Tip of the Iceberg: A Humbling Introduction to HTH

The Odyssey, which is an acculturation to High Tech High for new teachers, combined with our coursework has been an educational experience unlike anything that I have ever had. My wife and I were conversing about my position this year and as I was leaving Denver this past weekend, she said something very powerful, "I know that this is hard and the emotions will be extremely mixed all year, however I am jealous with regards to you being able to have the best educational experience of your life." Even though I had not started my time at High Tech High (HTH), we both knew how powerful a residency, cohort program can be. Throw in the fact that I would be doing my residency at HTH, a school philosophy that we both agree with, and we both knew that my year would be packed with learning experiences. In my short time at HTH I have put together some core synergies. Ideas and beliefs that are at the core of HTH. My sampling of these essentials to HTH include relationships, disruption of traditional power dynamics, reflective practice, culture building, and learning.

Relationships

Part of what makes this, my experience at HTH, so special is the emphasis on relationships. I have observed, both through explicit and implicit means, the fact that relationships are at the essence of HTH. We took part in the project slice in order to experience what the students experience. A project slice is an introduction into the larger project that will be undertaken. It involves (at least for this particular project slice) a field trip that exposed us to an expert, a complete sensory immersion, interviews with people associated with the particular experience/project, reflections, and an art piece demonstrating our understanding. My biggest

takeaway was the development of relationships. On day one of my field notes I recorded

interviews with a merchant in Tijuana, a man who just sold his car in Mexico City and was

waiting in line to get back into San Diego, observations of our group talking with each other and

other people waiting in line, and the quick informal relationships each group developed in order to

complete our art project. I think the most unexpected relationship comment came from the

Casa Del Tunel director when he stated that he could not develop any client relations because of

the long wait line (anywhere from 30 minutes to 4 hours) to cross back into the US. People

enjoy the museum but the lasting memory is that of the long wait line and not the museum. We

had a field journal that "needed" to be filled out in order to capture our experience. Each part of

the project slice forced us into dialogue with another person, learning in isolation was not a

natural "fit." Although this is the first year of the Odyssey experience for GSE residents, the

intentionality of split days has allowed us to develop deeper relationships with the leadership

cohort and our instructors, the teachers going through the Odyssey, and be able to reflect upon

the experience that we and the new teachers are going through. Berger states that excellence is

born out of culture (Berger, 2003), and quality relationships is the essential building block of

culture.

Disruption of Traditional Power Dynamics

        Relationships seem to be a core value of HTH but one in which was not necessarily my

own core value. However a HTH value that I have observed which mirrors my own ethos would

be that of empowerment. The empowerment of non-traditional power holders. Riordan in his

New Urban High Schools report, states that teacher as designer is a design principle that must

be incorporated in order for future schools to be successful (Riordan, 1998). Essentially what I

have seen is that teachers are the main power holders of the organization. HTH has flipped the traditional hierarchical structure so that teachers are given the most decision making powers with everyone else in a support role. Larry Rosenstock, CEO of HTH, and Rob Riordan, President of the HTH graduate school, on multiple occasions stated that student empowerment is an additional area that they would like HTH to explore. On the fifth day of Odyssey Larry turned to Rob and said something rather powerful, he stated that "... maybe we should rethink this idea of teacher as a designer into student and teacher as co-designers." Then during my school retreat we had students embedded in the thinking and design process. The idea was that students know students best and if we are striving for equity, than what better access point than through student voice. On day two of the retreat 22 students (9 Sophomores, 4 Juniors, and 9 Seniors) came to HTHCV. Teachers either came together in teaching teams, grade level teams, or content teams. For the next 3 hours teachers asked students questions, thought aloud and asked for feedback, conducted dialogue between the adult team while asking for input from the students. I noted in my field journal that a couple of common themes came across (I was able to visit several working groups). Every group asked the students what they wanted out of the year and if it was older students, what they remembered the most from that particular year. Students seemed to all relay the fact that they enjoyed the messiness of projects gone awry. Not that the projects did not turn out well, but at some point in the project something went wrong and the students had to figure out next steps along the way with the teacher. This co-designer piece was what the students most enjoyed. They said time and time again that in previous schools, had a lesson not gone as planned, it would have immediately been terminated or the teacher would have dictated what needed to be done. The "real world" aspect of a misstep in the middle of a project and needing to adjust, made the students feel empowered and bought into the school. I think this speaks really well to what Riordan refers to as adult world immersion

(Riordan, 1998) by allowing the students to experience failure but in a safe environment. It also speaks to Hsu's philosophy that kids deserve educational opportunities to rival that of their peers from more privileged backgrounds (Hsu). This experience, far exceeds any educational experience that any other student will have in school, which makes sense considering the leader of the school is Lillian Hsu.

