Trench Democracy in Schools #2: An Interview with Helen Beattie
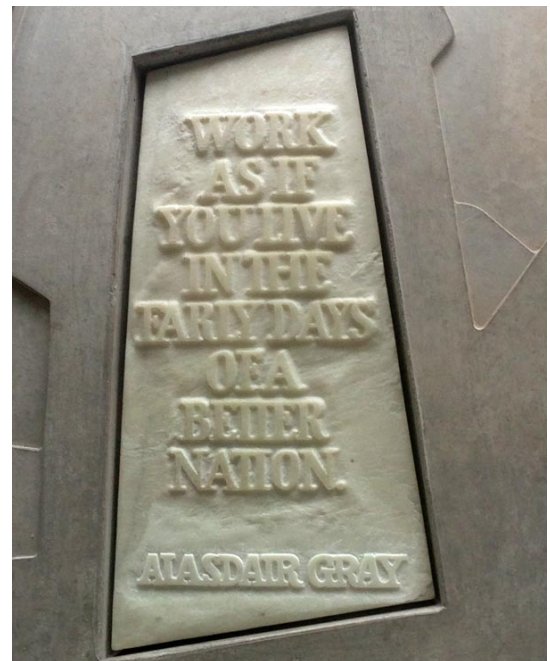
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This conversation is the fourth in the series, Trench Democracy: Participatory Innovation in Unlikely Places. *Innovative democratic professionals are recreating some of our most fundamental institutions, shaping new democratic practices and struggling against the sometimes profoundly counter-democratic tendencies of contemporary American institutions. While their work is always in progress, their experiences hold value for anyone interested in democracy's future.*

Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together (YATST) is a set of ideas and practices that Helen Beattie and her colleagues developed with schools across Vermont to deepen student engagement through collaborative action–research teams made up of students, teachers, and administrators. The initiative aims to "ensure that each and every student has the skills, self-confidence, and opportunities to assume meaningful roles in shaping their learning and their lives." Over the past five years, YATST teams have conducted and used dozens of surveys in a quarter of the state's sixty-three high schools to facilitate school-wide conversations; sparked changes in student government structure; created pedagogical videos; helped reform student assessment processes; piloted a classroom assistant program giving students a role in instruction; and altered the ways many teachers consult students for guidance on technique and course themes. I talked recently with Beattie about how schools are transformed through YATST and why it is important that youth and adults work together as partners. Before we get to the conversation, though, let's consider an example of YATST in action.

Why Do We Still Do This?

Hazen Union High School, in Hardwick, Vermont, has been affiliated with YATST for four years. Two years ago a science teacher approached the principal with a problem. Every year all the regular academic routines come to a halt for the week that students take traditional exams. The teacher questioned: Are these tests worth it? Wouldn't students get more out of a regular academic week? Is there another way to assess student achievement? The principal called on the YATST team—made up of fourteen students and one advisor—to facilita   versation.

The team decided to use a "reverse fishbowl"—participants seated arou   ner circle share their thoughts on a list of questions posed by a youth facilitator while those in the outer circle listen. When the speakers are done, they trade seats with the listeners who move into the inner circle to talk about their responses to the same questions and their reactions to the first round of comments. The team came up with three main questions for the facilitator to ask the "fish":

> 1) When you hear the words "mid-year exam" what comes immediately to mind?
> 2) Do mid-year exams accurately measure your learning? Why or why not?
> 3) What suggestions do you have for alternative means to effectively measure your learning?

In the first round, nine students sat in the inner circle. They felt that, while exams seem important for getting into college, they are imperfect measurements of knowledge or aptitude. Furthermore, exams are stressful and hard to prepare for, and the memorized information was often quickly forgotten. They wondered if the school could find a way to evaluate student learning that was more tightly integrated into the subject matter. When the faculty took the inner circle, they echoed the students' concerns, describing similar experiences during their own high school years. They shared doubts about how well exams captured what their classes were achieving. Many were frustrated with the format and the process. One teacher summed up the group's sentiments: "If so many of us feel this way, why do we still do this?"

