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Thoughts on Discomfort, Modeling Vulnerability, and a Culture of Critique

My heart raced and my mouth grew dry. I sat staring at my identity web, stealing glances at those next to me. *Am I doing this right? Is espresso drinker part of my identity? No, that's stupid. Don't be stupid.* I flipped the paper over to look at the guide with words I didn't want to grapple with staring me back in the face: RACE. ETHNICITY. CLASS. CULTURE. FAMILY. The only piece of my identity I felt comfortable writing was my name. I felt ownership and even an odd amount of pride given its uniqueness. Outside of that, well, I wanted to crawl into a ball or just flee the room.

The day before we started our identity web, our graduate cohort developed a list of norms. The second norm listed was, "Embrace discomfort." As someone with anxiety, this is a concept that I'm very familiar with. I heard it first in a yoga class that encouraged the practitioners to hold a pose that was uncomfortable and to breathe into the discomfort. It's very easy to say and yet very hard to do. I was uncomfortable with so many aspects of my identity. I didn't want to have to admit that I grew up in a backwards, racist desert town on the outskirts of Los Angeles. I didn't want to admit that my father passed away and that my family unit was weak and disconnected. Most of all, I didn't want to admit that I was White. I'll be the first to own that I experience much white privilege and have throughout my life. It's an odd form of cognitive dissonance. I own and recognize my whiteness and the effects it has had on my life, but I don't want to associate with that racial identity. Given that I don't fully know my racial background and people often ask if I am a combination of White, Latina, and Asian, I instead copped-out and wrote down, "light skinned." For a variety of reasons and negative associations I have for what it means to be White, I did not want to identify as such. Despite the number of thoughtful, progressive White people in my life, I hated the concept of being White given what that means in many other parts of our country. In the simplest of classroom activities, I could not face that part of my identity. I felt a genuine physical discomfort at the thought of someone else in the room seeing my identity web, so, short of lighting the paper on fire, I tore it up as soon as class was over.

I ask my students to be this open each year and yet here I was unable to commit to the same level vulnerability in my own graduate course with the most welcoming, inclusive group of adults I've had the pleasure of engaging in educational scholarship with. This moment reminded me of the importance of experience. Had I not been asked to create my identity web, I don't think I would have been able to address or even admit that I was uncomfortable with being White. There is much to unpack there but it was a key step that allowed me to understand at least one aspect of the student experience.

Ultimately, my journey through the High Tech High Graduate School of Education course "Core Values and Foundations" and the new teacher Odyssey consisted primarily of discomfort through experience. Nothing in my entire teaching career has shed as much light on the student lens as being a student again myself. "Student" has now become a new part of my identity and shaped much of how I interpreted and reflected upon this week. I've come to realize

that I must continue to push myself to embrace discomfort, model vulnerability, and critique everything (within reason) in order to refine school and classroom practices.

Slice - how Odyssey affected me as a teacher

I started at High Tech High (HTH) in 2011 and yet, here in August 2017, this is the first time I've experienced PBL from the student perspective during the project slice. It's such a simple concept, but when I first went through my Odyssey the slice was only an outing to my recollection, not a project experience. Going through a slice as a participant-observer had its unique challenges, but it will have its greatest effect on me as a classroom teacher.

My project slice had all of the elements of a Project Based Learning (PBL) project: field experience as a launch, collaboration with peers, utilizing 21st century skills, and a final exhibition. Yet, at the end of day one I couldn't shake these feeling of confusing and a lack of engagement on my part. I couldn't quite unpack what I was initially feeling. I just didn't really understand the point of it all. The why for my particular project slice wasn't clear to me, and I immediately disengaged as a result.

It wasn't until I talked with participants about their slices that I realized what was missing: authenticity. The homelessness project slice was a bright example of authenticity. They had an authentic human connection at the core of their project. Their launch was thoughtful and intriguing and allowed for participants to grapple with and engage in the content. And on day two, the pressure of their exhibition meant so much more. People's stories were in their hands. They had a duty and an obligation to tell their stories to the best of their abilities. I wanted to dig into that topic area and soak up the facilitation moves like a sponge.

