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CCT 693
Final Project – May 20, 2007

Teachable Leadership and the Junior Class: A Plan to Develop Effective Student Leadership through Regenerative, Reflective Action Research Practices

Introduction

For many years, I have been interested in the ways we at Brooks School go about teaching students to be effective leaders in the school environment. As one of the Deans of Students at the school, the issue of student leadership and its development falls more or less within the purview of my office. Over time, I have had the great good fortune to work with outstanding student leaders. I have also, however, found myself in difficult circumstances with students who had been placed in leadership roles, but who were not well prepared to meet the task. These experiences were frustrating and occasionally hurtful to individual students, and invariably perplexing to the people who had elevated that student to a position of responsibility. Early in my career, after informally observing numerous instances of successful and failed student leadership in a variety of circumstances, I found myself thinking more and more that the successes were mostly the result of some number of students' natural leadership skills, whereas the failures were primarily indicative of the personality failings of particular kids. It is this basic assumption around which most of my thoughts on student leadership circled, even as I moved into the middle portion of my career and began to take on some responsibility for the student leaders at our school.

In looking at our school, it is clear that we value the notion of student leadership. We have numerous leadership positions, and we have affirmed and re-affirmed in recent years that we would like leadership to be a central core tenet of the experience of Brooks graduates. And yet, we must assume from the perceived high rate of leadership failure that we are not doing a good job in instructing students. Certainly, no classroom teacher would look at a similar failure rate in an academic subject and permit him or herself to keep with the same methods, yet we were doing just that. Worse still, as in the case of the most ineffective teachers, there was really little that might be discerned in the way of a plan for instruction. Too often, it seemed, we were pointing the finger of failure at student leadership efforts gone wrong, when perhaps we might have turned that accusatory digit upon ourselves as teachers.

Increased interest in the topic has been the result of the extreme level of frustration exhibited by student leaders near the end (usually senior spring) of their careers at Brooks. Most typically, the students come to feel that they have not been given an honest opportunity to take advantage of their leadership positions, nor do they generally feel that they have accomplished much in this area of their lives at school. They feel this way despite being good-willed and community-oriented students – often our “best” kids. Interestingly, the frustration of the students is often mirrored by the adults with whom they work, many of whom come to feel at some point during the senior year that students for whom they have had high expectations have somehow under-achieved, or that they have not “progressed” well enough along a leadership track. The contrast, indeed, between the extraordinary enthusiasm of rising leaders and the sorrowful disappointment of those they are replacing is worrisome from an educational perspective. It is further disappointing, I believe, that such a habitually poor approach to this important topic would be perennially permitted.

It is for these reasons, then, that I find myself utilizing a process of action research. I have high hopes in doing so of coming to better understanding our approach to student leadership and its concomitant successes and/or failures. I further hope to re-conceptualize what it is that we want to do moving forward, ultimately proposing as a result a plan of action that will yield more effective and more satisfying leadership opportunities (for students and their teachers), and in a way that is collaborative and personal, regenerative, and institutionalized.

Brief Review of Reflective Development of the Topic

I have enjoyed a lengthy period of reflection on the matter of student leadership and on methods to work effectively on it as an educational topic. With my awareness of it heightened by my involvement with this project, and even at the earliest stages of a research process that would quickly become somewhat unwieldy (and admittedly not methodological enough...), I found myself thinking much more deeply and personally about the idea of student leadership at school. During this time, and by working with a variety of tools presented in this course, I found my own thinking to be quite divergent – so much so, that I was at times afraid I was getting too far afield in a topic that I would not be able to bring back into any particular focus. I quickly, for example, moved away from the idea of student leadership to character education in general. Further, I became increasingly sensitive to the idea of teachable moments as keys to bolstering outside instruction or opportunity. In talking formally and informally with students and colleagues about their ideas on student leadership, it became clear that there was something quite satisfying to both when a successful leadership opportunity had emerged from the collaborative work of teacher-mentors and student leaders. As I began to engage more fully in the project, I was more or less setting aside my view of student leadership as an outcome of skills or traits, and thinking much more about it as a reflection of some special interaction between a student, an interested guide to help him or her, and an opportunity to lead. Work in another class on creativity exposed me to the expansive view of M. Csikszentmihalyi's (1988) conception of creativity as a special interaction between a person, a domain and a field (environment). I found myself increasingly using that view of creativity as a helpful analogy for what I was hoping to accomplish via my leadership initiative. With my concept of leadership evolving into an understanding of it as an essentially generative act, one which results in a student interacting with an environment and a domain in such a way that something better is created (or permitted to grow), I found my work coming back into focus and my thinking becoming somewhat more convergent. I very much enjoyed this thinking foray, and found a number of tools helpful in balancing what was at times simple brainstorming with more formal approaches. I do feel that the time has been very well spent, and that I have come to know key components of my topic quite well via the process. I feel, too, that the process has re-energized my career long interest in student leadership as an educational topic, and re-vitalized my intentions to do more effective work with it.

