Documenting Progressive Practices

The Dawn of "Projectopia"

High Tech Middle (HTM) is currently immersed in a bit of an upheaval of its teaching practices, especially in regards to what Project Based Learning (PBL) looks like, and the structures around it. Those in the know call this process "Projectopia."

In brief, Projectopia started as a question regarding HTM's traditional adherence to grade- and discipline-specific structures for projects with students. The question was, why do we do it this way? Is it actually the best way to teach our students and do meaningful work with them? Or would breaking down those barriers (by making projects multi-grade level and outside of traditional disciplinary distinctions) enable our teachers to create more meaningful projects that reached more students? And how can we know the answer to that question if we don't try something a little crazy? As Mehta and Fine (2012) observed, "the purpose of school (at HTH) is not so much to prepare students for a hypothetical future as to support them in engaging with the complex challenges that professional work at its best entails" - so how could we better support that purpose?

As an attempt to answer that question, we ended up dedicating a 9-week block of school time to a "Projectopia" that consisted of classes determined by Advisory (multi-grade level groups with no connection to specific academic discipline work or traditional grades), full three-hour afternoons dedicated to Projectopia-focused time, and all-staff agreement to try to push even stronger student voice and choice in the process. From there, teachers were free to build out whatever projects they wanted to do, structured however they wanted, to retain a sense of teacher autonomy and creative power.

Coming up with the structure of Projectopia involved a number of all-staff discussions, workshops, surveys, debates, and more - a story for another time - but now that it has begun, it seems like that might have been the easy part. Because the question that we have to answer now is: how are we really going to know if the grand experiment that Projectopia represents actually works? And with so much variation between projects, how can we pull out best practices, learn from our mistakes, and objectively determine if Projectopia should become a regular part of HTM teaching and learning culture?

That's where this Put it into Practice comes in.

Developing a Plan for Documenting/Assessing Projectopia

From the process of developing Projectopia, as well as many conversations with Janie Griswold (Director of HTM), it became clear very early that, to turn Projectopia from a "one-time experiment" into a deeper, innovative "culture shift" at HTM, we would need to have some way to actually prove its worth. As Projectopia feels very different from the way projects have gone in the past, a number of staff, students, and even parents had many very-reasonable fears about what might really come from wide-scale change at our school. With that in mind, we ended up pitching Projectopia as an experiment - that could be scrapped and never repeated if it truly didn't work - in order to allay those fears and build full support for adoption . . . this year. But change is uncomfortable, and we have never done this before - so, in comparison to the comfort of "how it's always been," Projectopia is bound to feel less successful, no matter how it ends up - so we clearly need some more concrete documentation and assessment to make sure that discomfort and some inevitable mistakes don't become the only measure of its success (which would lead to killing the idea

without truly giving it a chance - at which point, there would be no point in going through with it at all).

So Janie and I sat down and talked about how we could push this level of documentation and assessment with our teachers - as far as really examining the work the students are doing in class and determining what they're really getting out of it - and we quickly came up with "let's just ask the teachers." From there, it was just a matter of coming up with a structure for how we were going to work with all of the teacher's input to build out a cohesive plan.

We ended up dividing the process into three pieces. The first involved surveying the staff to pull out our collective vision for Projectopia - why were we really doing this? What were we trying to help our students achieve that might not have been happening through how we typically ran projects?

Once we had that information from the whole staff, the two of us would distill the responses down to a few core goals that had the most agreement/support from the teachers. Then we would build teacher-led Action Groups around those themes, with the focus of coming up with plans for measuring, documenting, and assessing our success in each area, based on the actual work students were doing and producing in their Projectopia classes. The staff would then implement these plans throughout the duration of Projectopia to make sure we were collecting strong data to examine after it was over.

At the same time, since I am one of the few faculty members not leading a Projectopia class (since the classes are divided by Advisory groupings, even non-teaching staff are leading groups), I would meet with individual Projectopia teams to document their specific struggles and successes throughout the process, as well as taking video and photos in classes in case we later decide to share our process with other interested groups.

The Plan in Action

The survey process ended up going quite smoothly. After writing up some draft questions, cutting them down, and being mindful to get at our goals from various angles, we handed all the teachers a print out with the following questions: *"What, in your opinion, is the main purpose of doing Projectopia the way we're doing it at our school?;" "What are your hopes and fears for how Projectopia may be different from how we have been teaching up to now?"; "What do you want to see your students get out of Projectopia that is different from our 'regular' classes/projects?"*   We then gave teachers two days to fill out the form and get it back to me and Janie.

