

# Navigating a Gale: Sustaining Curriculum-Instruction-Assessment Innovation in an Urban High School for Immigrants

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*Initiating an innovation in curriculum, instruction and assessment is a difficult, complex task under any circumstances (Gross 1998). Sustaining such an effort, especially in an urban setting is even more challenging and doing so under unusually turbulent conditions seems to be a proposition that few schools are up to.*

*This research, conducted at an innovative urban high school for non-English speaking immigrants sought answers to these questions: What learning strategy was established for the school and how has it evolved amidst the changing conditions facing the school? What kind of community was established for this school given its special mission and how has it developed? How has leadership at the school been exercised to insure sustained innovation? Findings included evidence of three core themes: shared values for learning, democratic organization, and strategic moves. Three theoretical frameworks were applied to help gauge the degree of challenge facing the school as well as possible stabilizing forces that may be at work.*

## Introduction

Initiating an innovation in curriculum, instruction and assessment is a difficult, complex task under any circumstances (Gross 1998). Sustaining such an effort, especially in an unusually turbulent urban setting, is even more challenging. That is why the situation at Universal High School so intriguing. Here is a school that served over four hundred newly arrived non-English speaking students from all parts of Megaburg. For over fifteen years the school has developed and refined its curriculum, instruction and assessment to meet the particular needs of young people. Further, the school has over a 90% graduation rate and an equally high rate of college acceptance. Finally, the school has become one of the first in Megaburg to take on charter status, has survived a funding controversy with the city and had done battle with a state department of education over the issue of state imposed high stakes tests. Despite all of this, conditions at Universal are said to be calm with every expectation of carrying on in the business of reform. The school has continued to thrive under such circumstances. Specifically, this research seeks to better understand how an urban high school for non-English speaking immigrant students can succeed while handling serious challenges from the city and state. Perhaps better stated, what administrative and organizational skills and practices were used to navigate such a gale?

## Setting and Background

**School history.** Universal was founded in 1985 as a joint venture including the Megaburg City Board of Education and the City Board of Higher Education and is housed on the ground floor of the Polk Community College in Megaburg. The facilities are modern including basketball courts, a swimming pool, computer labs and theaters. Students at the school mix freely with community college students and are able to take college level courses. From 1985 to 1999 Universal operated under the auspices of the Megaburg Board of Education. In 1999 it became one of the first charter schools in the city. The school has just proposed (May 2001) plans to drop its charter status and return to the Board of Education as a single district school with similar autonomy and more assured funding.

## Students

Universal High School is open to "all recently arrived limited English proficient students who reside in the City and who will be entering 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade in the following school year." Priority is given to students who have been in the US fewer than four years and "scored at or below the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile on the English test of the Language Assessment Battery." About 435 students attend the school in grades 9-12 and they represented fifty-two countries including Albania, Thailand and El Salvador. The 39 languages they

speak includes Farsi, Punjabi and Fukienese, Spanish, Arabic and Mandarin. Students come from all economic sections of Megaburg. The school enjoys a favorable faculty to student ratio (1:10). Rates for course passing, retention, attendance, graduation and college acceptance are all above 90%. College acceptances for the graduating class of 2000 included private schools such as Bard, New York University, and Syracuse; state university campuses as well as colleges in the Megaburg city system and community colleges.

Moving among students between and during class sessions gives one a strong feeling of being in a true global village. While the population is homogeneous in age and most dress in the style of American teenagers, the range of languages leaves a clear first impression. But soon after that, there is a sense that students mix freely, at times with friends from their home country, equally likely, with students from very different backgrounds and experiences. The atmosphere is busy but not harried, focused and friendly. Relations between the faculty and students are friendly but also focused on work. Students appear to be known by faculty and staff. I observed many informal, often humorous side conversations between faculty and students.

#### **Albert: The Leader of Universal High School**

While my observations and the data about school demographics provide a framework for this study, this school's story is very much intertwined with the life of its founding principal. Albert was the child of immigrants who came to the US after World War II. Although he did not like school very much, his leadership abilities were apparent quite early when, as a teenager he organized a group that founded a kibbutz in Israel. When he became an ESL teacher he again went his own way. In his words he "pretty much isolated" himself, staying in his own classroom even at lunch and developed an approach to educating non-English speaking students. This included going into the program office and re-arranging his classes in a way that seemed, "more appropriate." He went on to comment, "I didn't have the authority to do that, I just did it... And after a while people got accustomed to seeing me do that, so they never questioned what I was doing there and why I was doing it. Within the context of the program I had a lot of autonomy which had been a constant throughout my career."

Next, Albert became a staff development specialist. "What I loved about that job was the opportunity to set up my own schedule, to decide which high schools to visit when and what the agenda was. ... It was all of the fun part of being able to go to new places every day and figure out ways to support people in their work ... and the focus really was on how to help teachers be better. Great job!"

Yet, Albert was then promoted to a leadership position where he first heard about plans for alternative schools in the city. A proposal he reviewed for an alternative high school for immigrant students did not impress him with specifics, but the concept intrigued him. In 1985 Albert

accepted the challenge to start a brand new school.<sup>1</sup> Although it was a very serious undertaking, he felt that he had the experience and the perspective to found just such an institution. "What I realized right off the bat, I came into this having visited 90 to 100 existing high schools in the previous 6 years. I had a clear sense of what was going on. In most of them people were struggling to perpetuate organizations that didn't meet their needs or anyone else's. I was going to go through the trouble of opening a new school. If you're going to invest that kind of time and energy why recreate what exists everywhere else? It doesn't make any sense. I used it as an opportunity to think more deeply than I ever had before to think about what kids needed and how schools could be structured to meet those needs. To figure out a way to keep learning from that experience and feed that learning back into the school. Not just for me but for all of the people working there."

#### **Sustaining Innovation in the context of relevant literature**

The question of sustaining innovation in schools has been a constant topic for researchers and practitioners for over sixty years (Nunnery 1998). Literature on a question so long considered naturally takes many perspectives. For the purposes of this study, a context was established through these three lines of inquiry: leadership patterns related to sustaining innovation, the establishment of school communities to support innovation and the presence of system-wide issues that were associated with the innovative practices.

#### **Leadership issues related to sustaining innovation**

Since Universal high spent most of its existence as a public school, its principal falls under the realm of a public service leader. The question has been debated, to what extent might this class of leader engage in innovation before being labeled a loose cannon? Borins (2000) took on this charge and established an argument that there is a considerable range of innovative activities open to leaders in the public sector which are legitimate and that do not create dangers to larger organizational concerns. In fact, he concludes that these leaders can often create reforms that benefit their public clientele.

The qualities of innovative school leaders have also been described in the literature. Some of these include being centered on students and their families, being highly ambitious but for the school rather than for themselves and being trusting but not naïve about political conditions (Gross 1998).