Methods and Approaches – Cycles, Epicycles and Navigation Tools

From the very outset, I recognized that I came to this project with a full set of assumptions on the matter of student leadership and how best to treat it in my school. As a result, and in an effort to clarify my own opinions by seeing other perspectives, I began my work at the Evaluation and Inquiry arc of the Cycle of Action Research. I had hopes, in the beginning, of conducting two parallel sets of research, one that was outward looking – other institutions, proven programs, etc.

– and one that was more inward looking – my own school, what we have been doing, our failures and successes, etc. I felt that this was an important starting point for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that I had to confess to being more or less involved in a lengthy personal and ongoing reflective epicycle on this topic, one which needed a significant level of vetting before I could sensibly and productively proceed through it to more thoughtful and circumspect work. While I did find my initial outward research, which I now think of more as a survey, to be helpful, I also quickly discovered that I was more interested in and had higher hopes for my inward (towards my own school, that is) work. As this happened, I found that there was a wealth of information within the kids themselves and within my colleagues, and though I valued what was happening at other places, I began to develop a sense that we could perhaps chart a course somewhat of our own making. I sensed, too, that this approach might yield a more personal level of teaching and engagement, and that even the very act of starting with the students themselves could represent a very strong foundation in collaboration through which to build constituent support, and atop which to build the other elements of an approach to evolving better student-adult leadership interactions.

Evaluation and Inquiry – What Are We Doing?

As noted above, the thrust of my research quickly focused on an inward-looking examination of what it is that we have been doing at Brooks, and on what perspectives current student leaders, potential student leaders and interested faculty might have to offer.

The Current Approach to Leadership – An Overview

At Brooks, we have used a fairly traditional approach to student leadership. We have a variety of leadership opportunities for students at a variety of different levels and expectations. We also elect or choose leaders in typical, mostly consensus driven ways. Leadership positions are thought of at school as important, though it is not abundantly clear from a simple look just why this is the case. Certainly, there is an element of real and perceived privilege to these roles. Prefects in the dorms, for example, are permitted to have televisions and refrigerators, and there is a certain preference in student housing assignments accorded our leaders. Most student leaders assume that some level of authority will accompany their position, though the manner in which this plays out is widely disparate and has as much to do with individual leadership traits (even for non-elected leaders) as it does with the positions themselves.

Leaders are typically selected in the spring of the 11th grade year, in some cases after “trial” periods of leadership for those interested. There has been an attempt in recent years to offer the entire class an opportunity to engage in leadership tasks, or at least to consider their own individual leadership potential, before these selections are formalized. This process has been only moderately successful, however, and it does not seem generally to have impacted the leadership choices that are made or the quality of the experiences the students have once selected. The end of the spring finds us with 30-40 leaders of different groups – team captains, dorm prefects, library proctors, school government representatives, etc. – and one umbrella group of leaders – the school prefects. This latter group is thought of as the primary leadership group in the school, and has the most access to the headmaster (who has lunch with them every week) and the deans of students in a leadership sense.

Paradoxically, the “highest” leaders at school have the least well-articulated job description, and with their focus on the school in general, the most poorly delineated constituent group or charge as well. A number of roles do come with job written descriptions, but more are simply handed

down verbally by the group or by an adult. Many are simply interpreted by the students themselves, both positively and negatively.

Outcomes and Results

While selected student leaders enter their 12th grade year with high expectations and an abundance of goodwill, many will see their leadership opportunity devolve over the course of the year. There is a certain element of inertia to this phenomenon, friction that is the result of poor planning and direction, unreasonable expectations given the demands placed on students in other areas of their lives (academic, college process, athletic, social, etc.), unclear goals or charges, and perhaps even poor or ill-conceived motivation. The result of this is a high level of frustration, both on the part of students, who feel they have missed (or were not given) a chance to succeed in their leadership, and by adults, who had hoped to see emergent leaders in many areas of the school. Senior frustration about leadership is as perennial as the grass, and is in many ways the most salient component of students' reflections on their experiences after the college process has ended and graduation (and beyond) approaches.