Larry Rosenstock said the other day that everything is geared towards students, with the front line educators being the teachers. He also stated that as you add more administrators/managers the decision making grows further and further away from the people implementing the decisions. Thus a disconnect begins to occur. Ron Berger's statement "A visionary superintendent stayed in his post for twenty-five years and supported a hiring process in which the staff had an integral voice in hiring new teachers and new principals." best sums up my thinking why trusting teachers with the success of a school equates to overall success of the education system (Berger, 2003, pp.52). Through this "power" teachers are empowered to be learners and designers. Trust is given to people who normally are not given much trust in the education system. Teachers are truly, and not just in word, given the responsibility and leeway to do what is best for students. Barth (2006) calls this a trusting, collegial relationship, which in turn allows for maximum innovation and engagement (Hsu). I observed this both at Odyssey, teachers critiquing other teachers' projects through project tuning, as well as at High Tech High Chula Vista's (HTHCV) retreat through ample unstructured time for project creation.

Reflective Practice

With trust and empowerment, accountability usually is not far behind. In this respect I have seen that all personnel at HTH are willing to admit their mistakes. A reflective mindset

permeates the organization. Again this points to Berger's idea of an ethic of excellence through a culture of critique (Berger, 2003). HTH personnel see it as their job to improve, which means constant revisions to all aspects of their lives. To me it seems that this is both sought after and gradually ingrained into people. I see this in new teachers who have not had the chance to be acculturated yet. In my field journal I noted several occasions in which people were intrinsically motivated to be reflective. I also noted several times that people were "Hard on content, and soft of people," which is a HTH ideology. Without prompting people asked probing questions and challenged others thinking, but in a kind manner.   On numerous occasions I witnessed veteran teachers who continuously have retracted a previous statement. For example, both Larry and Rob made statements that they later revisited in order to either clarify or nullify what was previously stated. Another example of this would be with the project tunings that occurred during Odyssey. It takes a true culture of critique and reflection to trust that unacculturated teachers will be "hard on content, and soft on people" with veteran teacher's work. Talking with new teachers, some seem to naturally have this reflective practice while others seem to crave an environment that allows for reflective practice. Although I stated willingness to make mistakes as my observation, making mistakes becomes cumbersome if reflection does not accompany it. The fact that it is encouraged for personnel to make mistakes, early and often, is something that I have not seen anywhere else.

This entire year will be filled with learning. As my title implies, I know that my first three weeks at HTH are merely the tip of the iceberg and I can not tell how much learning will take place nor the direction; only that the learning will be exponential from this point on. I had an aha moment this past week when we were discussing our interview questions. The purpose of the Odyssey came to the forefront of our discussion. We ended up realizing that Odyssey is designed as a culture building exercise that the participants do not really realize is a culture

building exercise. My group was talking about Frank's *Ethnographic Eyes* as well as Moll's *Funds of Knowledge* and thinking about what we know and what we have observed. As veteran educators we have gone through orientations, not necessarily like Odyssey, in varying capacities. Through these different capacities (new teacher, new administrator, facilitator, participant, etc), our observation has been that these types of activities are more about acculturation than skills building. HTH seems rather intentional about everything, and it seemed as though Odyssey is a establishing the groundwork for *The Roots of Connoisseurship and Criticism* (Eisner, 2004). New educators were being introduced to these two concepts without explicitly naming the terminology. They were beginning to surrender to the work and re-educating their perception (Eisner, 2004). These new HTH people were completely engaged during an activity that normally sees teachers with laptops and phones open and eyes directed toward the clock. They also were engaged in conversations about what this means for them and how they can bridge the gap between what they know and what is expected of them from HTH. Odyssey also progresses veteran teachers connoisseurship and criticism through "rendering what they come to know in a language which is accessible to others and enables others to "re-see" that work" as well as "recognize differences that are subtle but significant in a particular qualitative display" (Eisner, 2004).Veteran teachers were an integral part of the Odyssey experience. Nevertheless, I do think that this growing the connoisseurship and criticism master of veteran teachers is an area of Odyssey that could possibly be a growth area for HTH.

