

# Presentism, Individualism, and Conservatism: The Legacy of Dan Lortie's *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*

(Lortie, D. C. 1975. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

by

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## INTRODUCTION

More than 30 years ago, as a doctoral student at the Leeds University Department of Sociology in England, I was trying to develop a qualitative understanding of teachers and teaching, and I was looking for any colleague or mentor who could provide some sense of experience, guidance and sheer precedent in a field that was then almost barren. From time to time, I would walk across the road, and up the rickety back stairs of the old School of Education building into its Hogwarts Hall-like attic, where I would be met by the engaging intellect and darting eyes of a silver-haired scholar who was one of the very few to have trodden this path before me. Douglas Barnes, English specialist and expert on classroom interaction, had already coauthored a groundbreaking book on language in secondary school classrooms (Barnes, Britten, & Torbe, 1969). One day in 1975, as I entered his tiny garret, he thrust into my hand a new book by an American academic I had never heard of—Dan Lortie. “Have you seen this?” Barnes exclaimed. “It’s really interesting!”

Although I read Lortie’s book, I only first began to really work with it when I became a lecturer at Oxford University in 1980. There I formed a partnership with my office neighbour and namesake (but not relative), David H. Hargreaves. Together, we team-taught the Master’s degree classes in sociology of education. We had a shared interest in culture, in the anthropological sense, particularly in relation to the culture of teaching. Both of us had been inspired and influenced by three key texts: Willard

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Waller's curmudgeonly discussion of what teaching as an occupation does to teachers in his 1932 book on *The Sociology of Teaching*; Philip Jackson's (1968) study of *Life in Classrooms*, and its depiction of the overwhelming *immediacy* of teachers' working lives and decisions; and Dan Lortie's (1975) landmark text based mainly on interviews with 94 teachers about their work in Five Towns in the Boston metropolitan area in the United States.

Lortie's book was actually based on work undertaken more than a decade earlier in the five towns surrounding but not including the city of Boston. His lengthy interview schedules (they must have taken some time to complete) asked his subjects about their entry into teaching and what brought them to the job; they asked about the structure of the day in terms of time and what would count as good days; they asked about teachers' relations with their colleagues and others and also about sources of satisfaction within their work. The study was replicated to a smaller degree some years later in Dade County, Florida; and Lortie's findings are supplemented by national survey data from the National Education Association.

*Schoolteacher* draws on these diverse sets of findings to construct an argument about teachers' work. Of central importance is the nature of the rewards that teachers get from their work—Lortie calls these “psychic” rather than financial rewards—and the key characteristics of the culture of teaching. Here, Lortie classically and memorably described the three defining sentiments of teaching as those of *presentism* (focusing on the short term), *conservatism* (concentrating on small-scale rather than whole-school changes), and *individualism* (performing teaching in isolation from other teachers).

### THE THEORETICAL LEGACY

The theoretical legacy on which Lortie's *Schoolteacher* drew and which it has in turn perpetuated is that of the American tradition of symbolic interactionism and also of the Chicago School of the sociology of work and occupations. Beginning with the writing of George Herbert Mead (1934), symbolic interactionism explained how people's selves and identities were formed through their interactions with others, especially those who had a primary influence on their lives. Lortie refers back to Mead at one point and also to Herbert Blumer (1947), another “founding father” of symbolic interactionism, who understood that the actions of leaders and others could only be understood in the context of the “organizational imperatives” (Lortie, 1975, p. 204) of where they operated.

These organizational imperatives were part of the sociology of occupations. Lortie is repeatedly deferential to authors of the Chicago School of the sociology of lifestyles, work and occupations such as Howard Becker and Everett Hughes who helped frame the intellectual traditions of the city and the institution where he studied and worked for all his adult life, and who cultivated a significant subfield of the sociology of occupations and

lifestyles. At the very beginning of *Schoolteacher*, Lortie (1975) locates his work within “the sociological study of work and occupations” (p. 2). His Master’s thesis at Chicago was on anesthesiologists (Lortie, 1949) and his doctorate addressed entry into the legal profession (Lortie, 1958). These studies enabled him to understand the principles of organizations and of professional socialization in two of the classic professions against which others have often unfavourably compared teaching as a poorer, semi-professional cousin.