Ultimately, however, I'm glad that I wasn't in that slice because I learned more about the student experience that didn't fully meet my needs as a learner. On day three of Odyssey, we completed the Mild, Medium, Spicy activity with Kaleb Rashad and Tim McNamara utilizing Expeditionary Learning's Attributes of High Quality Work. We evaluated different project ideas for their potential for complexity, craftsmanship, and authenticity. It truly hit me then that my slice was lacking authenticity and while there was potential for craftsmanship and complexity, the time frame simply didn't allow for it. Because of this experience, I was able to identify where projects can fall short. Looking back, I can see how many of projects provided the same experience to my students. Moving forward, I will genuinely be more thoughtful about creating and implementing projects that cultivate environments for truly high quality work.

The other piece that was missing from the slice experience was a connection to the following day's work. After speaking with several Odyssey participants, I realized that feeling was ubiquitous amongst new teachers at my school site. During our conversation, the idea emerged that the slices themselves should have been evaluated using the Mild, Medium, and Spicy protocol and/or a backwards planning document of the various slice agendas shared and dissected. This reminded me of the importance of being thoughtful and consistent with the language we use. At HTH there are plenty of new acronyms and buzzwords to learn and the burden of doing so can be lessened by attaching that vocabulary to experience, just like we would do in the classroom for our students. If I were a new teacher, I would have appreciated learning how and why my slice facilitators planned the two days looking at the same document I would then use to plan my own project. For me thinking of my potential as a leader, this idea

forced me to reflect on the fact that no matter our age, we all require scaffolds to understand content and tasks.

Model Vulnerability

In his article, “Improving Relationships Within the School House,” Roland S. Barth notes that, “You *can* lead where you *will* go” (Barth, 2006, p. 11). He utilizes an example of when he was a principal and, after staff pressure, allowed a neighboring principal to observe him at a staff meeting. The purpose of this observation was to model collegiality. By allowing a peer to observe him at work, he opened up the door for teachers to be open to classroom observations by other teachers. I prefer to think he was modeling vulnerability, a characteristic I intend to hone as a leader. I did it rarely when I started as a teacher, but this past year I made major strides in it. I wrote every essay from my own point of view and shared it when the students did. I, for the first time, did my own final Presentation of Learning (POL) and shared it as a model. The POL was raw and personal, full of tears and the reality of my experience that year. Afterwards, many students came up to me and thanked me for sharing and trusting them with that information. Others indicated that they wished they had known about my struggles sooner in the year. By the time it came for student POLs, my teaching partner and I observed that we had some of the most open and truthful POLs we had seen in our entire teaching career. I attribute this to the willingness both my partner and I had to be open, emotional, and real with the students as models.

The importance of modeling vulnerability became even more apparent in my conversations with Odyssey participants and my empathy interview with an new-to-HTH 10th grade humanities teacher. To my surprise, they stated that they felt uncomfortable asking questions they deemed stupid. They were left with so many unanswered questions but worried about appearing lazy or dumb (M. Schultz, personal communication, August 11, 2017). In other words, they felt uncomfortable with vulnerability. When I probed further about why, a theme emerged. There was so much focus on the final outcome of PBL and the sizzle of events like exhibition that they felt like there were no pitfalls of PBL. For example, the film *Most Likely to Succeed* left the participants wondering more about the day-to-day of the project and all of the other students in the room rather than the two it focused on. “What about the kid who’s running around with scissors?” one participant asked.

Another moment during Odyssey that challenged teacher self-confidence was the Mild, Medium, and Spicy activity led by Kaleb Rashad and Tim McNamara. The hierarchical categorization of project ideas left these participants feeling deflated or criticized if they had a similar project idea that was deemed “Mild” or “Medium.” Additionally, the Spicy categorization still left out the nitty gritty details. A single sentence describing a “Spicy” project sounds great to an outsider, but as a new teacher wondering what the third Tuesday at 10:12 a.m. looks like, it can be daunting and confusing.

A big concern I have about these moments, is that they might result in what Roland Barth (2006) calls parallel play. In other words, teachers who feel uncomfortable reaching out and asking questions given the flashiness of what HTH celebrates and the fear of appearing as an imposter, might isolate themselves. That isolation will lead to less collegiality within the school. I’m reminded of the culture the math teachers at my school build around mistakes which is that mistakes should be expected, inspected, and respected. I’m wondering how we can build a similar culture around the celebration of mistakes in the HTH culture? Can we create a structure

that allows teachers to share mistakes as a way to unpack them but also as a way to say, “Hey, we’re all in this together, and nobody’s perfect.” To borrow a phrase from social work research professor, Brené Brown, how can we embrace the “gifts of imperfection” within our practice to build collegiality, community, and a common brother/sisterhood of practitioners?

