

Becoming an Early Dinosaur

Dr. Steven Van Zoost

So there I was, becoming an early dinosaur. This didn't fully register with me until I saw the seniority list in the staff room. There are 44 permanent contract teachers in our high school and I am currently tenth from the top of the school's seniority list. Somehow, I seemed to have jumped up this list. Maybe I hadn't checked the list in a couple of years. In two more years, it appears that I will be fourth from the top of the list. This is what startled me: shortly, I am to become the one of most "senior" on our staff, but I'm only in the middle of my career. I'm becoming a dinosaur much earlier than I anticipated.

It's not that I'm anxious about my changing role on a staff; it's that we are going to be lacking a collective memory. When I first began teaching, the teachers at the top of the seniority list provided us with historical context to educational issues. One teacher notoriously began his statements at our staff meetings with, "Historically..." His comments helped me understand the school system, the school's culture, and how educational issues have been addressed successfully in the past 30-some years. Historically, our Local has had active membership and was known for our contribution to provincial leadership of the NSTU. Now, there are few well experienced educators in our Local leadership. At the top of our staff's seniority list is Gary Schmidt who has been involved in our Local for over 25 years. He writes the following:

My years of teaching have supplied me with a long view which hopefully enables me to remain calm about change, having experienced many educational trends over the past 30 years. I do miss the comfort and insight offered by my colleagues who are now retired. I remember those staff meetings at the former Hants West Rural High, often marked by difficult questions and discussions. I thought these teachers were just grumpy and frustrated. I have learned that this questioning and what appeared at the time to be grumpy complaints were the stuff that helped shape change so that it might be better for both students and teachers. Early career staff might be less likely to question the status quo. However it seems just like yesterday that I was that rookie on staff. Climbing that seniority list starts out at a snail's pace but all of a sudden you are there.

Gary's words remind me of how our professional roles often change with experience. Increasingly, I am feeling the responsibility of being a senior staff member who asks challenging and sometimes uncomfortable questions about our work.

It's not that I'm anxious about working with Millennials – goodness knows, we could use their influx of optimism about making change in the world and bettering our education system. It's encouraging to see teachers at the beginning of their careers become active in our union. At the very bottom of our high school staff's seniority list is Adam Boyd. He is one of our school's union reps and he writes the following:

I had a position in a school where the majority of staff was fairly new to teaching, and out of necessity teachers without much experience took on many of the leadership roles and positions of responsibility. New teachers need mentors, and sometimes it was necessary for teachers with just a few years of experience to become mentors, putting additional stress on them. Newer teachers tend to have a lot on their plates, and it is easy for them to take on too much and burn out. I worry about the high number of teachers that leave the profession after just a few years, and I think that having a balance of experience in a school is important so that new teachers can be supported as they learn their craft.

Adam's words remind me about the importance of senior staff to connect with new staff, just as those who came before me reached out and supported me.

It's not that I'm [too] vain about showing my age, or that my pedagogical stances are dated. Staying young in teaching is partly about staying current in best prac-

tices. Ongoing and meaningful learning is part of what defines being a professional. For me, professional development has defined how I see myself as a teacher. It's important to me to look for new ways of thinking, new ways of working with today's young people, and new ways of envisioning education for today's world. I remember my grandfather learning *not* to wind his wristwatch and my mother learning how to set up a shared PhotoStream account on her iPad. I have no doubt that I'll continue learning in order to stay with the times. For teaching, this means keeping current with students' interests, needs and ways of thinking about themselves and the world. Dinosaurs have to adapt to remain relevant and survive.

It's not that I haven't had excellent dinosaurs clear the path for me – I am grateful for their grace, grins and generosity. Many of those teachers were proudly teaching third generations of their students' families. There are few — if any — teachers in our school who could make such claims now. The teachers ahead of me set the professional standards that I expect from myself and others. Without them shaping our vision, a new demographic of teachers are setting the direction of teaching. It's not that I'm unwilling or unable to let go of teaching practices that have worked in the past. I'm keen to try new pedagogical approaches that resonate with today's students.

It's that dinosaurs are often seen as extinct or at best, slow—at least in the stereotype that I carry in my head. I remember being in Grade 3 and sketching and describing dinosaurs, especially the Brachiosaurus. I must have liked drawing this creature because it is

the first image that comes to mind when I think of the word "dinosaur." Somehow, I need you to know that I'm no slow-moving creature. I have to stay faster than my 17-year-old students; do they go home and learn how to create an app just for fun? Design an infographic? Think about how to change the world? I do. My students keep me young.

It's also that I'm too early to be a dinosaur —I'm only in the middle of my career. Redefining our Locals, our schools and our vision of education will now be done by early and mid-career teachers. There won't be many in our NSTU who are "near-retirement" or who can help us see problems with a wider lens that comes from experience. Instead, our vision for the union will come from Millennials and early dinosaurs. This is somehow most unexpected in my career trajectory—that we'd be reinventing ourselves without the voices of the most experienced.

And, it's that I miss my mentors. I miss my history with the closest of colleagues. If you believe that we learn from experience, then mentorship and collegiality is integral to growth. Now, it's time for me to be mentored and learn from those behind me on the seniority list. Now, it's time to gracefully learn how to become a senior member of a staff much earlier than I expected. Now, it's time for all of us to re-envision our schools and our union with the voices of Millennials and young dinosaurs.

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