The Current Approach to Leadership – An Introspective Look

In looking to gain insight beyond the practical, I convened a number of informal dialogue groups over the course of about one month. I did this, again, because I felt that there was much to be learned at the first hand level. These groups consisted of interested faculty members (3-5, the smallest group), current student leaders (6-8, depending on the meeting time), and interested 11th graders/potential leaders (12-17, the largest group, depending on the meeting time). All the groups were voluntary, and the student groups were fairly representative in terms of gender. The faculty group, I would say, was highly self-selecting, and was populated only by adults who are pre-disposed to being supportive of student leaders for one reason or another. In meeting times of approximately an hour, the faculty group met twice and the 12th and 11th grade groups convened three times. It is of note that the 11th grade group has been most interested to meet again (and hopefully will). All groups were introduced to the principles of dialogue (with varying levels of success, I'd say), asked to read the container guidelines in turn, and then they were directed to consider leadership as an experience, with a particular eye on describing it. Hoping to be more a participant than a facilitator, I was purposefully not especially directive at the outset, and generally did not comment on the process until it was over (and in one case privately). I had hoped to use a modified Critical Incident Questionnaire, but found that time did not permit it at the end of the sessions. I did hand out a questionnaire but did not get a usable sample back. The direction the dialogues took were quite different, where the 11th grade group was talking mostly about what would be, the 12th grade group focused on what had been, and the faculty was more generally circumspect about leadership.

These dialogue sessions were interesting and helpful in a number of ways. First and foremost, they revealed quite disparate views on the idea or definition of leadership. For the most part, the faculty seemed more focused on task completion than on leadership *per se*. The group had high hopes for students running already organized programs or overseeing duty-type tasks, but did not generally identify any particular level of vision for student leaders working within the status quo. The term responsibility was used numerous times, and often interchangeably with the term leadership, and over the course of the two dialogues it became clear that the adult definition of leadership at Brooks was comprised of two primary components: An ability to take responsibility for the success of a group or task, and an Understanding of how best to take ideas and follow through with them (in group settings). In talking anecdotally about leadership, all the adults identified one or more times when they had worked closely on a student initiated project or group activity as being examples of satisfying leadership teaching, and as being completely enjoyable and fulfilling in a teaching sense.

The 12th grade group had little trouble getting started during its sessions. As a group, they were frustrated by their experiences, and noted that they had received too little direction, not much positive feedback, and too few opportunities to lead in a significant way. Many felt that they had wasted their time in their efforts, and a number indicated that they did not feel respected in their roles as leaders. They talked quite a bit about a desire to lead at higher levels (making real change, for example), and identified their few leadership tasks as mundane or meaningless. There was a general sense that their leadership was more likely to be referenced when things were not going well around school or in a particular area. They felt this had been especially true in the fall, when many of them did not have the time to deal with what was being expected of them in a leadership sense, because of other pressures (the college process, most notably). Like the faculty group, many of them could identify a satisfying leadership experience they had enjoyed with an adult, but these were not generally the result of the school's leadership structure; simply, they had had a chance to collaborate on an idea of their own, had seen it through, met with success, and been recognized¹ for their efforts. Often, in relating these experiences, they identified the adult with whom they had worked as having been something more than a typical teacher (friend, mentor, etc.).

The 11th grade group was the most vigorous dialogue group. As rising seniors, in the spring with the class ahead of them getting ready to depart, this group was full of optimism. They were quick, too, to point to the lessons – good and bad – of the various school leaders from throughout their time at school. Much of this conversation was specific to other past and present students (I let this go in the dialogue environment, though I would not normally have done so), and it did not take long for the dialogue to take the shape of a position for the class of 2008: “We want to be...etc.” The group talked briefly about popularity and leadership, which I took to mean it was on their minds as elections approached, but they also acknowledged effectiveness and interest in leading as key leadership traits. This group talked more specifically about events or tasks than either of the other groups, and seemed to bring an energy to the table that would suggest great success for the following year. While not as prevalent as in the other groups, still a number of participants talked about times when they had worked with someone who had helped them bring some idea to fruition.

Conclusions:

While these dialogue groups could hardly be said to be comprehensive, they did reveal some interesting facets of the topic of leadership at our school.

What I heard:

- All groups valued successful leadership collaborations they had experienced, though most were personal and not necessarily the result of the leadership approach of the school.
- No common definition of leadership was shared between groups. The adults favored duties or responsibilities, the 12th graders wanted to bring about change and to exercise authority, and the 11th graders wanted to create events. The students included privileges as part of their definitions, while the adults did not even mention the topic.

¹ As this paper is being finalized, I have had the chance to read over the citations for our graduation. Eight of the twelve major prizes that will be awarded to seniors include the word leadership, almost all of them in an area, project or plan that was initiated by the student and helped to fruition by an adult. I point this out in support of the notion that this type of activity – close student leader-adult collaboration – is valued at our school.