As Neufeld (2009) observes in a particularly perceptive analysis of Lortie’s scholarship on teaching, Lortie felt that school teaching was “not like other occupations’ (Neufeld, 2009, p. 37). The language, as Lortie’s Chicago contemporary Philip Jackson (1968) had already revealed, was more technically simple. The underpinnings of teaching, as the late Susan Rosenholtz (1989) would show more systematically in years to come, were uncertain. They benefited little from the scientific procedures of medicine or the case precedents of law. And the outcomes were unclear. Unlike lawyers, teachers did not know whether they had won or lost. Nor could teaching tell them whether their students were cured or not. So teachers’ rewards became personal, emotional, or “psychic,” as Lortie put it—resting on exceptional cases of child rescue in the present and deferred praise from returning students far into the future.

Lortie (1975) understood that many occupations had psychic rewards, but that the nature and importance of these rewards varied from one occupation to another:

Psychic rewards consist entirely of subjective valuations made in the course of work engagement; their subjectivity means that they can vary from person to person. But they are also constrained by the nature of the occupation and its tasks; we would not expect lighthouse keepers to list sociability as a work reward or street cleaners to rejoice in opportunities for creative expression. It is an empirical task to find recurrent patterns in such subjective, psychic rewards. (p. 111)

Looking at the place of psychic rewards among teachers and in teaching, Lortie (1975) concluded that:

Teachers perceive their psychic rewards as scarce, erratic and unpredictable. They are vulnerable to the ebb and flow of pupil response; even highly experienced teachers talk about “bad years.” Uncertainties in teaching inhibit the feeling that future rewards are ensured, and such doubts support the position that it is unwise to sacrifice present opportunities for future possibilities. (p. 211)

The distinctive psychic qualities of teaching, be they rewards or annoyances (Hargreaves, 1999), are fundamentally wrapped up with how teaching is organized as an occupation. Teaching, Lortie claimed, is a flat rather than staged career (with long periods of working life spent at the same level of seniority), entered abruptly and alone after what is often an indifferent

college training, through the reality shocks and dramas of the first few weeks in the job. This leads teachers to fall back on their own resources—especially the long “apprenticeship of observation” they undertook as students on the other side of the teacher’s desk. Together, these combined factors offer little hope of innovation, but strong prospects for persisting conservatism.

Given all these considerations, teachers are left to construct their work lives and careers differently from their counterparts in other occupations. Lortie’s Chicago contemporary, Howard Becker (1951) had explained this in his doctoral thesis which showed how Chicago public school teachers developed lateral careers. They either moved from a tough inner-city school at the beginning to a higher status and better supported suburban environment after a few years, or made adjustments to their urban environment if they could not leave and derived satisfaction from a slower pace, a smaller homework and grading load, and less interference from parents. Lortie’s concern with teaching’s “flat career” is underpinned by these insights.

In education, however, Lortie’s most frequent references are back to one of America’s and the world’s earliest interactionists: Willard Waller. Waller was the son of an Illinois school superintendent and had received his Master’s of Sociology from the University of Chicago in 1925. Lortie and Waller had a shared overall project of understanding teachers and teaching within the unique context of their occupation. Waller (1932) had noted that “those who follow certain occupations are continually thrown into certain kinds of social situations” (p. 376). “What teaching does to teachers,” he continued, “it does partly by furnishing them those roles which habit ties to the inner frame of personality and use makes one with the self” (p. 381). This applies particularly to the relationship teachers have with their colleagues. “A landmark of assimilation to the profession is that moment when he decides that only teachers are important” (p. 389).

In a flat career that attracts socially conservative entrants, many of them women who have an “in and out engagement” to their work, and after a shock-laden entry that leads them to fall back on their traditional memories of how to teach from when they were students, Lortie’s teachers develop an occupational orientation toward unstable psychic rewards in a context of great technical uncertainty. Constrained by the historical weight of school board bureaucracy and isolated in their cellular classrooms through a work culture characterized by the unholy trinity of presentism, conservatism and individualism, teachers give little hope to advocates of change.

### **THE UNHOLY TRINITY**

At the core of the Dan Lortie’s research lay his simple but compelling argument: that teaching is characterized by three orientations which

impede educational improvement—presentism, conservatism, and individualism. Individualism, Lortie claimed, was reinforced and rewarded by a job that had uncertain criteria for successful performance and that drove teachers to rely instead on their own “indicators of effectiveness,” which led them to align their goals with their “own capacities and interests” (Lortie, 1975, p. 210). Teachers therefore had a stake in their own autonomy and were likely to resist changes in conditions that would threaten it. With weak criteria for assessment, lack of clarity on agreed goals and techniques, and “sink or swim” principles of socialization, teachers were isolated in their own classrooms, insulated from collegial feedback, and unlikely to engage in substantial, collective change.

For Lortie, presentism reinforces individualism. Teachers show little enthusiasm “in working together to build a stronger technical culture” (Lortie, 1975, p. 211). They “punctuate their work” into small study units, “concentrating on short-range outcomes as a source of gratification,” and they “do not invest in searching for general principles to inform their work” (Lortie, 1975, p. 212).

