



Horace

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“Learning Through Interests”: Lessons from the Met

Kristin Waugh-Hempel has been working at The Metropolitan Regional Career & Technical Center (the Met) since 1998. After serving as an advisor for four years, she focused her energy on the school's Learning Through Interests (LTI) program and now serves as its director, overseeing the LTI process for all six Providence, Rhode Island Met schools and, through the Big Picture company, training Big Picture staff nationwide. Waugh-Hempel describes how the Met uses community-based learning as one of its cornerstones, relying on the depth and strength of relationships to guide students through the process of learning through their interests.

The Met Center is a network of small public high schools that offer student tailored curricula and opportunities to apply their academic learning at internships in the community. To date, the Met has inspired a national network of 30 similar schools, all founded by The Big Picture Company.

At the core of the Met’s curriculum is the Learning Through Interests program, which helps students find opportunities to learn in real-world settings and through meaningful projects. We pair students with adult mentors in the community who share their career interests and passions. Two days a week, students work as interns and take on projects that benefit their worksites. Back at school, with their advisors, students build and reinforce the skills and knowledge needed to complete those projects. Unlike traditional internships which train students for specific jobs, the purpose of an LTI is to allow students to apply their academic knowledge and meet their learning goals.

It can be challenging to engineer the combination of hands-on work that comes from a student’s passion and that is useful to his/her community along with the development of a relationship with an adult s/he can trust academically, professionally and personally. The LTI search and placement is a very personal process during which the Learning Plan Team—advisor, student, family members and LTI Coordinator—helps the student to look deeply within herself to find out what objects, ideas or questions are of interest to her. Then we give her interest primary importance in guiding the internship process.

Finally, the LTI is not simply about the product that is created or the service that is rendered. On a deeper level, it is about teenagers learning to become mature, thoughtful adults. The LTI creates the forum for adults and teenagers to get to know each other, to have close relationships and to learn from each other. Thus, the Met uses the LTI as a real-world opportunity for students to learn from the interplay of hand/body and mind, to learn from the interaction between the individual and the world around her and to learn from the messiness of real world planning, critical thinking and problem solving.

One of the most important aspects of the success of our internship is the strengths and depth of the partnership between the mentor at the LTI site and the Met advisor. Learning at an LTI site is messy. It is complicated and nuanced. It doesn’t follow a linear outline. Often the most powerful learning isn’t planned for and happens in areas or ways that are unexpected.

So how can a school manage and track it? With a lot of communication! To begin, when the LTI is set up, the reality of the messiness of the learning experience needs to be put on the table for the mentor, student and advisor to acknowledge and brainstorm how they will work together to document any “aha! moments” as well as take the time to observe the more subtle but equally important constant growth. The team then commits to regular communication, aiming for weekly phone calls and emails, monthly on-site meetings and occasional drop-in check-ups.

In this communication, the advisor builds a relationship with the mentor. We have found that when mentors feel comfortable with the advisor and have informal discussions, they are more likely to reveal some of the important learning on which we want to capitalize. In the official “Check-In Meeting,” the mentor may revert to a strictly professional approach that narrows the scope of the conversation and may unintentionally put an overly positive spin on the LTI. There are two reasons for this: many mentors are eager to “do a good job” as a mentor and don’t want to admit when they’re struggling or when things aren’t going well because they see it as failure on their part. And some mentors did not have positive experiences with their own teachers and do not understand the role of the advisor as advocate, coach and student support. Thus they don’t realize that they can reach out to the advisor without getting the student “in trouble.” So taking the time to build trusting relationships and creating informal opportunities to talk is not only pleasant but it’s really important to the success of the work.

In addition to building a relationship, the advisor asks the mentor and student questions above and beyond matters of accountability and progress. For example, the advisor facilitates discussions about what the student is most excited about or what was hardest to do or understand. It is often in this triangle of dialogue that learning is identified and then supported. A similar series of facilitated discussions happens with the parent. All of this coalesces at the exhibition when multiple members of the community as well as the student’s Learning Plan Team are able to share their insights into the student’s learning and growth over the quarter. Each person sees a piece and throughout the quarter the advisor is collecting these insights and directing and encouraging the student accordingly.

Our methods of tracking are going to look very different than other schools and what we capture will look very different. This was a tough adjustment for me and for many of our new employees—it’s even hard for new parents. The best piece of advice I can give is to communicate all the time with the people on the Learning Plan Team and to have faith in what you know. It can be really tough when a student stagnates and a learning experience doesn’t end up being as rich as you’d first hoped, but a strong team both knows how to learn from that “failure” and to understand that learning isn’t a steady process but is full of ups and downs.

Eight Keys to LTI success:

1. LTI and/or project aligned with student interest
2. Student and advisor are actively involved in the LTI search process
3. Mentor, advisor and student are trained on their roles and expectations in the LTI
4. The mentor and advisor have strong, regular communication
5. The student and mentor have a strong relationship built on trust and openness
6. Students reflect regularly on their learning and overall experience at the LTI
7. The LTI project is authentic and deep, and is the focus of the Learning Plan
8. The assessment of the project and overall LTI is based on professional standards of quality

Related Resource

Horace Volume 20 Issue 4, “We All Win Together: Met Graduates Reflect on Advisories,” features Kristin Waugh-Hempel and her students discussing the role of advisories in the Met structure.
<http://www.essentialschools.org/resources/281>

Kristin Waugh-Hempel graduated from Swarthmore College in 1997 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Education and Sociology/Anthropology. In 2004, she received her Master’s of Educational Psychology from Vermont College of the Union Institute.

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