What was really gratifying from this process was the depth and level of thought all of our teachers put into their responses. They each clearly took time to make sure they were hitting on what they found to be most important, and they seemed to truly trust that their opinions were going to be heard. Claims by HTM teachers that they are part of a progressive school were largely reinforced by the fact that all of their responses fell under varying aspects of Alfie Kohn's definitions of "progressive education" - touching on cross-grade Collaboration, Community outreach and service with a Social Justice perspective, and focusing on building on students' Intrinsic Motivations. (Kohn, 2008)

We then took those forms and coded them for themes - tallying every response, and grouping together those that had clear overlap. From there, we looked at the subsequent themes and did a second pass to group them even more (the results are represented in Figure 1). We then went over these findings together and decided that three Action Groups was the most effective number (to include a sufficient number of voices, but to allow for a focus on multiple aspects of Projectopia). From there, we merged two of the most-voiced themes together, and as one theme - "breaking down boundaries/re-examine different ways to

get to HTH core principles" - felt more like an over-arching theme for all the responses, three clear, top answers emerged.   Tellingly, these top themes ended up seeming like a simple re-framing of John Dewey's original definition of "real work," " — work that had both imaginative and substantive meaning, that leveraged natural curiosities into deep learning, and that built the inter- and intra-personal skills required for successful participation in social, economic, and civic life." (Mehta and Fine, 2012)
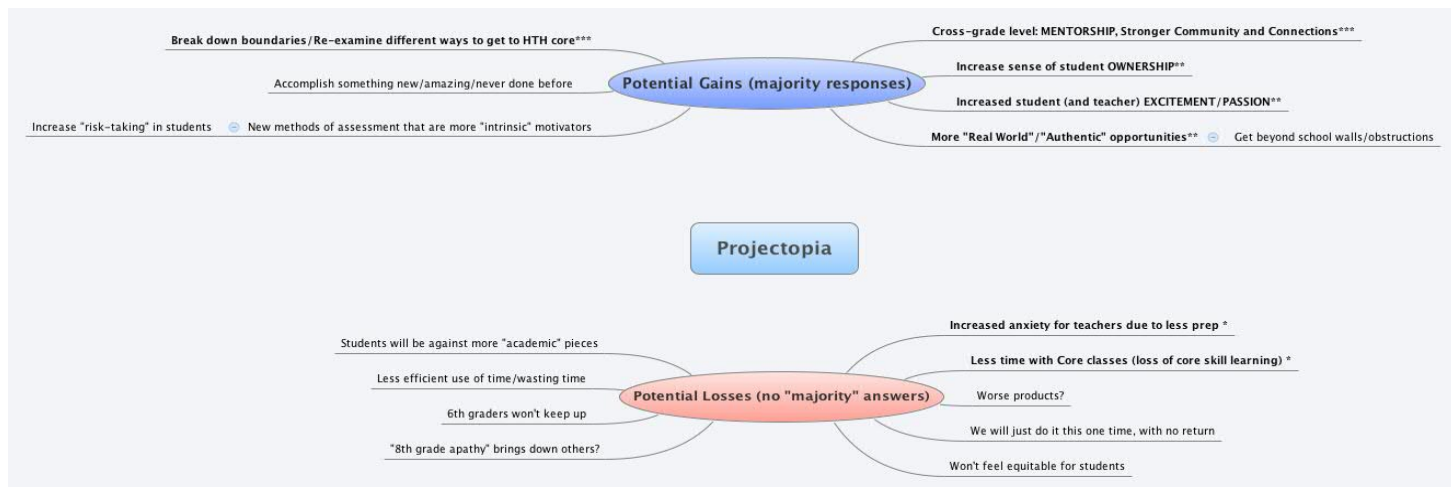

Figure 1 - Core themes from staff responses regarding Projectopia goals. Bolded responses in the "gains" section were reflected in at least ⅔ of all staff responses, the more asterisks, the higher level of agreement across staff. It was interesting to note that the "losses" section had very little overlap - most fears were very individual in nature.

We then sent out an email with the Figure 1 attached, explaining our process and the three Action Groups we were going to ask teachers to join and start up the following day. At that meeting, we would explain further, if necessary, and then get the Action Groups started to begin figuring out how to document Projectopia.

Unfortunately, both Janie and I were out that following morning (due to illness), so we were unable to lead the meeting. However, Casey Salmon (our Resource Specialist) stepped in and handled it all for us, and, from teacher feedback, it sounds like things went pretty smoothly (after she explained that the documentation/measuring was primarily for our own use, and not necessarily for outside "exhibition" - although that may happen, as well). When asked about their thoughts on that process later on, there was a consensus that the themes reflected the core values of Projectopia, and, as one teacher stated, "I felt that I had plenty of opportunities to engage in this process and have a say on what we focused on, and I think what came out of it fits well."

That said, one piece of feedback that was shared about the process was echoed by other staff regarding confusion about "trying to develop clear assessments before I was sure about exactly what our project was going to look like in class was hard for me - which should come first?" That confusion, coupled with other questions about the purpose of documenting/measuring the process suggests that, in the future, we should probably spend some time with the staff really working out the strengths and purpose of objectively documenting this type of process before moving forward. In a way, this reflects Ron Berger's consistent emphasis on "modeling" meaningful work and projects - had we started the process with a clear

model of a useful measurement/documentation of classroom practices as a means for later improvement, our staff might have been able to buy into (and better engage in) the process. (Berger, 2003)

Since that time, each Projectopia Action Group (PAG) has met two times and created an initial survey/instrument to get incoming measurements for their area of focus, on top of more general discussions about how to take the student work from their classes and derive a measure of progress from them. In creating these instruments, each group has tested prototype measures with their own Projectopia groups, and refined/improved versions will be shared with the rest of the school for everyone to use as soon as possible. Throughout the rest of Projectopia, each group will continue to develop new measurements/documentation for their area of focus to be shared and used by their peers, and, through this, we hope to compile a large amount of data for us all to sift through at the end of the term.