Later that same week, the principal and the faculty leadership team began working out changes to the school examination process. Teachers at Hazen Union now use a wider range of tools to evaluate what their students are learning, including project-based assessments, reflective writing assignments, and other measures.

Albert Dzur: Let's begin by talking about how YATST works. Can you give me an example of how a school has taken up this program and run with it?

Helen Beattie: Each school has tremendous flexibility in how they make space for this work. In four schools we've had YATST as a credit-bearing class, usually under social studies.

AD: So it's a freestanding class?

HB: Yes, an elective, and ideally a year-long one using an action research design. YATST teams typically conduct surveys, asking students and teachers the same questions about the process of learning at that school. They analyze the results, looking for points of agreement and divergence. The data then become a springboard for discussions that the students design and lead. As ideas for change emerge, the team makes an action plan and the school does something new. There's much more time for participants to go through this process when it is a credit-bearing class. That's awesome. And when schools do it as a class, students and teachers walk in with expectations of what a class is about and what student-teacher relationships are about. YATST tries to change that paradigm by ensuring the class is not all teacher-driven. Students don't come in saying, "How am I going to get an A in this class?" We have to fight some of those forces of traditionalism—that is the very heart of what we are trying to change. The process becomes as powerful a teaching lesson to the students as any outcomes they produce. When they're co-designing surveys, for example, or going out and doing interviews, they start to see "Oh, students can do this." And they don't see that until they start to do the work.

AD: Can you think of an example of a project that really took off and changed the dynamic at a school?

HB: A couple of good examples come to mind. Just to set the context, most teams are comprised of about eight to sixteen students from varied grades. It is an extracurricular commitment in many settings. It is not unusual for a student to join early in his or her high school years and continue on through twelfth grade. The goal of each team is to have as diverse a mix of students as possible. The teams have at least one adult advisor, often a teacher.

In several schools, the teams have discovered a big discrepancy of opinion between teachers and students. Teachers say over 90 percent of the time that they check in with their students regularly about their learning and adapt instruction accordingly. Students, on the other hand, perceive low levels of that. In those schools, YATST teams have instituted mid-semester feedback systems where, in fact, students are given the opportunity to fill out a survey halfway through a semester and then talk about it with their teachers. That second part, to me, is the transformative part. They can fill out lots of surveys but change is when they start sitting in a class with a teacher who says, "This seems to be working but this other thing doesn't for you guys. I'm thinking we could do this, instead. What do you think we should do? What would be better ways to get at this material? Because we have to do the material but there are choices we can make about how we do it." That's transformative. That's when students say, "I do have some role in shaping instructional design and my experience here."

Three schools in particular have latched onto this mid-semester feedback system and keep trying to refine it and deepen it. That, I think, is an example of transformative work that starts

to reshape a culture. Teachers often don't even think about the possibility of asking students in an ongoing way but once they start to taste it, it's very rewarding. Then the teacher realizes, "Well that just increased their engagement and they didn't hammer me. I didn't lose my dignity; in fact I have a better relationship with them for asking." So it actually starts to create many more ways that the teacher is checking in with students.

AD: When you talk about student feedback, you are referring to feedback on the form *and* the content of courses.

HB: Yes, it's both. We really encourage each school to design their own surveys. I give them prototypes, but it's up to them to design what will work for them. I strongly suggest a student self-assessment, and most of the schools have done this. Students are giving teachers feedback, but they're also asking, "How am I doing as a student partner here? Am I being timely? Am I taking risks?" So YATST reinforces by the very structure of the process that it's not just about, "You, teacher, you need to change," it's also, "We as students also need to change and be more responsible and participative in our learning process." So the mid-semester form reflects the reshaping of relationship that we seek here, moving towards a partnership model.

AD: What is motivating people to participate in YATST classes? I understand what your motivations and my motivations would be, but why would a student enroll in a class on transforming their school? Aren't students asking themselves, "It's about *teaching*? Why do I want to be involved? I'm supposed to be in classes about core subjects; why do I want to be thinking about learning structures and curriculum development? That seems kind of tedious."

So much of what students do doesn't feel meaningful to them and this is in-your-face meaningful.