Principals have been urged to engage the faculty more effectively (Shantz and Prieur 1996) and help students to identify with the school, thereby avoiding disaffection and possibly dropping out (Leithwood and Jantzi 1999). Recent perspectives ask us to reconsider leadership itself by transcending the individual and to look instead to the

activities of the school as a unit (Spillane, Halverson and Diamond 2001). Yet in an innovative school whose student body consists of newly arrived immigrants from over fifty countries, the question of cultural views on leadership is also relevant. We are urged to remember that, "What is seen as 'appropriate school leadership,' and management in a particular society is at least partly a function of accepted ideas and practices of curriculum, teaching and learning." (Walker and Dimmock 2000). Thus, leading a school such as Universal in a sustainable and innovative way likely means being engaged with the cultural orientations of students and those faculty who were raised in quite different types of schools with more traditional leadership patterns.

#### **Establishing a community as an element in sustaining innovation**

Choices exist in the literature over the extent to which schools elect to create coherent communities at all. Using Tonnies (1887) alternatives of *gemeinschaft* (community) versus *gesellschaft* (society), Sergioanni (1996) argues that schools need to bridge the communal values of the home and the more competitive values of the larger society, thereby favoring the *gemeinschaft* option. Viewing the schools as complex organizations, this position has been critiqued more recently (Enomoto 1997) to favor seeing, "multiple overlapping and nested cultures." This sense of a community with many culturally nuanced interconnections seems particularly relevant to the Universal case. Guiding the establishment of an innovative school trying to meet the complex needs of this population, one might expect sensitivity stemming from a non-bureaucratic ethical view such as the ethic of care (Noddings 1992) and a particular focus on the needs of this group as opposed to a generic understanding of students as an abstraction (Reyes, Scribner and Scribner 1999).

Relationships among students and the curriculum, instruction and assessment practices of the school also tell a great deal about the kind of community that exists. Glickman (1998) urged schools to "unpack the term democracy and actually see what it looks like in operational terms."

Other community values to consider have to do with the development of the faculty as a sustaining force in innovative settings. The principal's role in such a situation has been described, especially through careful hiring, listening, and flexibility (Scribner et al 1999) But no matter how finely crafted, how responsive and how democratic the school's internal community might be, all schools exist in a wider environment. Innovative urban schools live in a richly complex world filled with competing interests as well as opportunities.

#### **System wide issues facing the desire to sustain innovation and reform**

When considering innovation and its chances for long

term survival, a question of origin arises. Since schools are not isolates, which is more likely to last, locally generated reforms or national models adapted to local sites? While a large scale review of educational innovations over the past sixty years shows that the latter are more likely to thrive over time (Nunnery 1998) exceptions clearly exist. A recent study (Gross 2001) depicted the ill fate of one national model used in an urban setting that had worked successfully but which fell upon hard times. Multiple causes were found for this failure including rapid growth, the loss of a supportive district administrator and the end of a foundation's support cycle. The lack of connections between the innovative school and district administration can result in negative consequences (McCormack 1996) with special attention being paid to the impact of external accountability systems and their potential for undermining organizational capacity (Newmann et al. 1997). Yet these challenges need not be insurmountable. Paying attention to a coherent policy from the state to local levels, building capacity and commitment to changed practice has been shown to be an effective approach in sustaining innovation (Chrispeels 1997)

The literature, described above, is highly useful in showing examples of innovative leadership, supportive school communities and possible strategies for positioning innovative schools so that they might respond to external pressures. However, serious questions remain when considering a school such as the Universal High School and its apparent ability to navigate over time.

#### **The research question:**

The overarching research question is: How can an innovative urban high school for non-English speaking immigrants handle the challenges of meeting students' needs as well as meeting the city and state standards? Specifically, this question is divided into three parts:

1. What learning strategy (instructional approaches, curriculum focus and assessment techniques) was established for the school and how has it evolved amidst the changing conditions facing the school?
2. What kind of community was established for this school given its special mission and how has it developed?
3. How has leadership at the school been exercised to insure sustained innovation?

First I will describe the school's setting, history, student body and its founder and leader. Next, findings will answer the research questions. Third, I will use three theoretical frameworks to explore the challenges facing Universal High as well as possible reasons for the stability of the school.

#### **Method and data sources**

In order to approach the research questions, I have used the following qualitative design: As background I have engaged in hundreds of conversations with a colleague who

has taught at Universal High School for over ten years. These conversations gave me an early sense of the mission of the school as well as several examples of the school's progress through such changes as moving from the Board of Education to charter status. For hours during my visits to his school and afterward, he was extremely helpful in giving me feedback to my early observations.

Two visits were made to the school semi-structured interviews were conducted with a teachers and all administrators. Four classes were observed and short discussions were conducted with students in and out of classrooms. Students' interactions in the halls were observed between classes and in administrative offices. Observations also included a full faculty meeting where the topic was refining the hiring process so that teacher team authority and over all school needs could be in better balance. An informational session for a group that was planning to open an alternative school elsewhere in the city was observed. I was also able to attend a special presentation of student projects. Beyond interviews, observations and conversations, I read a great deal of written material about the school including research reports from previous studies. Other artifacts include written material from websites and newspaper accounts depicting key events in the life of this most unusual school.

First, interview tapes were transcribed and attempts were made to identify possible themes. I came closer to themes that I had some degree of faith in when I reviewed the transcripts several times and compared what I thought was emerging as patterns with the other sources of data. I also compared ideas, descriptions and views among like kinds of data by comparing the ideas found in different texts, or interviews from different individuals.

Next, early coding of the data by what I thought were the three most useful themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Reviewing interview data and coding it as appropriate has helped me identify new sub-themes. After this I started the process of looking for sub-themes for each section. This allowed for the possibility of new, large themes as the coding process went on. This did happen as a fourth general theme became evident. In this way I was able to make sure that there was coherence and good fit among the themes (Glesne and Peshkin 1992).

During this phase of the process, the formation of larger ideas were allowed to come to the surface. Some of these helped in the analysis of the findings while others led to ideas for follow-up studies.

Finally, findings were integrated from relevant literature to expand the context of the ideas gained from the field the draft of this manuscript was reviewed by one person from the school. In this way, I have tried to live with the experience four times. First, by conducting the interviews, observing and collecting artifacts. Second, by listening to the tapes for transcription. Third, by attempting to code, and modify the process. Fourth by arranging the ideas of the interviews in a order that allowed ideas to merge and emerge.

## Findings

Data from interviews, observations and school artifacts revealed three core themes which are central to understanding the course of events at Universal High School over the past sixteen years. These are: (1) shared values for learning, (2) democratic organization and (3) strategic moves by the principal. The three themes were powerful ideas for teachers and administrators as separate concepts and even more significant in combination as they buttressed one another in the life of the school.

### Shared values for learning

Shared values for learning flowed from underlying values about the purpose of the school and its mission. These were translated into specific practices in instruction, assessment and curriculum topics. Finally, the faculty and administration spoke in great detail of the ways that the state testing program stood as a threat to these values.