Culture Building

Berger states that quality culture equates to success (Berger, 2003). Through both Odyssey and HTHCV's retreat I found that it is not unusual for the first 1-3 weeks to be devoted

to building classroom culture. These two efforts,Odyssey and classroom culture building, made me realize just how important culture building is to the success of an organization. Although they may not be core values, personal growth and personal understanding are essential to HTH. For me these two are both divergent and convergent ideologies. Personal understanding is an internal reflection of self that requires an internal dialogue whereas personal growth is an external "something" that is done to the self. However, one must know thy self in order to figure out where the self needs to grow. They feed off of each other, in a sense they are the Yin/Yang of a person and I think HTH as a whole. Ben Daley, HTH Chief Academic Officer, in his tips for success stated that teachers must teach to their passion but that they should stick with what feels comfortable at first. This statement is quintessential to the personal growth/personal understanding relationship: Do what is comfortable while figuring your how to teach to your passion. I think about a quote that I heard at Odyssey that essentially stated we hire great people and then fit them into the classroom. This idea is rather radical in that content openings are not the number one driver of hiring. If you find a passionate person who has the ability to grow, the content teaching will follow; or the content offered will switch to accommodate. For me this speaks to the idea of teachers as craftsmen (Berger, 2003) and intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1996). If we want our students to be craftsmen, the highest compliment in the professional world (Berger, 2003), than we need to look for craftsmen rather than a position. Deci (1996) states that intrinsic motivation equates to greater health, well-being, and performance. Again, if we look for craftsmen that are intrinsically motivated, we are setting up ideal models for our students; thus providing examples of excellence everywhere. (Berger, 2003) Through hiring intrinsically motivated craftsmen, HTH provides examples of excellence for the students and avoids subpar examples merely to "fill" a position.

Through our reading concentrations, I can infer that personal growth is a value that HTH wants in its people and wants to encourage the students to develop. Knowing thy self seems to be a worthwhile pursuit, in fact Ben Daley put it rather poignantly in his last tip to find a balance and take care of yourself. He stated that he is a recovering workaholic and that Larry Rosenstock gave him the best advice; you can either work 100 hours a week for a couple of years or work 50 hours a week for the rest of your life. This really struck me because coming from Denver, the atmosphere embodies the reverse: work harder, not smarter. Whereas here at HTH, my assumption is that "work smarter, not harder" permeates the culture. An example of this would be in a teacher session that I attended. A statement that the teacher made really struck me. He stated that each year (he is in his tenth year) he has worked less and less hours, and his classroom has gotten better and better. Internal growth as an organization as well as smart growth are keys to success. This comes across through the fact that HTH is authorized to open more schools than it currently operates, however it has chosen to slowly build out.   To me this addresses the mindset of achievement debt rather than achievement gap (Ladson-Billings, 2006). To view through a debt means a slow methodical repayment that ensures a continuous progression at the expense of immediate gratification. It seems to me that HTH wants to build a critical mass of personnel that can support a new school opening; for it is the people that make HTH successful and not necessarily the system. I get this sense that internal growth is important through the fact that most, if not all, of the personnel that are out of the classroom either began in the classroom or at bare minimum as a school director. Also, as Larry pointed out 4 directors returned to the classroom this year. For me this point is enormous. It means that you should take on positions that allow you to grow but not to overextend yourself in the process. It also means a horizontal organization where no position is elevated above another, which in

turn allows for fluidity between positions. People are allowed to enter into a position at the right time in their lives.