I think HTH honors and celebrates vulnerability in a lot of ways but there is still work to be done. I’m left wondering how we can *truly* support new teachers who lack the self-confidence or sense of belonging in our atmosphere. Can we create a culture that celebrates and shares mistakes? Can we focus on other aspects that make our classrooms successful rather than the big, sometimes unrealistic exhibitions?

Critique & Refine

High Tech High cultivates a culture of critique. This culture is necessary to collegiality and growth, but I’ve noticed that I’ve been overly critical over the course of Odyssey. I’ve mentioned my criticisms of my slice experience but I observed it as a thread throughout my Odyssey experience. I facilitated a project tuning that was ultimately successful and a good experience for those involved. When asked how it went afterwards, however, I immediately jumped into what I deemed a facilitation mistake. The questioner stopped me and actively forced me to identify something positive. The fact that I was being stopped mid-sentence to be more positive shook me. *Isn’t this our culture though? We’re never good enough.* I’m starting to realize the danger in this mindset and have questions around how to break free of it.

My first thought is related to an idea from the Chip and Dan Heath’s book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*. They present the case study of Jerry Sternin’s work with *Save the Children* in an attempt to assist malnourished children in Vietnam (Heath & Heath, 2010). It’s a large, complex issue. If one focuses on solving all of the deficits related to malnourishment in Vietnamese children, nothing will happen. Instead, “Sternin’s strategy was to search the community for *bright spots* - successful efforts worth emulating” (Heath and Heath, 2010 p. 28). I am at pivotal point in my teaching career where I need a significant mindset shift to looking for bright spots, rather than problems. I recently switched subject matters and am finishing up my third credential. I’m starting graduate school and am gaining a new, 9th grade advisory. I’m taking on a meatier 6th period with another teacher and am starting the year with a new-to-HTH teaching partner. I’m going to fail at points. I won’t do everything perfectly nor to the best of my ability. If I continue to view my world with a deficit mindset, I will crumble under the pressures of this job.

I don’t think, however, that critique is useless, especially in arenas where it rarely occurs. A piece of critique in the readings that struck me was in Santiago Rincón-Gallardo’s (2017) article, “Three Theories of Educational Change.”

Freire and Dewey need each other not because either of their ideas fall short of causing deep learning when fully embraced and enacted, but because both sets of ideas have failed to take hold in the vast majority of schools across entire educational systems. As revolutionary thinker Antonio Gramsci would put it, they have both failed to establish a new hegemony--that is, a set of ideas, beliefs, and practices that are widely shared in a social group, and become the new taken-for-granted. They have fallen short of subverting and redefining the institutional culture and power relationships of schooling, which gets as much in the way of learning (a core concern for Dewey) as in the way of social justice (a core concern for Freire).

I echo Rincón-Gallardo's main critique, especially given that Freire and Dewey's ideas have been around for quite sometime. It's not a new idea that student work should matter outside of the classroom as John Dewey says in *Experience and Education* (1938), "The educator by the very nature of his work is obliged to see his present work in terms of what it accomplishes, or fails to accomplish, for a future whose objects are linked with those of the present" (Dewey, p. 76).

I think the reasons why these ideas have not fully taken hold, even within HTH, are multifaceted and nuanced. I do have some thoughts about this question as a sixth year HTH staff member. Comparing this Odyssey with my first one, there are many similarities. I was left questioning if we really are pushing boundaries. Or are we, to use a phrase Larry often returns to, regressing to the mean? Ben's "cautionary tales" talk is the same. Larry and Rob's messages are the same. The voices present in leadership positions in higher leadership are the same. What is being presented might be new to outsiders, but how are we working to truly push our organization internally?

I don't intend to say that changing an entire system with many stakeholders is an easy task. I'm not naïve enough to say I have all of the answers, but I really want to continue to question and push the evolution of HTH. According to Ben Daley, our student population is 70% people of color whereas our staff is only 30% people of color, and I heard this ratio comparison at my first Odyssey too. Given the similarity in messages, I'm left questioning in what ways can we continue to push the equity boundaries within our organization? I hesitated to critique this point, worrying that my words were too divisive and ignorant of the thoughtful, passionate individuals and educators who work hard to make HTH the beautiful place that it is. But I'm also pushed by Lisa Delpit's eloquent words in her article, "Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator" (2007). She states, "It is time to look closely at all elements of our education system, particularly those elements we consider progressive; time to see if there is minority involvement and support, and if not, to ask why; time to reassess what we are doing in public schools... to include other voices, other experiences; time to seek the diversity in our educational movements that we talk about seeking in our classrooms" (Delpit, 2007, p. 185). High Tech High is one of "those elements we consider progressive" and as Larry and Rob state, it is first and foremost an equity project. If those statements are to remain true, further inquiry and change is required.

