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Backwards By Design report
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When Developing a Course Goal Becomes Developing Shared Norms

Having just arrived in Washington from my longtime Michigan home a few days before, the Backwards by Design retreat was the first formal activity of a new adventure on the faculty at Western Washington University. It was a great opportunity to get to know other faculty across departments. But, even more importantly, it was an open environment dedicated to fostering the creation student-centered learning environments. I learned many things — including a much more enthusiastic approach to using sticky notes to storyboard activities. I hope I was able to contribute as well.

One idea that I brought to the table was discussed at some length. For many years, I have used a technique for giving students a say in the direction of the course when I teach small, seminar-based classes. The technique I used was leaving one course goal blank on the syllabus, and in the first day of class inviting students to reflect on their individual goals. In small groups and then with the whole class, we work together to craft a student-generated course goal, which I would then add to the syllabus to "officialize" it. My fellow participants in the retreat were intrigued -- everybody seemed to think it was a good idea.

Me? After this year, I'm not so sure. As I hope to show over the next few pages, I used what I learned in Backwards by Design — as well as another student-centered teaching workshop I attended at SMATE — to refocus that activity into something deeper and much more robust.

I would like to begin with some background about the class in question: JOUR 480 is the Journalism Department's senior seminar class. It is a culminating intellectual experience for the

students in all of our tracks, in which they are exposed to journalism and mass communication theories that they are then expected to synthesize and apply to an issue of contemporary importance. This class has a reputation among students as being difficult, so they attend to approach it with some trepidation. Teaching this class is an important part of my duties in the department, and it was important for me to get off on the right foot. Creating a student-centered learning environment in my senior seminar class seemed of utmost importance.

In the Fall and Winter quarters, I used my tried-and-true course goal technique. On the first day of class, I had students do a quick write on an important goal they had for the class. In groups of three, students discussed their goals and come up with one. They wrote that goal on the board, and we discussed all of those goals as a class.

In the Fall, the students came up with the following proposed goal statements:

1) To explore a new topic -- something we can take with us into our futures.
2) [This group made a drawing of a tree with words on the branches like: inspire, research, connections & consciousness, lifelong learning, career, benefit to self & others, network, positive change]
3) To improve research skills and enjoy what we are doing.
4) Do lots of brainstorming to find research topics that we are interested in
5) Improve research skills to tell better stories through mass media
6) To use this opportunity to further develop skills we can apply to our own personal fields of work/study

I had a difficult time getting the students to reach consensus on an ultimate goal. We ended up selecting a hybrid of No. 1 and No. 5, but it was not anything that we ever referenced again in class. It provided an interesting conversation, but didn't do much more than that.

Learning from that, I made some changes in the Winter Quarter. We went through the same process (individual write, small group discussion, full-group discussion). I think I did a better job of introducing the task, and at the end, I had students rank their top three goal

statements. There was a clear consensus for the following class-generated goal: **To have our views challenged – and maybe changed – in ways that help us understand our fields of practice.** The conversation was better, but it was again an activity that did not have a lasting impact.

As I continued to seek something with a greater impact, I read an article in The New York Times' Sunday magazine titled "What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team." This article examined current Google research on what makes teams successful. The researchers found that the composition of teams in terms of certain personality traits or skill sets aren't a strong predictor of their success. Rather, they found that a concept called "psychological safety" was crucial. Psychological safety suggests an environment of trust and respect, in which participants are comfortable being themselves and confident they won't be rejected or embarrassed for speaking up (Duhigg, 2016).

Of course, the concept of the "safe space" has turned into a polarizing cliché invoked in political contexts to bash a perceived elitism of the ivory tower. But this article described the exact kind of environment I wanted in my Senior Seminar class. We need to feel safe in order to take risks that help us learn to soar.

The Google researchers found that establishing clear group norms was a critical part of the process (Duhigg, 2016). I was reminded of a norm-building activity we did in the SMATE student-centered course design. Ultimately, I adapted the course goal activity described above to ask students to create a list of class norms rather than a single goal. As part of this, I changed the quick write task to ask students to reflect on times they've had positive learning experiences. What made those experiences good?

In the resulting discussion of course norms, the first thing I noticed was that the conversation was looser. Rather than talking about high-minded goals, we were all able to talk about our own positive experiences with learning. Some of the things we talked about were nuts-and-bolt: Did we want to arrange the desks in a circle? Did we want to discourage using laptops and smartphones during class? What about eating, given the class' 4-6 p.m. meeting time? We hashed out all of those issues (for example, snacks were OK, but nothing loud or stinky). I typed up the final list of norms, and it was posted in the classroom.

In the weeks that followed, we rarely referenced the norms directly, but they seemed to hover over the room. There was a bit of levity when somebody brought in something to eat that was a little bit loud. The student was apologetic, acknowledging that she was violating the course norms. By referencing them though, she was acknowledging that this was an important agreement. We forgave her.

More than the actual items on the norms list, I think the importance of this activity was starting the class with a moment for honest, authentic discussion right away. The students understood that this was their space as much as mine, and this had big and little effects all quarter.

With these kinds of teaching experiences, past performance doesn't predict future performance. However, I intend to continue to build on this activity. One hope is to learn more about the role of group norms in the classroom and build on that literature in a more formal way. Another future goal is to learn how to assess the impact of these norms at the end of the quarter. Right now, I just have the gut feeling that it went well, but I would like to be able to validate that experience empirically. My research question would be: What group norming techniques best foster the kind of psychological safety crucial to a successful learning environment.

Bibliography:

Duhigg, C. (2016, February 25). What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html