It became evident that Universal high's mission rested upon a very clear idea of what the future should be for the immigrant students they served. Albert told a story that captured that spirit:

I think they (social elites) have a very different vision of the kind of world that they're going to live in and the kind people who are going to occupy positions of power. And it doesn't by and large include the students at this school. So our goal for these kids is very different. I'll give you a concrete example. Some years ago the president of Megaburg Telephone, later went on to become politically active and the chair of the state university. He visited the school... met with the kids and asked 'how many of you want to be telephone operators?' Of course, not one of them raised their hands. Who in their right mind aspires to become a telephone operator? Not that it's not honorable work but that's not what people aspire to. Of course he walked into the class, he saw a bunch of immigrants and he figured their highest aspirations in his company was that they could become telephone operators. Essentially what we're doing challenges everything that goes into that perception. ....

Thus, for the school's founder, and for the faculty, the job of educating these students meant to prepare them to challenge prevailing estimates of their limited futures.

Flowing from the values of open horizons for their student, other ideals that directly impact the instructional program start to be part of a logical progression. Students not only counted because their futures were at stake. They mattered in the present just as much. Their need to be understood, valued and to be part of a healthy community were acted upon. One faculty member, herself a recent immigrant told me: "I think that what is important is a

community sense, a family sense because teachers do care about the students. As a team we do work collaboratively together." The "community sense makes the school unique," thus, placing the school closer to *gemeinschaft* (community) (Sergiovanni 1996). There was also evidence of the school being organized in complex yet inclusive ways that allowed for "multiple, overlapping and nested cultures" (Entomoto 1997 p 530). Being a school for immigrants "makes this school very unique because our students feel better here and they can relate to each other better." This kind of internalized sense of belongingness has been associated with valuing school relevant goals ( Finn 1989). " They work in groups a lot and making lots of public presentations. Speaking in English, sharing what they learn in English."

Seeing these learners as an asset was also reflected in crafting the learning program at the school. Albert pointed out the way this group tested one's sense of effectiveness:

I'll tell you the important thing. It actually caused me to come to terms with what I believe about how people learn because if the kids speak the same language it's easy to delude yourself that they are getting more out of what you are saying than they actually are. You can't do that in a school where they have no idea what you are talking about.

Translating these concerns for students into teaching strategies, one teacher remarked, —"Are you training kids to work in a factory model, in a factory, or are you training kids to think, analyze, create, go beyond those thinking skills, which is memorizing and regurgitating, and repeating and like that. We're very much skill oriented over content oriented though the content is always out there."

Another explained how this kind of thinking led to curricular choices of depth over breadth. "the small group activity approach, which is probably the most important at least for the language development and the exploring things in depth—you know favoring depth over coverage."

English language instruction is also conducted with a constructivist, hands-on learning approach at Universal high. One teacher emphasized the constant use of English in many contexts with students actively engaged in active learning rather than being passive. "Having kids talking to each other all the time, generating the English with other English language learners, producing the English leads to learning the English. Our teaching methods are essential for English language learning, probably good for native born speakers too, but good for English language learners is the only way that they are going to develop their English. Talking to them in front of the room, they're not going to learn English. They're going to space out, rely on someone else's notes. They'll try to get by, they may be good at school, but they won't know what is going on. When they are working on something with each other they're learning the English as well as the concepts."

My own observations of classes and student presentations was consistent with these descriptions. Students were active in class discussions, were active in English language group work in several curricular areas and

had engaged in many projects. Students were obliged to practice English constantly as well as attend to the content of their other academic subjects.

### The State Tests as Perceived Threats to Values

But the hands-on, student centered, depth-over-breadth quality of instruction at Universal seemed at odds with mandatory state tests, according to many at the school. One of the clearest ways that one can understand Universal High's shared values for learning is when they are contrasted to the inferred values in the state sponsored testing program. Concern over being pressured to move away from depth and interconnectedness was evident.

One teacher shared his concerns about being forced to change his approach as a result of the state testing program. "...If you have the time and a little latitude, you can make the history come alive, you can even go to the college office on it and get some of the great paintings, slides of some of the great paintings, which is what I do, that's what I did this year, and spend three or four days showing Michelangelo's stuff, showing a Primavera, showing....letting the kids know what makes a painting great so when they go to a museum they don't call it a picture, and understanding its perspective and the background and Mona Lisa's more than just a smile. That's what I do now. That's not going to be there next year."

The problem of abandoning depth for breadth in an effort to meet the requirements of the state tests seemed doubly serious for newer, less experienced teachers. A school administrator remarked, "And basically the problem for the most part is the tests end up driving the curriculum, and sometimes you can convince teachers who've been teaching for a long time that you can imbed enough preparation within projects and still find innovative stuff for the kids. What I've seen happen is some of the younger, newer teachers are so upset at the idea that their kids might not do well on the test that they're really reigning back in and doing old fashioned, teacher-centered preparation for the tests kind of activities, that's kind of unfortunate."

Just as teachers and administrators predicted diminished depth due to the state tests, they also worried that the demands of their portfolio system would be sacrificed. One administrator related the case of one girl who did amazingly well with their portfolio and assessment to illustrate the point. "We had a young lady in our early years ... I had the privilege of sitting in on her portfolio. I mean she was exceptional, I'm not going to tell you she was an average student. She was exceptional, absolute genius, and accepted at MIT. In four years, she'd gone from zero English to writing science papers that, I'm not stupid, but I had trouble understanding her science papers. And her level of English was just so extraordinary... She actually developed a computer program that would compare her financial aid packages before she decided to go to MIT. You know, but for her, a test would have been limiting. She might have

scored in the top 5% on a test, but she was a kid who was capable of going beyond that.”

It is important to note that the portfolio system was only one way that the school showed its concern for accountability. Another way the school demonstrated its commitment was in paying attention to aggregate results. “There has to be accountability. But you cannot dot all the i’s and cross all the t’s. Here’s a school where we have over 90% graduation rate where 90% of our kids go on to college etc. And they’re killing us. So have accountability but don’t tell us how to get to that point. How you get to 90% pass rate. If we can do it fine. 90% graduate rate terrific.

To many faculty and administrators at the school there was a serious disconnect between these results and the demands of a standardized testing regimen in general. One specific case, showing a clear lack of fit, was told to me by an administrator.

I’ll give you an example. I have a student who was unable to pass the reading part of the test. She passed the rest of the tests. She failed the test by one question. She enrolled in college and is already in college level English classes. She’s beyond the remedial classes at the university. She’s taking Eng 101 and she’s passing it. She can’t (yet) pass (the high school standardized test) so she can’t get out of high school but she is already succeeding in college. It shows you how crazy (this is). The high school standardized test measures one group of skills which may or may not be important. In her case it was not important because she was succeeding in college. What’s being served by this student (being technically held in high school)? It’s insane. And the fact that by one point she does not graduate, teacher in-put doesn’t count. How she did in her class, how she did in her portfolio is meaningless because she failed that test by one question. That’s just an illustration.

The seriousness of the stated disconnect between the internal and externally applied accountability systems is hard to overstate and was associated with undermining a school’s organizational capacity (Newmann et. al. 1997) thus endangering one of the three factors associated with sustaining reform (Chrispeels 1997).