HB: Let me just fill in the blanks about how the other schools operate the initiative because it relates to this question. In some YATST is an extracurricular offering. We try to call it a "committee" and not a club because the whole desire is to have this institutionalized as a part of the decision-making structure. We seek to frame our existence in that way, whether YATST is a credit-bearing course or non-credit bearing extracurricular activity. What is fascinating is how involved these kids are in YATST. For example, students at Harwood Union, now in year five, meet at 7:30 on Wednesday mornings. They have incredible numbers and a diverse array of kids coming. Students at Hazen Union meet during lunches. They also have regular two-hour retreats after school and in the evenings. It is interesting, in those situations they don't have as much time to do the work as deeply as in a class, but it is so clearly their personal belief and commitment to this that drives the sustainability of those groups. There is more universal buy-in and more energy because you don't have to be there if you don't want to be. They are choosing to.

AD: You've obviously talked to hundreds of students. What kinds of motivations come up when you talk with people?

HB: Most students are thrilled to be given a chance to name their frustration, their feeling that their education is not fully meeting them. They are thrilled to have a chance and a way to change it. That little flame comes up pretty quickly when you say, "Would you like the training, support, and framework for you to be an agent of change?" Many students will come to the fore pretty immediately with a lot of excitement about that. So much of what they do doesn't feel meaningful to them and this is in-your-face meaningful.

AD: YATST is attracting all kinds of students, not just the typical joiners—people who would naturally join the student newspaper or student council.

HB: Right. Our teacher advisors are really good at identifying kids in their classes who they hear are dissatisfied. The teachers will say, "Well come to this group; it is trying to change exactly what you are frustrated about." There is an ongoing effort to make sure we do have diversity. We certainly have some of the same workers you would see in the other classic leadership groups, but we shoot for diversity and we have been relatively successful. The child who is really crashing and burning, however, is not going to come to a 7:30 AM meeting.

AD: I was wondering about that. Is there outreach done for that kind of kid?

HB: Well, that is really our primary target group. We want to reach the most disengaged. Even if those children do not actively participate, YATST teams reach them through their research. They collect information about *every* student's perspective on his or her learning experience, ensuring that they reach everyone. Student members of YATST teams bring the information back to teachers and other students to figure out why the numbers are what they are and figure out how to become a force for change. So disengaged students are part of filling out the survey, they are part of hearing that that survey was analyzed. Their voice—whatever piece of their voice was in this survey—is being acted on. So that is one way we make sure we reach those students.

Following the action research model that focuses on quantified survey data (such as, "95 percent of teachers think learning is engaging but only 60 percent of students agree"), YATST as a whole is expanding to other, more qualitative research strategies. We just had a statewide conference where shadowing emerged as a strategy. This is where we can collect more information about what a day is like, for instance, with a student who is totally unhappy with the system. That way, we can better understand them, bring forth their voices, and encourage them to find their own voices to express what is not working for them. So YATST is trying out deeper ways of doing the research and then showing that those concerns are actually being acted on. YATST teams are working on that, but I don't know if these teams will ever really be able to meet the needs, or be the right match for, somebody who is really checked out or angry. This is because so much of our work is around "assume best intentions" and "engage in dialogue for change," which are perspectives that are really hard for somebody who's embroiled in such deep challenges. It is difficult for them to step forward as effective change agents.

AD: Let's talk about what motivates teachers and principals to join YATST.

HB: The teachers who are most involved, who are the advisors for YATST, are often the ones who already have classroom instructional methods and pedagogy that absolutely honor student voice and constructivist learning. They are also often good service learning exemplars. They've got the message, but they often feel isolated and unable to help their peers feel comfortable moving anywhere down the student- centered learning spectrum. YATST is a way these teachers

can further what they believe is in the best interests of students through a mutual, collaborative effort. It is a structured way that lets them act on that desire. That is often where I see teachers coming from.

The administrators involved in this, similarly, are people who value student voice. They don't necessarily know how to make it happen, don't have the time or the knowledge to provide the skills and training to make it manifest in their school, and are relieved to have some place to go for a road map and support.