Essential Learning

We often forget how to dream as adults. We either never really knew how to dream, were told too often to stop dreaming, or never had our dreams reached (too aspirational). For me I think that it is essential for educators to dream of the what ifs. Last night the priest during his homily made a statement that synthesises this point perfectly. He said it is better to shoot for the moon and fall short than to shoot for the ground and crash.   It allows for constant hope and inspiration. It keeps me motivated in those dog days when I am counting down the school days to summer. Coming to HTH is an aspiration unto itself. To be in an environment that respects teachers as the stewards that they are but also giving them the resources and respect to actually fulfill this stewardship is amazing. Hsu's thinking that innovation thrives when teachers have ample freedom to pursue their passions and exercise their creativity, best summarizes HTH. In only a week my experience has made me want to go back to the drawing board to resubmit my school proposal while also creating something brand new. I want to be able to create a school that mirrors HTH's philosophies of relationships, internal growth, service to others first, and equity. Larry Rosenstock when addressing the people at the Odyssey during his welcome speech stated that HTH is not a model but rather an example. BASF has a motto of "We do not make a lot of products you buy. We make a lot of products you buy better;" I want to take HTH and make a better version of it. I know that sounds very bombastic, and I am not saying that HTH is a bad school. Quite the opposite, I think HTH is amazing. However, John Dewey's thinking combined with Larry's history of education has me stuck on this idea of

resetting to zero. It has been nearly a century since Dewey's work but his view that 'traditional"

education is autocratic and inhumane still holds true (Dewey, 1938). I also think that his idea that

traditional education does not take into account the internal powers of a person, is still evident

today (Dewey, 1938). Think about the enormous bureaucracies that most school districts

operate as. Central administration controls everything from curriculum to when bathroom

breaks occur. Teachers and students are treated more as automatons on an assembly line

than autonomous beings with complexities unfathomable to a central governing body. As a

history teacher it resembles the struggle between the American colonies and Great Britain:

taxation without representation. King George (central admin) seems to be making decisions that

are not congruent with what the colonists (teachers and students) need or want. Being a third

generation educator, I have the ability to reflect upon education through the eyes of my family and

as Larry stated, nothing is new. I want to help push that reset position away from zero and into a

progressive setting. Education and people in general will at some point in time revert back to

what feels comfortable. My aspiration is to move what makes people feel comfortable with the

uncomfortable or at least keep them there long enough for the reset to meet them halfway.

For my own personal growth aspirations, I want to become a better listener. I want to

really hear (and feel) what the people around me are talking about. Weisglass calls this

constructivist listening (Weissglass, 1990). For me this is important because we tend ot forget

that teachers bring their humanness to the job (Weissglass, 1990)   To be more mindful of my

current situation so that I can really help the person., to help that person embrace their

humanness and utilize their own strengths and genius to solve the problem.   Problem solving is

an addiction for me. The ability to help another person by solving their problems makes me feel

good. However, Weissglass (1990) points out constructivist listening empowers the speaker.

Weissglass (1990) also points out that constructivist listening has exponential effects in that it

encourages others to become constructivist listeners themselves, which in turn means people solving their own problems, reduction of stress, increased reflective practice, and a compassionate workforce. Thus surrounding the students with examples of excellence for what a well rounded adult resembles. However, in order to help people really grow constructivist listening is a key element. I want to get to the point that instead of immediately jumping to problem solver mode, I listen to the speaker and help them understand their problem and possibly solve it themselves. Through my graduate work, I know that this is the right path for optimal human learning and motivation. It is just so hard for me to do this when often the answer seems so clear and present. Nevertheless, to help education and those around me grow (as well as myself), I need to listen. Simply listen and take in as much as I can so that I can be a BASF to education and a constructivist listener to colleagues.

Relationships, disruption of traditional power dynamics, reflective practice, culture building, and learning have been central themes that have continuously been present in my experience. I think that HTH is intentional in everything it does. I have yet to figure out if their intentionality breads accidental intentionality or if all of the intentionality that I have seen is planned. I leave Odyssey and my first several weeks at HTH with more questions than when I came. My thinking is that although my questions will be answered by the end of the year, more than likely I will have many more questions still lingering. Which at the end of the day sums up HTH's main goal of instilling passion.

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Appendix A: Personal Learning Plan

Personal Learning Plan (PLP)

The **Personal Learning Plan (PLP)** is an evolving touchstone document used to develop your learning goals and reflect on your growth as an educator and leader throughout the program. PLP reflections may be shared with your program director, advisor and critical friends and be used to guide reflective conversations throughout the year.