The core belief in the potential for these students was matched by a concern for their present needs. The school developed a supportive community and the kinds of engaging curriculum, instruction and assessment strategies that could respond effectively. Serious pressures, however, were perceived in the form of mandatory testing and this concern was also a clear value effecting possible future learning.

### Democratic Organization

In addition to shared values for learning, the faculty and administration spoke in detail and with passion about

their system of shared governance. Universal high school has a strong commitment to democratic organization that has evolved over time. Faculty and administrators described the school-wide mechanics in detail as well as relating stories of democratic organization in their own lives. Finally, there was a recognition of the challenges that democratic decision making placed upon the school as well as a willingness to respond to those inherent problems.

One of the clearest examples of democratic organization came with the evolution of faculty teams.

“We changed the school a lot,” an administrator told me. “When I first came we had peer support groups. I met with three other teachers on Wednesday afternoon. Talked about the curriculum, case studies of kids ‘ Do you know this kid?’ It was a place where it was safe to say you had a bad day and to have someone help you figure it out.... At that time we were teaching separate classes.... We gradually started to form interdisciplinary groups. It was kind of experimental at first”.

Currently there are six interdisciplinary teams at Universal referred to as clusters. Each team works on two themes (such as American Dreams and American Realities). Teams connect such disciplines as humanities, math, science, and technology as well as applied learning through relevant internships.

Teachers and administrators also described how a democratic organization works in practice. Tuesday morning team meetings consider curriculum changes, directives from administration, as well as student, parent and faculty complaints. Typically, action plans are devised at the team meeting to respond to these issues. Innovations, such as interdisciplinary teams, are also the result of team empowerment. Teams have a budget and their own account for such expenditures as classroom supplies and field trips. Teams have serious responsibilities including hiring, supervising and instructional planning. “And the way we do that, the fact that there is a group of teachers that are going to work with that teacher basically are the people responsible for interviewing and hiring that person and they have a real vested interest because this is the person that they are going to be working with. And also, they have a vested interest since everybody works so closely together to support that person. And we build a time in the schedule to do that...” To help insure the success of new faculty, the school has a norm of new teachers team teaching with veterans. Each team has a counselor who has a small enough caseload to be able to recognize and respond to problems quickly. Universal faculty members see this part of team life as a key element in the school’s peaceful atmosphere.

Beyond the team level, teachers participate in setting direction for the school. When Universal became a charter school, this meant increased participation by teachers through membership on the Board of Trustees. This group is comprised of administrators, faculty, union leaders, students, parents and a vice president from the community college where the school is housed. Their range of responsibilities includes approving the budget, establishing

policies in areas like curriculum, student recruitment, and school size. Meetings are normally held monthly during the school year. Management of the school is the responsibility of the Steering Committee. Members include the principal, assistant principals for organization and guidance, Board of Trustees chair and the teacher union chapter leader. This group meets weekly during the school year. The Board of Trustees convenes Faculty Forums for the purpose of building consensus on major policy issues. These occur three or more times annually. Faculty meetings are held monthly and are designed for discussion and professional development work. While the proposed move to single school district status will mean some organizational changes in form, plans clearly spread decision making to the stake holders in a similar way.

"The decisions are made mostly by consensus with the exceptions of elections and amendments to our by-laws. Those are a 2/3 majority. It's a small school (if there are 3 people who are not convinced with the idea it is a problem. There needs to be a lot of discussion to make them comfortable or change the idea."

Teachers clearly valued their ability to influence the school and their freedom to develop as professionals. One teacher credited Albert for helping her get a good start at the school stating that he "opened up the doors for me," to imagine and build the kind of classroom that would be great for students. She calls herself her own best student "because I was learning along with everyone else, and my excitement flowed out." It was contagious. "One of the things about being a good teacher is that you have to love learning." "Willing and open to learn new things. Taking risks, learning from your mistakes." Bringing in things from the outside world, helped to nurture a creative and inventive environment. "Teachers are not bounded by what they are certified in."

Even novice teachers were included in the democratic organization of the school. I asked one teacher whether she helped the team make decisions right away. "Basically I was a full participant in the team." She did not understand fully when she was hired. She was surprised. "I have a voice in the team and in the faculty." She was now willing to fight for her ideas. I wondered whether or not it was hard to have shared responsibilities early on. She told me that teaching and participating in shared governance was not in conflict, even at the start, since time was provided for teacher leadership activities.

Despite its advantages, teachers and administrators realized that their school faced important organizational challenges. Some of these were related to the strength of the teams. These issues were discussed openly and objectively during my visit, both in formal meetings and in interviews. For instance, many felt the need to balance Team autonomy with need for whole school vision.

Since teams enjoyed great influence in hiring, were they missing the quirky but talented teachers in favor of easier going team members? One administrator wondered, "If you're a member of the math faculty in a high school and you have

virtually no contact with that teacher you might feel that, 'This guy over here, you know, he's kind of quirky, he's not a pleasant guy but he's a brilliant scholar, a great teacher. Let's hire him.' But if he's one of five teachers with whom you were going to work with closely, forget it. Math scholar, great teacher, 'I don't care. I have to get along with this person or don't want him. 'And so it changes what people value. And it has real implications for this school because I think that people do tend to go with people who are more like themselves.'"2

I attended one hour-long faculty meeting on this topic. Teachers worked within their teams and discussed questions such as possible vacancies on each team, how the handbook might be revised regarding hiring, and how to engage more references when hiring. Information from these discussions was brought to the personnel committee through the team's representatives. Next, a broader dialogue entitled, "What kind of people are we looking for as a school community?" took place.

The role of the principal in this democratic organization was particularly noteworthy. Teachers told me that Albert showed faith in the model even when he thought mistakes were occurring. "Albert is remarkable. On one hand he is not bashful about telling people how he feels about things, 'Here is what I think we should have, I think that we should go in this direction.' On the other hand he really has faith in this model and that you should trust teachers, even if they make mistakes... If you're about to make a mistake, he'll say 'You're about to make a mistake.' But he will not say 'You cannot do it, do not do it. Do not defy me.'"

Albert's commitment to democratic organization also meant including himself in the school's peer review process. The teacher who was responsible for writing his peer review considered what she might say as well as the significance of having the school's founder and principal participate. "I have to write Albert's peer review and I think what do I have to say to him. I love the man I think he is a brilliant leader. But I want to give him some food for thought... some things to reflect on. I think I just got an idea... praise him to the hilt for his strategy and ask him some questions about his tactics. But isn't that interesting that Albert asked me, a teacher in the school, to do his peer review. And not only that but a teacher in the school asked Albert to be his peer on his peer evaluation. So I think that is what gave Albert the idea that he should ask a teacher to do his peer evaluation."

By allowing for the group to own decisions, learn from mistakes and by placing himself in processes like peer review, Albert helped to foster a deep professionalism among the faculty while simultaneously modeling non-bureaucratic leadership (Shantz and Prieur 1996).