Conservatism is the most evident obstacle to change. The only changes that teachers deemed desirable, Lortie argued, were ones that amounted to “more of the same”; confirming current “institutional tactics” by “remov-[ing] obstacles and provid[ing] for more teaching with better support” so that teachers had “a preference for doing things as they have been done in the past” (Lortie, 1975, p. 209).

Lortie’s chief strategic legacy has been to inspire antidotes to individualism and resistance to change in the form of teacher collaboration and collegiality (Fielding, 1999; Hargreaves, 1994; Lieberman, 1990; Nias, Southworth, & Yeomans, 1989), and strong professional (learning) communities (Hall & Hord, 1987; Louis & Kruse, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Eliminate individualism and you cure conservatism—this is the theory of change that has followed in the wake of Lortie’s work. The equation is simple:

*If  $P$  (presentism) +  $I$  (individualism) =  $C$  (conservatism) then reduced individualism will diminish conservatism, or  $<I = <C$  (holding presentism as a presumed or unstated constant).*

Over the past 15 years, through a range of empirical studies that have explicitly referred back to Lortie’s original scholarship, I and others (e.g., Little, 1990) have come to question this formula as a way to eliminate educational conservatism. This work has culminated in the identification of two different kinds of collaboration (collaborative cultures and contrived collegiality); three kinds of presentism (endemic, adaptive, and addictive); and therefore two different kinds of conservatism (old and new).

First, in the late 1980s, when I took up a new position at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the elementary teachers’ unions had

successfully bargained for significant increases in preparation time for teachers away from their classes. Lortie had directly asked Five Towns teachers about their uses of time. He had claimed that one of the reasons teachers were isolated in their classrooms was that they had no time to interact with each other outside them, within the school day. In effect, schools were characterized by an *endemic* or ingrained presentism that defined the occupation as it was. But Ontario had now significantly shifted this variable of time. Would increased time away from classroom demands give teachers more time to reflect and interact with each other, or would they use the time to complete more individual and immediate tasks? Would a little less endemic presentism reduce teacher individualism and therefore also conservatism? The theory of change here was  $\langle P = \langle I = \langle C$ .

I set up a study to test this hypothesis. Two suburban schools districts were selected—one was solid but unremarkable; the other specifically promoted increased collaboration. Teachers in the unremarkable district used their additional preparation time unremarkably—to perform more individual tasks like grading, lesson preparation, or making contact with parents. By contrast, some of the principals in the cluster of collaborative schools were overzealous and tried to force collaboration upon their teachers—instructing them where and when to collaborate and what to collaborate about. The result was what I called *contrived collegiality* and it led resentful teachers to collaborate less (Hargreaves, 1991, 1994). In the middle, were schools with principals who knew how to provide just the right amount of scaffolding so teachers would drive most of the collaboration themselves. Less presentism did not lead to less individualism unless there was a simultaneous focus on this variable, too. And even then, not all collaboration reduced conservatism, with contrived collegiality arguably increasing it.

A decade later, I came back to Lortie again but in a very different policy context. Lortie had worried about the emergence of encroaching bureaucratization on the work lives of teachers. Cohn and Kottcamp (1993), in a replication of Lortie's study, had found that increased standardization in the 1980s had amplified the amounts of presentism, individualism, and conservatism in U.S. schools. With colleagues Ivor Goodson, Dean Fink, and others, I undertook a study from the late 1990s onward of teachers' and leaders' experiences of educational change over the past 30 years in eight New York State and Ontario secondary schools—including within the context of increasing standardization that was evident in both places at that time, and that, in Ontario, included deliberate reductions in teachers' preparation time away from classes (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). The comments of teachers in the study expressed the loss of their psychic rewards because of the "taking away of professional judgment and autonomy." "There just seems to be so much focus on meeting the standards set from the outside that I don't think we get to spend as much time thinking about what we're going to be doing in the classroom and enjoying

it,” one said. Though some teachers were “still excited about teaching,” they confessed that they could not “deal with the system . . . and [were] tired of fighting it” (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 91).

Teachers in this period experienced sinking professional motivation and lost classroom creativity. With the added pressures and loss of preparation time, teachers now collaborated with colleagues less.