AD: So YATST provides a framework and an institutional memory for successful practices.

HB: Right, and we provide training and support all along the way. YATST is not a "one day conference and off you go" model. We believe that if you want a culture change, it is a ton of work, it happens over time, and each institution is different. We can give you some guiding tenets and skills, but we'll also work with you as you run into the inevitable roadblocks—the, "Who would have thought that would have been the response?" sorts of issues—and help the team and the administrator work through these. We know that good professional development, not to mention culture change, is a long-term process.

AD: I want to touch on that. Education is a profession, so I could imagine some pushback along the following lines: "You are asking me to collaborate, you are asking me to share power, you are asking me to be more flexible in my approach and give students a good deal of voice in the classroom, but I'm a professional. I went to school and I got an advanced degree. So why should I do all this?" What's the best kind of argument to make to somebody who plays the professional card?

HB: Well, one argument to make is, "Do you feel when you reflect on your daily classroom experience that your students are fully engaged? And if you have a shadow of a doubt about that, then we should talk." That is the main struggle for most teachers. We can help them ask that question without the threat of judgment, without having them feel like they have to reflect on inadequate practices. We say to them: "Education has been framed around a model that was for a different era and we know better now. It is not the industrial era. It is a new era and we need new strategies. You will feel in your classroom an increase in engagement when all of us figure out how to better align what we do with this world and these kids. We have brain research informing us now and we have what we know are twenty-first century skills. It's a win-win situation: when you are willing to move some you will immediately get feedback that you're starting to engage more students."

And not all teachers jump to the fore with that opportunity or believe it. But that is why YATST is incremental and keeps trying to build up from the grassroots. The more teachers who start to shift and give testimony, the more the ardent resistors begin to shift. There is a group we'll never get who will lecture forever, but there's this whole middle group that we are starting to influence strategically. We are shooting for a tipping point and it comes from within, not from an administrator telling teachers to do this.

AD: Still, you must face resistance from some very good teachers, on the one hand, who already feel loss of professional control over their classroom from state mandates, standardized tests, and the public culture of resentment towards public education. So there's this fear of loss of workplace autonomy from even the best teachers and, on the other side, really struggling

teachers who don't have their act together might see YATST as yet another set of complicated demands that they can't possibly master. How do you assuage those sorts of concerns over professional control?

HB: As I've said, YATST teams assume best intentions and focus on strengths. For instance, when teams get survey data back the students analyze it to come up with strengths and areas of concern and then they bring that to a student-led faculty meeting. And when they bring it to that faculty meeting the first thing they do is note the strengths and affirm teachers. Only then do they move on to talk about what we call "puzzling gaps" (we don't call them "weaknesses") like the one I described earlier between teacher perceptions that over 90 percent of the time they check in with students and students' very different observations. These puzzling gaps occur around relevance, around voice, and all sorts of things.

When students do this correctly, when they are showing that they are not assuming bad intentions or ill will, when they are there to say to teachers, "Join us in making every day better," this is an incredibly powerful door to open. It is much different than an administrator saying, "We are not doing well; we need to close this achievement gap," or whatever the new state mandate verbiage is. When students say, "Let's explore this; let's problem-solve; this is our data; we both want the best for all of us," it is really effective. It is both sides, after all, who want to get up each morning and come to school to be part of an engaging learning community. When students do that, I think it drops the defensiveness of teachers in a way that is unparalleled from any other professional learning experience that they have.

I've heard such positive feedback from teachers and I've witnessed this, too, in the student-led faculty meetings and district professional meetings. They've led multi-school K-12 district in-services which teachers from all schools in the region attend, focusing on things like challenging whether the level of expectations that teachers have for students are subject to biases and stereotypes. They have asked how we can all focus more on strengths and see ourselves and others as potential-laden. They have provided information regarding new discoveries about learning and the brain. Those district in-services the YATST teams led received outstanding feedback from teachers. In fact, the teachers from two separate in-services recounted being really angry at the agendas that followed on those days because they felt as if the students had raised the deepest questions everyone had about teaching and learning. They then had to go into these adult agendas, which often violated good teaching practices, when they had just taken part in discussions that really matter to them.