Clearly, this school gave serious thought to the importance of sharing power among teachers and administrators. From this belief, concrete mechanisms were established. Such as teacher teams and the board of trustees. Teachers reported the value of these in personal terms while the whole school worked to refine the system by dealing with serious organizational concerns flowing from power

sharing. This commitment to shared power and open planning places Universal in the company of successful reforming schools over the last six decades (Nunnery 1998). Finally, Albert showed sensitivity for the needs of the group to grapple with problems while at the same time acting as an equal by placing himself in the peer review process.

### Strategic Moves

The third leg of the triangle dealt with strategy. Faculty and administrators acknowledged that Universal's development had a great deal to do with the strategic behaviors of their principal. More than that, strategic thinking had internal as well as external manifestations.

The first thing that faculty and administrators (other than the principal) made clear was the fact that Albert was the prime strategist for the school. One administrator described Albert's strategic practice this way, "First, Albert's an incredible innovator, I really think it starts with the principal. I always tell him that I think he's a Maoist because he believes in permanent revolution. He believes that schools either change or they die, you can't maintain the status quo." He's always one step ahead of the opposition. It's truly amazing. The guy (Albert) took the commissioner to court, for Christ's sake. And after he lost he had the audacity to appeal the decision. It's pretty amazing...."

Albert saw himself as a risk taker who had enough self-assurance to be bold and yet maintain a principled focus. "As an individual I'm confident to the point of arrogance so I don't often doubt my own ability to do what I set out to do. Other aspects of the way I operate I think frighten people. They're not accustomed to people who act out of principle rather than self interest. They don't know how to do a school well and they're a little put off balance when they're confronted with one."

Yet, Albert was hardly an isolated leader. He showed me two albums filled with published newspaper editorials about the school. He made numerous presentations around the city, taught graduate courses in leadership around the country and formed a support network for his school's approach to assessment.

Some of Albert's strategies apply to the internal workings of the school. In creating an innovative school to respond to the needs of an unusual group of students, Albert opened the possibility of hiring faculty who did not fit the traditional mold. One teacher had great experience in community college but not in high school "It was a long, arduous process. They were a little reluctant to take a chance on me because I had been working at a Community College for 13 years so I had not been working with younger kids for a while." Another had never worked in a school for students with limited English. "It was a concern for me in the beginning because I had never worked with this population and it was a bit out of the ordinary for them because at that time they were really looking only for people with ESL background." A third came to teaching after a starting as an educational lawyer. A fourth, herself an immigrant, met a teacher from the

school while taking her pre-service classes.

### The Key to External Strategy: Leverage Points

The underlying mechanism behind Albert's external strategies, which move the whole school, are what he calls leverage points. These are actions designed to respond to opportunity and possible dangers.

"Now our leverage for the last couple of years was becoming a charter school. Our leverage for the next couple of years will be giving up our charter status...The big problem with being a charter...no support in Megaburg." Also they are expected to do with less. "2/3 of the funding. Less autonomy, (as a charter you stick out). The city will be happy because they can say charter were the problem, not them. The commish hates charters (lack of control)."

Thus, Albert's analysis, like his professional experience, ranges from issues at the building, district and city levels. Moving to charter status gave the school freedom that mattered at the time. In a letter explaining the move to become a charter school he wrote,

As Principal, I will not need central office approval to attend a conference or schedule a school trip as I have in the past. Working with the faculty, parents, and the students themselves, we will now make the important instructional decisions that affect what teachers and students do in the classroom. We will decide how to expend our resources in support of teachers' efforts to promote student learning. In other words, I have been given license to exercise my professional judgment for the first time in thirty years.

However, when finances caused the disadvantages of charter status to out-weigh its advantages, Albert was ready with the next move: going back to the Board of Education but as a single site district. This was designed to help alleviate the financial limits of being a charter while maintaining independence within boundaries. Albert had few illusions about the attitude of the Board towards his school. "The truth is this is probably a continuation of their effort to marginalize us...But it's to our advantage".

Becoming a single site district would not permanently help with the second external pressure: the mandated state tests. It turned out that Albert had a second move already planned designed to respond to this problem. This was a proposed partnership with Polk Community College whereby students could graduate community college in five years.

One may look at Albert as a brilliant strategist who creates ways for the school he founded to stay afloat. However, there is more to the picture. We should add three conditions associated with sustaining innovation: coherent policy, capacity and changed practice (Chrispeels 1997). Albert can be seen as trying to maintain all three at the school level during a time when they were at risk due to external conditions. I was also struck by Albert's moral commitment to the students and the program he felt responded best to their needs. This sense of duty and working for the



good has been associated with transformational leadership (Sergiovanni 1996). To play all of these roles, Albert, unlike most principals I have met, was able to see himself as part of a complex hierarchy but not trapped by a particular role within the larger world of educational institutions. He acted as a person on even terms with everyone, including city leaders and the state's commissioner of education. In this way, his strategy was both empowered and democratic in that it was based on equity in relationships.

#### How the Three Findings Work Together:

Beside their impact as foundations for the school, the three findings were also clearly linked. For instance, faculty and administrators spoke of the link between the state's emphasis on testing (a perceived threat to shared values for learning) and democratic organization. One teacher commented: "I can't work in a place where people were told what to do because you can't exercise professional judgment if you're being told what to do.. and you can't do your job if you can't exercise professional judgment. But the child in all of us, especially under these weird conditions where they are coming down on us and all these crazy new tests that may not appropriate for our kids that are experiencing. If it's going to be like that just tell us what to do. And Albert wants to fight that tooth and nail, that's important strategically. For us not to become a school where the administration tells the teachers what to do. All is lost if that happens. So I don't know if that was just an impulse or he was thinking that strategically but I know that since I'm on the steering committee in our next faculty meeting is going to be put some decisions that had to be made before the faculty and make sure that they understand that the faculty as a whole needs to make these decisions."

In a positive way, democratic organization is seen as a way of giving teachers the decision power needed to create meaningful learning for students. "I think that that's definitely one of the attractions, maybe, for the school. I think Albert has that, his philosophy or his way. He gives teachers freedom to do what they think is good for students. And he trusts them to do it."

Democratic organization through teaming and shared values for learning was evident in the interdisciplinary nature of course work. Team members from a variety of backgrounds worked to provide an integrated approach to large questions. This clearly fits the school's vision for learning and was organized democratically giving much power to teachers.<sup>3</sup> One teacher saw democratic organization as a strategy for sustaining the interest of veterans in the school. "I guess because we have a lot of ownership. ... Because we're pretty much in control of what we do in our classrooms. No one gives us a curriculum from on high and says these are the kinds of things that you're going to do in your classroom over the course of the next year. If we're bored, we're bored by choice, not fiat. Change keeps things going but also a catalyst for anxiety. But it is a norm of the school."

Another spoke of the team's help in making her a better

and more responsive educator. The team had years of experience and she team-taught with a much more experienced math teacher. Her math background was strong but she got a great deal of help in teaching skills "to respond to their needs right away and with appropriate activities, appropriate questions, support, whatever they needed." "The other teacher was very sensitive to that. " This was a model for her to also be sensitive to student needs. She changed from thinking about her presentations to responding to student needs (moving from mere teaching to learning). She has made a shift.