This new context was one of *adaptive presentism*. This phenomenon had first been described by Michael Apple and others as one of increasing intensification in teachers’ work, where teachers were expected to respond to increasing pressures and comply with multiple innovations under conditions that were, at best, stable and, at worst, deteriorating. Intensification and initiative overload led to reduced time for relaxation and renewal, lack of time to retool skills and keep up with the field, increased dependency on externally prescribed materials, and cutting of corners and quality (Apple, 1989; Apple & Jungck, 1992; Densmore, 1987; Larson, 1977). My own research revealed how teachers struggled along alone, did not even have time to return children’s work to them promptly, and withdrew from planning and dialogue with their colleagues (Hargreaves, 2003). In the context of educational standardization, imposed reform and adaptive presentism, Lortie’s unholy trinity was exacerbated  $>P+>I=>C$ .

In another policy context, my colleague Dennis Shirley and I recently got a chance to revisit Lortie’s legacy once more. We were invited to evaluate a project in England called Raising Achievement Transforming Learning (RATL). RATL comprised over 300 secondary schools that had experienced a dip in student achievement scores over 1 or 2 years. Its approach was highly collaborative—to promote improvement *by* schools, *with* schools, and *for* schools in peer-driven networks of lateral pressure and support. Participating schools were connected with each other and with self-chosen mentor schools, and invited to conferences that supplied them with inspiration, technical support in analyzing achievement data, as well as a menu of short-, medium-, and long-term strategies for improving teaching and learning and also achievement results. The network’s architecture emphasized transparency of participation as well as of results, and most of its momentum and cohesion was peer to peer and lateral, rather than top down in nature (Hargreaves, Shirley, Evans, Stone-Johnson, & Riseman, 2006).

Reinforcing research on the general achievement effects of teacher collaboration (e.g., Rosenholtz, 1989), two thirds of the schools improved at double the rate of the national secondary school average in just 2 years. RATL elicited immense enthusiasm from educators. They were grateful for assistance in converting mountains of data into practical knowledge that could be acted upon to improve student achievement, and they were appreciative of the concrete strategies they had gathered through RATL’s conferences, visits with mentor schools, and ideas exchanged on the online Web portal. Here was a change network that recognized how energized

educators could, in collaboration with one another, find and apply solutions in their own settings that produced demonstrable success. Again, the theory of change appeared to be

$\langle I = \rangle C$  (with no attention to presentism).

However, once more, this change theory directly addressed only one of Lortie's variables: individualism. RATL had a sting in its shortened achievement tail: a new kind of presentism that was *addictive*. Teachers were enthusiastic and energetic about engaging with and adopting short-term strategies that yielded immediate results rather than about undertaking long-term transformations in teaching and learning (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009a, 2009b). Teachers hurriedly and excitedly swapped successful short-term strategies with their mentors and each other in order to deliver the government's narrowly defined targets and purposes measured by test scores and examination results. The majority of strategies that teachers adopted were simple and short term, or "gimmicky and great" ones such as paying former students to mentor existing ones, having examiners share their grading schemes with students, establishing ways for students to access study strategies online from peers in other schools, and supplying bananas and water to hydrate the brain and raise potassium levels on test days. Schools became addictive organizations, on successive "highs" concerned with meeting targets, raising performance standards, and adjusting strategies right down to continuous, just-in-time interventions with every child.

This push to create data-driven, networked professional learning communities has certainly brought about less individualism but it has also increased the amount of presentism. In turn, this has led to a new conservatism where collaborative interactions are pleasurable, but also hurried, technical, uncritical, and narrow. The revised formula for 21<sup>st</sup>-century teacher cultures of collaboration might therefore read  $\langle I + \rangle P = \textit{new C}$ .

Here, what counts as conservatism is different and deeper than the definition of conservatism made by Lortie. For Lortie, conservatism referred to professional and institutional inertia; to the retention of traditional and familiar practices in the face of more progressive change efforts concerning innovation and the like. The conservatism that accompanies addictive presentism is a deeper one of purpose as well as practice; of ends as well as means. The means hurry interaction, and focus around data-driven improvements and just-in-time interventions to accelerate progress in narrowly defined basics of literacy and numeracy. The ends are concerned with improved achievement scores in narrowly conceived areas of curriculum, or in the slick and speedy world of 21<sup>st</sup>-century corporate skills such as teamwork, flexibility, and adaptability. The ends give no attention in teaching, curriculum, and learning to goals and contents such as envi-

ronmental sustainability, human rights, local history, or creativity and performing arts. This is conservatism of ends by narrowing and exclusion, reinforced by a conservatism (and presentism) of hurried and unreflective means that inhibit professional engagement with these deeper and wider questions of teaching and learning.