The Results So Far

Although we are currently only in our second week of Projectopia, the results of this process have been inspiring. Of course, we can hardly reflect on how Projectopia is going, but what I have found most interesting is the level of depth and real reflection that has been going on in our Action Groups. Due to the task at hand - trying to tangibly *measure* and *assess* progressive learning practices - our teachers have been struggling through one of the most difficult aspects of progressive teaching that goes beyond standardized testing - how do we objectively determine if what we're doing is working? It's such a vital question that can often get side-stepped in the process of trying new things, and it has been exciting to watch our staff discuss various options and come up with some creative solutions to get at these goals.

One such conversation that really stands out in my head revolves around one group's use of survey questions - noting how even subtle differences in wording can completely change results ("are we talking about *ownership* or *choice* or *control*?"). Interestingly, this particular struggle led to all of the group members agreeing to do some research and attempt to find studies that have measured similar concepts to bring back and share together later on. As a former teacher who knows how hard it is to find time to do "extra research," I was impressed to see this level of commitment to the task come out, pushing learning and practices, without any extrinsic "need" to do so. And I wonder if having more Action Groups, in general, focused on finding ways to truly measure and assess "progressive learning" would similarly increase the depth of our "adult learning community" - or if this might be due to unrelated circumstances.

Personal Reflections

As far as progressive education and leadership go, this particular project was personally interesting as it felt like a successful combination of a front-end push by non-teaching school leaders with very minimal "leading from the front" and strong teacher ownership of the actual direction and process. So often, when thinking about these leadership PITPs, I find myself reverting to thinking of anything where I don't stand up in front of the staff actively facilitating a discussion or workshop as "not counting." However, throughout this process - not once did I actively facilitate a discussion. Neither Janie nor I "led" a meeting about this. Between the two of us, we probably spoke in front of the whole staff on the matter for a total of 10 - 15 minutes over the last two to three weeks.

And yet we still facilitated the *process* - various teachers have expressed a strong feeling of ownership

over it all, and not one took issue with the final themes or how we went about coming up with them - and that is quite different from how the process of developing Projectopia went (although maybe it is a result of the trust built - and lessons learned - through that longer, messier process). Many teachers made a point of appreciating the "all-staff" feel of the process, along the lines of one teacher's observation that "even though we weren't physically together for all aspects of the process, it felt like we all just got together and brainstormed a solution, with everybody involved." Interestingly, many teachers didn't even notice that a large portion of the process was actually facilitated outside of the group (when Janie and I broke down themes), recalling only that "we were all involved in the whole process."

Through this process I have also found myself reflecting on a larger question that seems to come up regularly during my time with the HTH organization - what does "teacher-led" really mean for a school director? And where do "teacher autonomy" and a clear, unified direction meet (or diverge)?

To me, this particular process (and the teacher response mentioned above) answered some of those questions for me. Looking at where things currently stand, I feel confident in saying that the teachers here at HTM have an amazing amount of freedom over how they conduct their Projectopia classes (without discipline distinctions, perhaps even more freedom than any other academic classes).   At the same time, it seems to me that the teachers actually have a more unified direction and desired outcome from Projectopia than they may have had before. As a result, our Action Groups seem to be more driven towards concrete action than they generally have, and the teachers are really stepping up and leading change at our school - and they have stated, again and again, how much ownership they have felt over the process.

However, without Janie's guidance and direct leadership, Projectopia never would have happened. And without active facilitation of this measurement/documentation process, I highly doubt much cohesive, objective assessment would have happened, and, as a result, the ultimate goals of Projectopia would have been unrealized. In a nutshell - without Janie's direct leadership (somewhat "telling teachers what to do," in some cases; definitely holding the group accountable to making change, in general), we would continue to be carrying out "business as usual" here at HTM.

At the same time, without our teacher-led Action Groups and active buy-in, we would be unable to come up with such creative and effective ways to measure and assess this process, and the Projectopia classes themselves would be uninspired and likely ineffective.

And so, at this time, I feel like I am understanding these concepts of "progressive leadership" and "teacher autonomy" more clearly. When done right, these two concepts are balanced in such a way to enable truly innovative teaching and progressive advancement for our students to occur. However, when there is too little of either (whether the leader is standing back and not pushing enough, or the teachers are not allowed enough freedom to creatively bring their experience to bear on a school's problems), you get a bit of stagnation and lack of progress. Of course, this balance is incredibly difficult to achieve, as it depends so strongly on relationships and mutual understanding - and that is why so few schools feel truly "progressive."

That said, it's also what makes me all the more excited to have the opportunity to work with a leader like Janie and be involved in a truly "progressive" time in this school's history.