The findings- shared values for learning, democratic organization and strategic moves, go a long way in responding to the research questions. There was a clear learning strategy that was consistently applied at the school over time. This strategy came from shared beliefs about the students that the school was designed to serve. These shared values were seen as conflicting with the state testing policy. The school had developed a tightly knit democratic community that included all members in key policy and implementation practices. Teachers and administrators spoke of the participatory nature of the school in positive ways, both from an individual and from a whole school perspective. These qualities reflect values that Reyes, Scribner and Scribner (1999) found in schools that were successful with Hispanic students. Of the four dimensions they advocated, the findings clearly support numbers 2 (collaborative governance), 3 (culturally sensitive pedagogy) and 4 (advocacy-oriented assessment. As the school's leader, Albert thought and acted strategically, both internally (such as hiring talented people with non-traditional backgrounds) and externally (such as moving to and then away from charter status) all with the aim of furthering the school's ability to meet its mission. Finally, there was evidence that these three findings operated together and were mutually reinforcing. I will now use three theoretical frameworks to place these findings in context.

## Discussion

The findings indicate that Universal High utilizes three interconnected themes to promote its educational program for immigrant high school students. Shared values for learning, democratic organization, and strategic moves were important guiding concepts according to the faculty and administrators. Yet, I believe that by using theoretical frameworks, it is possible to see these themes and the school itself in a deeper way. The first two theoretical frames are the dynamic triangle connecting curriculum, instruction and assessment and the concept of turbulence. By combining these I hope to better gauge the severity and nature of change at the school. The third frame I will propose is another dynamic triangle, this one connects dialogue, democracy and innovation. My intention is to use this framework to suggest why Universal can continue to thrive in the midst of such potentially destabilizing turbulence.

## Frameworks 1&2: The Curriculum-Instruction-Assessment Triangle and Turbulence as a way of gauging the severity of change at Universal:

### The Curriculum-Instruction-Assessment Triangle

The connection among curriculum, instruction and assessment has been described for many years in the literature (English 1988, Taba 1962). Those interested in curriculum alignment (English and Larson 1996, Jacobs 1998) have made a particular point of ordering classrooms so that what is taught, how it is taught, and how learning is measured are consistently and rationally organized across grades. In my own research (Gross 1998) I found that there was a dynamic quality to this triangle. This means schools that substantially modified curriculum soon started to explore new teaching methods (instruction) and new ways to measure learning (assessment) to match the new curriculum. Further, it did not appear to matter at what point of the triangle (curriculum, instruction or assessment) the change first occurred. Development in the remaining two areas soon followed. In this way, the curriculum-instruction-assessment (CIA) triangle grew leaving the interior area, which I call learner development, larger as a result. All ten schools in the 1998 study were experiencing growth in the CIA triangle as a result of their innovative practices. In 1999, however, I found the reverse (Gross 2001). In this case, an urban school that had experienced CIA growth was moving in the opposite direction due to a series of pressures largely coming from the city and state levels. Their CIA triangle was deflating. The potential for the same result seems to exist at Universal, at least in the eyes of many faculty members and administrators. The most frequent reason given for this concern was the imposition of state tests for all students in several subject areas, thereby making for a serious change in assessment. Teachers and administrators spoke of building a vision for learning based on depth (a curriculum decision), hands-on constructivist practice (an instructional approach) and portfolios (an assessment that is consistent with these). The state tests were largely seen as an attack upon all three. Teachers and administrators feared that the tests would force more shallow coverage rather than focused depth (deflating the curriculum point of the triangle in their view), less hands-on instruction as teachers felt pressured to race through areas that would be tested (a negative pressure on that point of the triangle) and a possible abandonment of portfolios and senior demonstrations to give teachers and students time to prepare for standardized state exams. (See Figure One)

The specter of this perceived imploding CIA triangle was obviously serious and caused the administrators and faculty to resist. This case demonstrates again that the CIA model is dynamic in both directions and wise local leaders need to understand the warning signs of pressures likely to diminish their efforts. While the state tests (assessment) built upon state standards (curriculum) were the driving

forces in this case, the CIA framework would predict that all elements would be similarly effected if the state were to impose a particular system of instruction.

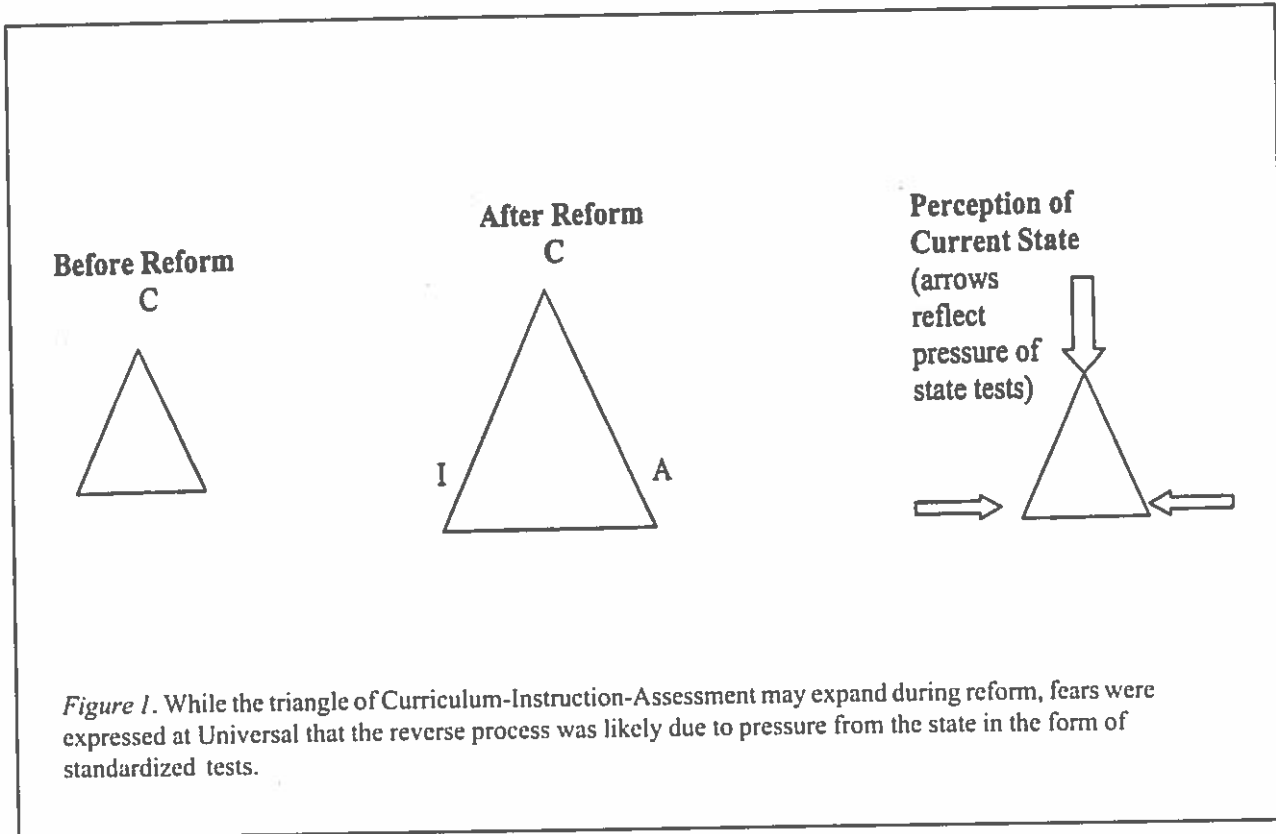
### Turbulence

In an earlier study (Gross 1998) I introduced the concept of turbulence in this way: I found that sites which had developed curriculum, instructional and assessment innovations for a several years, all experienced some degree of turbulence or volatile conditions. Further, I found that the degree of turbulence at these ten schools and districts could be divided into four levels:

**Light turbulence.** includes ongoing issues associated with the normal functioning of the school. Examples of this include dealing with a disjointed community or geographic isolation of the school. One school responded to its geographic isolation by joining a national reform organization and by hosting an annual state-wide conference on innovation at small schools. The key to light turbulence is the fact that it is part of the school's environment and that it can be handled in a way that will, at least keep the issue in check.

**Moderate turbulence.** was related to specific issues that were widely recognized as important and needing to be dealt with. The loss of an important support structure would be one example of moderate turbulence. Rapid growth of the student body would be another example of moderate turbulence. One school, faced with the sudden expansion in students made this issue the center of in-service meetings just prior to the opening of school. Faculty were trained in ways to welcome, listen to and integrate new students. The principal modeled the attitude of acceptance by stating that the new students were not simply joining their school, but had every right to help change the school since that fir their school's philosophy. Moderate turbulence, therefore, is not part of normal operations, it quickly gains nearly everyone's attention and yet, it can be responded to with a focused effort.

**Severe turbulence.** was found in cases where the whole enterprise seemed threatened. Community values conflict was at the heart of one instance of severe turbulence in the study. In that case, members of the community were deeply divided in their reaction to specific reforms. School board elections became highly emotional, friendships were ended due to pressure to join one faction or another and the process of reform was suspended. The district used a four stage strategy to respond to this dilemma. This included a shift to issues upon which agreement was less controversial, electing a centerist community member to serve as board chair, holding televised meetings of a strategic planning council and reminding community members that stability and trust rather than disharmony were the district's norms. In severe turbulence the problems are so serious that normal administrative actions seem inadequate. A coordinated set of strategies is very likely needed while business-as-usual thinking needs to be suspended.



**Extreme turbulence.** would mean serious danger of the destruction of the institution. I speculated that this degree of turbulence was possible, based on the fact that institutions do, of course, become unraveled. However, all of the ten sites in the earlier study were able to respond to their own cases of turbulence, ranging from light to severe, with success.

Applying these degrees of turbulence to Universal, the following pattern becomes apparent:

**Light Turbulence.** There is light turbulence at the school since the school serves many students who are or potentially are at risk. In addition, since the school draws students from many areas of the city, communication with families is a challenge.

**Moderate Turbulence.** Universal dealt with moderate turbulence as well. This took the form of balancing the independence of the teams, especially in hiring, with the common needs of the whole school. This was a high profile issue and the topic of a faculty meeting during one of my visits to the school.

**Severe Turbulence.** The enterprise seemed threatened in the eyes of many due to two factors. From the city level, not receiving adequate financial support as a charter school was certainly a danger. Without sufficient income, vital programs might need to be cut. At the state level, testing seemed a significant threat that had the potential of destroying the shared vision of learning and even democratic organization, according to many. This led to an emphasis on strategies designed to move the school to safer financial

ground in the form of a self-contained district and, eventually, away from state control with the possible alignment with the community college.

**Extreme Turbulence.** Unlike an earlier case (Gross 2001), Universal did not seem overwhelmed by the forces of turbulence and thus cannot fairly be described as facing extreme turbulence.

#### C-I-A Triangle and Turbulence

Thus, Universal faced serious pressures on its own CIA triangle. Faculty and administrators who considered these forces clearly described a threat to the school's basic approach. Similarly, applying the Turbulence framework to Universal, one is struck by the seriousness of the situation. Yet, analysis flowing from these two frameworks does not properly convey the sense of confidence and purposefulness that came across in interviews and observations. Far from being demoralized and fearful, the faculty and administrators seemed to understand the challenges facing them and seemed ready to act. It is likely that other forces are at work at this most unusual school.

#### Dialogue-Democracy-Innovation

Given the perceived attack on CIA from the state and reported financial constraints from the city, why is Universal so apparently stable? I believe that an answer can be found by considering the forces that under gird the school's ethos

of shared values for learning, democratic organization and strategic moves. I will call these foundational forces Dialogue, or a commitment to almost continuous communication by all faculty and administrators, Democracy, the belief in equality and shared power among members of the school's community and Innovation, or the spirit of continuous invention and refinement to further the mission of the school. These do not exist as mere platitudes but appear to operate together in a dynamic system that is mutually reinforcing just as the curriculum-instruction-assessment (CIA) triangle operates. When there is greater authentic dialogue, for instance, more voices are heard on crucial issues and power has a greater chance of being shared (democracy). With more voices focusing on a topic, there is an increased possibility for a novel idea to surface (innovation). Similarly, when democracy is nurtured, more participation is called for, increasing the need for dialogue, possibly leading to new organizational patterns (innovation). If authentic innovation becomes a priority, as opposed to a simple fad, it should be grounded in the deepest needs of the school and supported by the work of faculty and staff. This suggests an emphasis upon dialogue (so that the needs might surface) and democracy (shared work to nurture, support and sustain the innovation over time).

At Universal teachers and administrators worked on teams, each had considerable autonomy and worked through continuous discussion to solve problems. These discussions were meaningful because the teams were vested with power in hiring, staff development, and instructional approaches through democratic organization. These dialogic, democratic teams were then expected to find useful, inventive approaches in pursuit of educating students. At an individual level, the Dialogue-Democracy-Innovation triangle seems to work equally well in helping to explain Universal's operational stability. While Albert is clearly key, he is not the only strategist, (or innovator), and he hardly works in isolation. The leverage points he looks for are shared through writing and at many open meetings for discussion and debate. He also acknowledges the power of the group in making innovative suggestions. In this way leadership at Universal is not a question of what one person does but is "distributed practice, stretched over the school's social and situational contexts." (Spillane, Halverson and Diamond 2001 p 23). In one interview he stated that the school's best opportunity for growth would likely be to link up with a large corporate sponsor. He also said that this would not be feasible since he felt that the faculty could not support such a plan. In this way, he appears to have used the value of democracy to avoid an enticing but potentially dangerous innovation.