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PLP Reflection: Please use the following prompts to guide your PLP reflection.

1. What are your **personal learning goals** for the program? What **hopes and dreams** to do you have for your **experience** this year?

    ● I would like to learn how to create an organization that turns inward for answers and allows for empowerment of the teachers.
    ● I would like to learn how to be a better listener. I want to be able to truly hear what people are telling me, help my colleagues become true listeners, and be able to be of service to others
    ● One hope is that I can internalize the core values of HTH and be able to not replicate but utilize them as a compass.
    ● Another hope is to learn, through practice, how to develop people (well not develop because that means you are doing something to someone, but help a person grow in the direction that they want, which will help their students, and thus help the school).

2. In regards to **developing your craft as an educator,**

    a. What can you **celebrate**?

    ● My area that I want to celebrate is my ability to be open. Open about the process, open about where the process is taking me, and open to the fact that I am feeling a bit ambiguous about where I am (which seems like I might be most of the year).

    b. How would you like to **grow**?

- I want to grow as a listener. The ability to understand the speaker as well as what they are not saying.
- I want to grow as a leader. Not in the sense of a dictator but as a resource and collaborator. It seems to me that the leadership at HTH is really authentic about helping the teachers and that there seems to be a really good relationship between management and labor.

3. After looking at the *"[Effective Leader](#)"* document, reflect on the following aspects of your **development as a leader** (from within or outside the classroom):

   a. What are your **strengths***?*

- Shape Learning is an area for which I feel competent. If I were asked to lead this area tomorrow, I am confident that I would be able to perform my duties. I have both led and been strong in the classroom in these aspects. Through pulling from this fund of knowledge, I would be able to guide others through their own thinking. For me, where I need to develop is becoming a better constructivist listener.
- Building Community is an area that I feel especially strong. Through my past experiences I have engaged in each one of the subcategories. I have grown especially over the last year and a half to the point that I think I could lead others through their development. There are two areas, relationships and collaboration, that I know I will make mistakes. These two areas are filled with grey. A leader wants to forge great relationships with colleagues and staff but there is a line between professional and unprofessional. However, it is a hard to gauge this line (sometimes only when it is passed can you understand where it lies). Collaboration is another difficult area in that most adults have no idea how to truly collaborate. It is a constant work in progress and usually takes a patience and the willingness to admit faults, mistakes, and move forward.

   b. How would you like to **grow**?

- Share leadership is an area that needs growth. Although I am confident that I could lead in each one of the subcategories, I really have never experienced being a leader in any one category. Through this year, the goal is to become experienced and therefore more confident in this area.

4. As you think about your **Masters Project**…
   a. What **inquiry questions** are emerging about your practice?
- How can we empower teachers?
- How can we empower and fully integrate students into the education process?
- How do you create a culture of collaboration
- How do you create a system to ensure equity?
- how do you create a family school culture through hiring, PD, teacher empowerment, and other culture building activities?
- What HTH practices translate easily into a traditional school setting?

- How do you create student led voices for authentic leadership?
- How do you create sustainability and eliminate burnout - how can you make sure that the the teachers do not feel taken advantage of?
  - How to eliminate burnout and increase teacher retention?
- How to create the most student contact positions

   b. How might any of these evolve into a *masters project?*

- I think that I can combine them to create a systems blueprint for protocols, orientation, hiring, curriculum (general). Basically create a school proposal that emphasizes teacher and student empowerment through a collaborative, collegial environment.
- I really want to "create" something that stays at the school as well as pushes my learning. Ideally I would create a system level project that helps pull and fill gaps; therefore making an idea more effective and efficient.

5. What are your *professional goals* and how can we *support you in realizing them*?
   - One of my biggest professional goal is to make an impact (ideally similar to what HTH has had on the education world) on education. Not just a one and done impact but a sustainable impact that really changes the lives of teachers and students. One that moves the bar and allows for our inherent "norming" to not reset to zero. What this looks like I do not know right now. Does it look like applying for Harvard's Doctor of Education Leadership in order eventually be in a position that can make systematic changes? Does it look like opening a "realistic" school and building from there? Does it look like assuming a building level leadership role so that I can gain that experience? I think that my biggest request is for you to help me think through my goals. Offer personal accounts, insight, and challenge my own thinking.