteed to work in other circumstances; even objectively foolish strategies have achieved their desired ends. Tactical activists must therefore be open to creativity, innovation and proactive, controversial or even dubious ends. Remaining silent for fear of being laughed at or criticized is not the path to progressive change. (Shaw 2001:274)

Amid the confusion and uncertainty of globalisation and contemporary world politics, I have suggested that now is an opportune time for the teaching profession to take charge of debates around teaching, schools and education. The strategy of an activist teaching profession is a responsible and responsive way for various interested groups to work collectively and collaboratively towards greater recognition of the important social, cultural and political work that those working in education undertake. Through the structures, processes and relationships central to an activist teaching profession, greater public support can be garnered to improve the conditions under which teachers work and at the same time improve their representations in various media. If proceed proactively and consciously analyse “what tactics may best advance our goals, social change activists can inspire, and ultimately move public sentiment in a progressive direction” (Shaw (2001:275) then the possibility of an activist teaching profession is not the imaginings of an armchair activist or a utopian idealist but rather it is socially responsible strategy for improving education provision across the board. Hope is not enough – mobilizing the teaching profession, the media and various community groups in the interests of intelligent education policy and practice is the priority!
References


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