Interviews and documents indicate that this Dialogue-Democracy-Innovation triangle has operated at the school since its inception. In fact, one could argue that the school's high goals for its immigrant students represent a faith in democratic values. Further, constant, constructivist use of English reflects the value of dialogue and the resultant school that continually renews itself in the face of outside pressure shows an embedded spirit of innovation. This

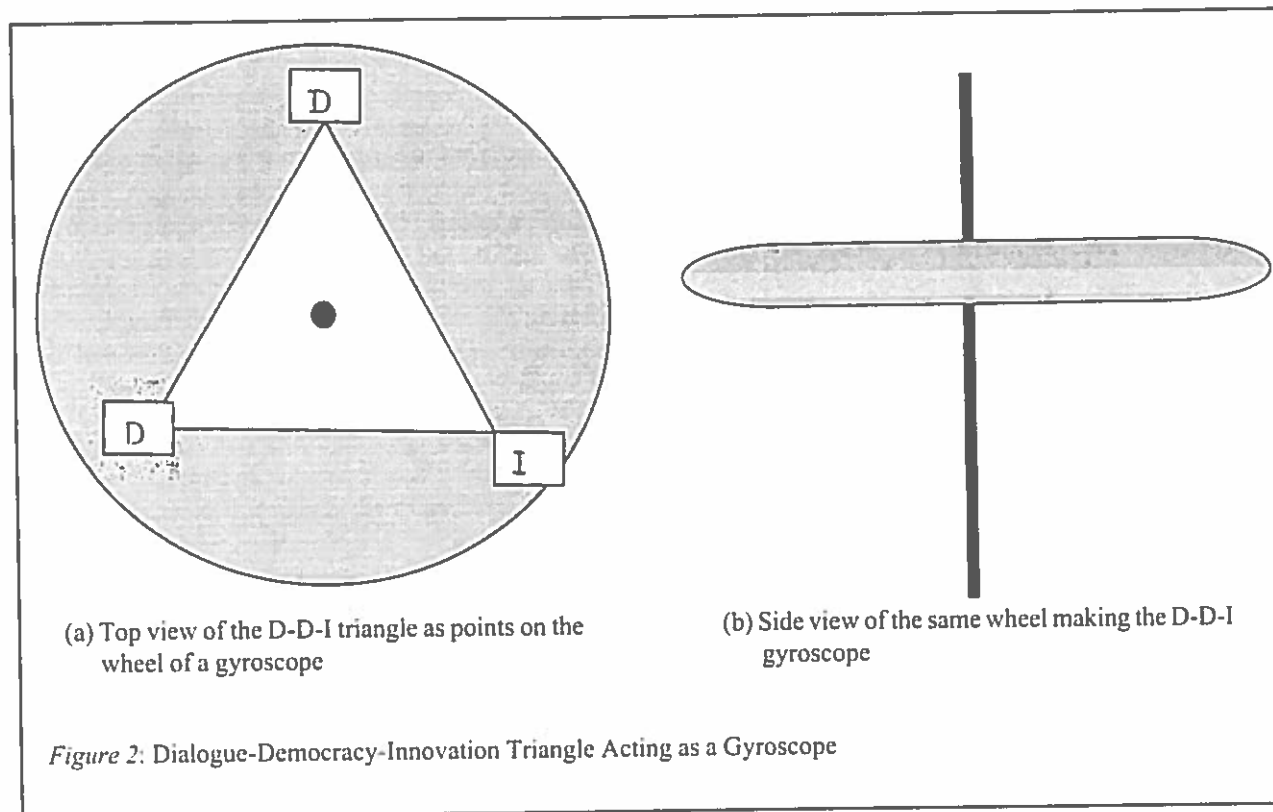
means that dialogic, democratic, innovative habits are part of Universal's culture and are part of its natural response to the challenges described under Turbulence above. Instead of despair when the city did not fund the school at expected levels, the norm became one of discussion and shared responsibility with the anticipated outcome of a newer, more workable approach. When the state eliminated the waiver for standardized testing, the same mechanisms were in place to fight the decision in court, join with other schools in opposing the tests and inventing a relationship with a community college to completely redefine the school itself. It is not as though these responses are easy or that they will inevitably produce desired results. The important fact is that the Dialogue-Democracy-Innovation triangle is in place, is grounded in the school's practice and appears to act as a stabilizing force, especially during turbulent circumstances. (See Figure Two)

The situation facing Universal is certainly challenging. The dynamic and inventive curriculum-instruction and assessment program, so carefully designed for non-English speaking immigrant students is being pressured by state tests. This regimen of high stakes testing, in combination with funding problems at the city level, and on-going issues related to running such a school cause Universal to deal with the simultaneous forces of light, medium and severe turbulence. Yet, because of the combined under girding forces of Dialogue-Democracy and Innovation, the school appears centered and capable of responding successfully.

## Conclusion

I started this research with a sense of expectation and great curiosity. How could a serious reform like the one at Universal sustain itself under such pressures? Indeed, the reform seems to be almost thriving rather than merely surviving, albeit somewhat diminished by serious challenges. This small craft is sailing in rough seas and the three core themes (shared values for learning, democratic organization, and strategic moves) seem to take on the role of basic controls. But at a deeper level, the frameworks of the C-I-A triangle and Turbulence give us the same warnings as might radar and barometer: conditions are serious and threaten to continue that way for sometime. The third framework, the stabilizing force of Dialogue-Democracy-Innovation, then plays its part by offering ways around the harshest winds and highest seas in much the same way a gyroscope behaves.

These ideas offer some general guidance for understanding how reforming urban schools might continue their work while enduring predictably turbulent forces. However, new questions have surfaced. First, Albert's role in the life of the school is clearly powerful but more needs to be understood about the moral and ethical burdens such leaders take on and the sources of their internal fortitude. Next, this study has revealed numerous challenges to reform. But it has also demonstrated many opportunities for invention in very large urban settings such as the move to



charter status and then to single school district status. Could urban schools have more potential vehicles for reform in addition to their well-documented difficulties? This possibility might open up a rich line for further research.

Albert told me one afternoon that success for Universal's students was hardly inevitable and that, placed in more traditional settings, very different behaviors and outcomes were likely. I have to agree. But I would add something else. Even amidst harsh currents and rising storms, failure for reforming urban schools is not inevitable either. With great skill, shared effort and a powerful sense of direction, it is very possible to navigate- even in a gale.

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serious questions to ferret-out the relationship between practice and democratic values. "What does it mean to be a democratic school? Does it mean that democracy is only for professionals and not for others, or can democracy and professionalism compliment each other?" (p 20)

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Of the three strategies for single site school transformation that I uncovered in previous field research (Gross 1998), Albert clearly fell into the category I referred to as Fresh Start experiments. Being a principal starting an innovation places Albert among other front line public sector managers below the level of agency head who, it turns out, have often been in the majority of public service change efforts (Borins 2000).

<sup>2</sup> This type of reflection is reminiscent of Scribner et al's (1999) reference to double-looping organizations where, "Informed by experience and relevant literature, these organizations question relevant assumptions that guide practice so that chosen solutions address the core problems and not merely symptoms. (p 133)

<sup>3</sup> This connection is reminiscent of Glickman's (1998) call for congruence between all of the elements of learning. He poses