### THE AGENDA FOR CHANGE

At the end of his book, Lortie (1975) offers some “speculations on change” (p. 214ff). He points to a whole new superstructure of agencies invested in change whose success depends on teachers changing their practice. In an uncanny anticipation of the large-scale reform obsessions of today, he anticipates how these tendencies can lead to exaggerated claims of success in, for example, the celebration of isolated “lighthouse” schools, or the proclamation of rhetoric that surpasses reality. He says that teacher conservatism will come increasingly under attack and warns against highly structured interventions that are “developed by people whose orientations are different from classroom teachers” and that do not understand teachers’ culture (p. 220). In response, Lortie advocates “more effective colleague relationships” that exercise mutual trust and “responsibility for the performance of peers” (p. 238) in a profession that develops its own experts who engage in the teamwork that characterizes other professions. He recognizes that this will challenge the traditional culture of teaching but argues that this is the prime alternative to external control by administrative superordinates in a vague new culture of “accountability” (p. 223).

Thirty years of educational reform have witnessed efforts to tinker with Lortie’s formula for change. Teachers have been given increased release time (less presentism), but this does not automatically create more collaboration, and through contrived collegiality, it can even manipulate teachers into complying with externally imposed conservatism. More collaboration and professional learning communities have the capacity to reduce *endemic* individualism and conservatism, but in a new age of top-down reform tied to short-term targets in tested literacy and numeracy and examination results, they have merely subjected teachers to yet more despotisms, albeit “enlightened” ones, of autocratic control in which narrow reform goals are hooked up to *addictive* presentism.

Teachers’ work has been manipulated by top-down reformers of all political persuasions. Reformers have been prepared to alter teacher individualism and play with presentism, but the one variable they have refused to change is their own social and political conservatism and its insistence on top-down accountability connected to narrowly tested system outcomes in relation to restricted conceptions of curriculum and learning.

This is made starkly apparent by looking at a highly successful system outside the Anglo-American nations in which Lortie’s work and its legacy

have largely prevailed. In 2007, I took a team to produce a report for the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on the relationship between leadership and school improvement in the world's highest performing country on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests of educational performance—Finland (Hargreaves, Halász, & Pont, 2008). Rebounding from an unemployment rate of almost 19% in 1992, Finland now tops the world on economic competitiveness. The secret of its astonishing recovery, our team learned, is its inspiring mission of creativity and social inclusiveness. This attracts and keeps highly qualified and publicly respected teachers on whom the country's future depends. Applicants to teacher education programs have a less than one in ten chance of acceptance and all are selected on rigorous academic grounds as well as by selecting panels who look at prior experience with young people and personal qualities.

Finnish teachers are paid only at the median of the OECD average, but conditions in all schools are good, public respect is high, and there are strong opportunities for and expectations of collegiality. In cultures of trust, cooperation, and responsibility (there is no Finnish word for “accountability”), these teachers design curriculum together in each municipality within broad national guidelines, and care for all the children in their schools, not just those in their own grades and classes. Their collaboration is not just about delivering other people's outcomes, but about developing curriculum of their own. Schools also collaborate together for the benefit of the cities and communities they serve.

The successful system of Finland meets teachers' psychic needs and rewards, provides substantive and pervasive collaboration (reduced individualism) and avoids presentism by not inundating teachers with waves of external, bureaucratic initiatives. But most importantly, its entire system and society of strong commitment to the public good in which all citizens are served and protected, is an antidote to Anglo-American corporate-driven conservatism—though, paradoxically, this social inclusiveness creates the cohesion that contributes to Finland's high economic performance. Finland demonstrates a new equation for the culture of teaching and change that Anglo-American nations do not dare to contemplate. First, have a mission of less social and political conservatism. Then, create the conditions of reduced individualism and presentism that support it. In formulaic terms, this means  $C = P + I$ .

Lortie's legacy is formidable but also flawed. Intellectually, it is in understanding the nature of teachers' work cultures and their inalienable importance for educational change. Strategically, it has led to the establishment of increased teacher collaboration and professional learning communities. Politically, though, Lortie in particular and the perspective he largely adopted of symbolic interactionism in general, never really undertook a political or critical analysis of the macro system of society. So conservatism was depicted as a cultural or professional trait or sentiment, not a social and

political ideology and power relation. This has enabled Lortie's strategic successors of change advocates and advisers to proclaim that they are combating conservatism when they are altering presentism or individualism. Only by moving outside the Anglo-American assumptions of Lortie's work and educational scholarship, though, can we grasp that the prime enemy of educational change, is actually social and political conservatism. In this respect, a change must first be needed, wanted, and acknowledged in this first of Lortie's variables, before the other two of individualism and presentism follow on behind. Otherwise, the outcome will always be eventual resistance and renewed or reinvented conservatism.

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