The other way in which I see our organization regressing to the mean is from one of the most impactful moments from Odyssey which was in no way planned. Janie came into our slice on day two to apologize for having used the phrase, "off the reservation," in her opening statements that morning. This moment will stay with me for several reasons. Firstly, I want to commend Janie for recognizing the phrase as potentially harmful, researching it, and then addressing every slice group to both apologize and educate everyone about the phrase. This was beautiful example of a school leader modeling vulnerability (Barth 2006). By doing that, Janie demonstrated that it is okay to admit a mistake and own up to it in a thoughtful, non-defensive manner.

Her apology also struck me because I hadn't thought twice about her use of the phrase. I vaguely remembered her saying it about a slice group, but it blew right past me. Because she took the time to address the historical context of that statement, I was forced to reckon with the fact that it meant nothing to me at the time. To my recollection, I've never used the phrase, but I wasn't cognitively questioning the use of it. Now, thanks to Janie, I am.

What happened after she apologized, however, might stick with me more. There was a white male in my slice group who, according to my notetaking side of my inquiry journal (Frank, 1999), spoke more frequently and for a lengthier period of time than other slice participants. As soon as Janie stopped speaking, this individual immediately broke in and said, “Well, I wasn’t offended by it, but did you figure out who needs to get fingerprinted?” After he asked that, the majority of the room laughed. I felt extremely uncomfortable, however. Here was this woman, walking around to mostly complete strangers, admitting she had made a racially insensitive statement. Her vulnerability was glaring and yet this white male begins with, “Well, I wasn’t offended.” *Of course YOU weren’t offended*, was what I first thought. Janie went on to answer his question and then left the room. And that was it - the slice moved forward in whatever we were doing at the time.

I was left with so many questions that stayed with me throughout the rest of Odyssey. Why did he feel the need to speak right then? Did he regret what he said? Should the slice leaders have said something or addressed the situation more thoughtfully after Janie left? Should I have said something? This is the difficult part about effective leadership. It oftentimes takes significant processing time to understand and reflect on a situation. It made me wonder how many teachable moments I had let slide in my classroom simply because I didn’t go through the processing time required to address it thoughtfully.

Even in a progressive environment such as the HTH Odyssey, despite attempted equitable structures, the regression to the mean occurs. The white male speaks first and most. Social niceties and desire to avoid conflict mean silence reigns when inequitable moments occur. I’m very curious how, as a leader, I can work for innovation in equity to avoid the regression to the mean.

Conclusion

I’m struck by how much this last week in the Odyssey and the Core Values and Foundations affected me. The introspection around my Odyssey experience allowed for me to come to terms with how overly critical I can be. This connects to Goleman’s (2001) ideas in his article, “Primal Leadership: The hidden driver of great performance.” If I am breeding a negative atmosphere by only looking for the problems to solve, I will directly infect my colleagues and students with that mindset. I applied to graduate school in part to be more like former director, Lillian Hsu. The “Effective Leadership” document is essentially a description of her leadership capabilities. She has an incredible ability to celebrate a teacher in the present and guide them to a stronger future without ever focusing on deficits. Above all, she was empowering and inspiring of students and staff alike. If I’m focusing on deficits, I’ll never emulate Lillian’s leadership style. Recognizing this issue is a great first step, but I’m left with two large questions:

1. How do I empower myself, my students, and my colleagues to approach this work when they struggle with issues around: self-confidence, identity/positionality, belonging, and imposter syndrome?
2. How do we build a culture and community of critique that TRULY supports vulnerability?

I'm also left with this conflict around wanting to continue to push and evolve myself and the organization but also giving myself and others grace to make mistakes. The norm "hard on content, soft on people" is an obvious solution to this conflict but it doesn't answer how a teacher who is so passionately driven in their work can disconnect their self-worth from their work. Embedded within that dilemma is a whole host of psychological and positionality issues, but I look forward to identifying bright spots to emulate within our schools and classrooms.

[Final Product Rubric](#)
[Personal Learning Plan.](#)

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