AD: So to the person concerned about professional control what you're saying is that students involved in YATST are delivering this message: "we are all in it together."

HB: You may feel like you are giving up some control as a teacher, but we will all get to a point together, we've named a common vision and desire, and it will be worth it to move there. So why would people choose to risk making a change? They have to see some positive outcome other than being a demand by somebody from above. When the request is from students, though, I think the likelihood of somebody considering moving is far greater.

AD: I'd like to touch upon the broader impact of YATST. I know that you think in big terms. YATST is about reforming education, it's about a culture change in education, but I get a sense that it's even bigger, that this has a wider social change arc.

HB: Yes. Part of that bigger arc is another ripple that we are trying to create. Vermont just passed a law that all schools must institute personalized learning plans so every student will be able to shape a mix of traditional courses, internships, and virtual learning opportunities. They will have flexible pathways, truly have educational alternatives. It won't be lip service, "Here you can design your own learning path, but here is the one set of courses you've always had as an option." So the state is actually advocating more student-centered strategies, but it doesn't yet have a good way to communicate this vision for change. To deal with this, I created a course at St. Michaels College, in Colchester. There are four schools involved in this course. Each school has adults and students, teams of two to four from each school. The name of the course is "Communicating School Redesign through the Youth-Adult Partnership Lens." The adults earn six graduate credits and the students are awarded college credit. It's year-long; we've already met for 24 hours–worth of multi-school time and we have 64 hours coming down the pipe. Essentially we can't talk effectively about school redesign without the two primary stakeholders at the table.

They are learning about some incredible research on communications and school redesign. I am co-teaching this with Jane Feinberg, who is a communications expert, She has synthesized a lot of the national data about education and learning. It only covers adult voters, though, there's no data on youth about redesign issues. Everything has been adult focused. We are doing an action research design; the teams are actually going out and doing research on the same questions but with students. We'll be creating the first communications database of student perspectives on education and learning as it relates to these new strategies.

This class is also going to be creating tools that will help guide students in fostering transformative dialogues. It will be a common language because the students are not going to let tools be developed that don't feel comfortable for them, and when it is comfortable for them it is comfortable for every stakeholder. There is nobody more masterful than students in getting to the heart of things. They play an essential role in co-creating what will serve their schools well as new strategies and techniques begin to take shape in response to state policy. These strategies are going to be steeped with youth-adult partnership, hence the title, "The Youth-Adult Partnership Lens."

Soon I am going to the Agency of Education to talk about how the YATST communications work might help in the roll-out of this law. Nobody knows exactly how to institute personalized learning plans, but having youth and adults sit side-by-side to strategize makes sense. My hope is that we are creating a new prototype for addressing big issues in education with students and teachers at the table, and with tremendous academic integrity at the same time. So, yes, I definitely think we are looking for large-scale change.

AD: Finally, a question about long-term sustainability. Have you thought about how YATST can expand within schools while avoiding the kind of bureaucratization that blocks rather than enables human development? What can YATST do to thrive without reproducing some of the disabling flaws—hierarchy, rigid rules, exclusionary forms of professionalism, etc.—that often accompany settled institutional practices?

HB: We are really careful to walk the talk, to make sure that what we believe embodies the democratic process and healthy learning environments. What our vision requires is for all stakeholders to be listened to and craft the answer together. So in the whole design of our

organization we have a frame that we give to schools to interpret and make their own and it is not proprietary or prescriptive; you take the pieces of it that best serve you.

If we stop doing that then we violate a core premise of the philosophical foundation of the organization. I am not going to be around when that happens because it would be unacceptable if we became so bureaucratic and prescriptive, and attached to a right way. We have the tools and schools have the wisdom to do what best fits for them, with our coaching. This is the way learning happens: with teachers bringing frames and knowledge and then being guides, working together with students to co-construct an understanding of that learning experience. So I really feel as if we are not in danger as long as we keep challenging ourselves as a leadership team to be flexible and not define outcomes in terms of perpetuating the YATST name, but rather by living the principles and practices of the work. I love that question because it helps me think about things in a way that I hadn't before.