

## **LEAP AND THE RESEARCHER WILL APPEAR ... OR SO THEY TELL ME**

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### **Vexation**

Please excuse the allusions to the Zen lesson that urges us to leap and the net will appear. But recently I have felt only the air underneath me. A few weeks ago, I accepted a position as a middle school art teacher. This would not be surprising if you had met me 30 years ago when I had changed my undergraduate major (again). It would also not be surprising if we have chatted over my concern for my fellow science teachers in the past few years. The “rookie” teachers always had two bubbles above their heads: the bubble to the right had images of you, their “fairy-god” professors encouraging and reminding them that there’s no place like inquiry. Unfortunately above their left shoulders appeared administrators and BOE members repeating the mantra “pass or practice saying unemployment five times fast.” Our veteran teachers, experienced in the cyclical ebb and flow of educational reform pressures, were now being carried out on stretchers (3 last year) and taking time off to “rest” (only 4 times last year!) from the pressures of teaching in our current classrooms.

At the start of each of the last twenty-five school years you would find me in a middle school science lab. On weekends and summer time, you would find me working with teachers throughout Northeast Ohio engaged with various curriculum consortiums, professional educational associations, or teaching courses at local universities. Instead of pulling me in opposite directions, my summer activities enhanced my efforts during the school year. I loved being able to take from the research community at the universities and sharing with the worker bees back in our schools. Alas, my enthusiasm began to hit a few speed bumps. The first bump took the form of state mandated testing. Please understand that I appreciate the benefits of having a common curriculum. I also like having a way of measuring student progress. But I am curious about students’ enthusiasm for learning science after the annual testing is over. I have not seen research about attitudes but I suspect there is something like a “post test-taking traumatic syndrome.” From a science teacher perspective, it has been horrifying to see all the excitement for learning being extracted from the students.

The second speed bump is poverty. My middle school is considered an inner-ring suburb to the city of Cleveland. Last year, 33% of my students transferred from the Cleveland School District, and tend to be the poorest of the poor. Chronic poverty and the effects of lead poisoning are at the root of so many academic and behavioral problems. Mental health needs of these students are overwhelming our staff. More tragically, the economic situation has led to a reduction in the number of psychologists and social workers. But I continued to operate with the belief that it was my responsibility to help all my students learn science. I accepted them as who they were and did all that I could to move us forward. However, it did not feel as if I was making any progress. Each school year, I would receive a new group. It felt like my reward for investing so much of myself in the most challenging of the students our school serves was that the administration would send even more my direction. I tried to deflect feelings of despair but gradually the realities began sinking in. I realized that a change was needed.

I began what I now call my 30-day retreat. It started as a New Year’s “Restitution:” instead of resolving to do a better job of taking better care of myself (that typically lasted 2.3 hours), I chose to make restitution with myself. Restitution is defined as an act of restoring something. I needed to restore my faith in my ability to teach, to know the child that I have been presented to learn with, but to do it in a way that still honors my love of the subject science. I recalled previous Crossroads where I heard participants sharing their “change in the cosmos” stories. After re-reading a few of their ventures (and realizing that I could then blame John and Adam if this decision didn’t work out) I discerned a few nuggets of wisdom. Each week for four weeks I met with trusted friends and advisors. These were carefully selected for their ability to be honest with me about my questions, creative enough to think outside the box, yet realistic enough to help me solve these challenges while still maintaining an income that would allow my daughter and I to still eat. The process provided me the following insight: First, I love teaching students at the middle school level; I’m not ready to quit teaching. Second, I want to continue to teach science in some capacity, but not in the same way I’ve

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being doing it. Three, I still enjoy working with the other amazing science teachers who have become part of my network. I wrote it all out, and then I leapt. I applied for a position in the art department. After much grief from my Board of Education and Superintendent, I was given the job. I hope and believe that this change will allow me to reconnect with the joy of teaching. I also have a desire to invent ways for infusing science into the art curriculum. I am in the same school working with the same populations. And yet I am optimistic because I have smoothed over the testing speed bump. That might be enough to re-invigorate me toward my career and calling.

I'm going to teach art for the 2008-09 school year. I am so excited that most nights find me sleeping only 3-4 hours. I feel like a kid in the candy store and there's an unlimited budget. Of course, then I wake up.

### **Venture**

My vexation contains two "big ideas." The first begins with an old favorite: nature of science. How does this compare to art? One of my primary goals is to help kids reclaim their ability to ask great questions, especially philosophical ones. As a science teacher I tried to emphasize problem solving and conceptual understanding. How might that translate to art? Many of our greatest scientists were (& are) artists in their own right. I also would spend a considerable amount of time helping my science students to determine what kind of a learner they were, and then use that insight to help them study and learn more efficiently and for a lifetime. Again, how will that translate into art?

The second vexation would require your input about the suitability of my art curriculum ideas for this age group. Trying to encourage my students to combine their real life experience into the art that they will be creating will take some creative coaching.

Over the years, through trial and error along with extensive study, I have developed a certain amount of cultural competence. I have come to recognize the need to set aside my own background in order to more effectively serve my students. But along the way, my filter about what I'm willing to try has always been about science. So I'm puzzling about ways to bring culturally responsive teaching from the realm of my old subject area and use that to my advantage and my students' benefit within the context of teaching and learning art. Some of my ideas include matching my curriculum with our History Course of Study. The primary focus this year includes world cultures. So far, I've included the making of Chinese kites, while attaching a disposable camera to them so that we can take a few aerial shots. We may study international alphabets and systems of communicating like Chinese pin-yin and calligraphy. I've asked our English department and foreign language department to submit some famous/favorite quotes from literature etc. for us to work with. Masks will be another project. We'll begin with their own face relief, and then they may choose a style of mask from another world culture. My list of ideas seems to grow daily, but I would cherish your thoughts and ideas. After all, you are a part of "my net."