- All groups noted how hard it was to give or to receive feedback on leadership, saying in many cases that leadership was most recognizable in its absence.
- All groups were aware of the challenge in electing leaders for the “right” reasons, with popularity being a major distraction to the process.
- The adult and 12th grade groups did not generally place leadership high in a responsibility hierarchy for students. Coursework, the college process, social obligations, etc. were identified a number of times as priorities in a 12th grade life, ones not easily or appropriately supplanted by leadership responsibilities. The 11th grade group spoke openly about the individual and collective importance of asserting itself as school leaders in terms of making a difference, and some number of students even equated having a good year in general with being good leaders specifically.

What I surmised (no order, just numbered for reference later in this paper)

1. The 11th grade group has the energy, enthusiasm and optimism to cash in on its leadership opportunities.²
2. In thinking about events rather than change, the 11th graders have a more tangible sense of how best to demonstrate their leadership. All groups desire to have an accessible and shared definition for leadership, one that permits its examination and assessment in the positive, and one that can be built upon productively.
3. All groups desire the types of satisfying leadership experiences they pointed to as having been personally successful and meaningful.
4. The idea of positive and progressive leadership feedback is important to the student groups.
5. All groups recognize the dilemma of popularity versus effectiveness in a setting of student leadership.
6. All groups feel that perhaps they are in on the start of something interesting and worthwhile by participating in these relatively brief meetings.
7. The 12th graders are somewhat conflicted in their view of leadership expectations. They desire, on the one hand, to have had “real” leadership opportunities, responsibilities and authority. On the other hand, though, they recognize a severe time impediment in their senior year, given a variety of expectations and obligations.

Proposing and Planning

From the information gathered during these dialogue sessions, and after considering some number of other approaches, I settled upon a plan. As I said earlier, I also have drawn on a number of years of personal thinking about this topic. That said, it is the dialogue group with the 11th graders that most motivates this plan.

In general, the plan follows in response to the numbered points immediately above:

1. In order to take full advantage of the enthusiasm of the 11th grade, and in partial response to concerns about the pace of the 12th grade fall semester, I plan to re-configure the traditional “leadership calendar,” in such a way that it straddles the 11th and 12th grade years.

² With only this one sample to judge, it is impossible say whether this is a function of this particular class or a truism of rising seniors in general. My hunch is that it is some of both.

2. In an effort to keep the 11th graders working towards tangible (perhaps more measurable) leadership goals, much of the work will be in the area of definable goals – events, demonstrable change, etc. – and outcomes that may be accessibly assessed. Efforts will be made, too, to consider leadership metaphors that are generated by those working on this project, and ones around which feedback and conversation might sensibly and clearly be built.
3. Because the most typical “successful” leadership experiences identified by all groups in the dialogues were peripheral to formal school leadership structures, and rather centered around close and collaborative work between a student and an interested adult, those sorts of opportunities should be promoted. These teachable leadership moments, though often spontaneous³ and likely difficult to measure, are at the heart of this plan. Whatever the structures that might evolve, close personal interaction, support and feedback of adults and peers with student leaders is crucial to the success of the project, and integral to any level of fulfillment that is to be attained by any of the groups involved.
4. In the area of feedback, there will be a number of levels. First, it is hoped that more tangible definitions (metaphors) of leadership and more definable leadership tasks (events, responsibilities) will enable more specific feedback and better opportunities for reflective assessment. Second, ongoing dialogue, focused conversation and work on the concept of critical incidents will offer a number of levels of ongoing assessment.⁴ Lastly, students involved in this project will be asked, with the help of interested adults, to compile a leadership workbook, one in which they have detailed their progress through the various leadership opportunities with which they have been involved.
5. It is hoped that successful work in the area of student leadership will somewhat mitigate the issue of popularity in student elections. It will likely never be desirable to do away with the notion of popular leaders altogether (there is something to be said for charisma and personal appeal), but evolving accessibility of the concept of leadership, and myriad personal opportunities to try to lead at one level or another, should elevate effectiveness in leadership above popularity. In the ideal, and perhaps one day as a result of this work, all 11th and 12th graders would feel that their ability to lead had been somewhat tested via this program. In the end, it could be simply that all students felt an opportunity to be of consequence in this area, even in the absence of an established leadership role.⁵
6. Because there is a sense of energy within all groups to work on this project, the effort must be ongoing, attentive and flexible. One of the measures of its success will be in the way the process, moving forward, makes use of each year’s enthusiasm, building new definitions, activities, assessments, etc. in an ongoing pattern of reflection and regeneration.

The Teachable Moment

All dialogue groups spoke anecdotally of the importance of interactive, close teaching as a function of successful student leadership outcomes. While instruction in this or any educational topic is important, it is clear from listening that the most satisfying and productive opportunities

³ Student leaders and adults seem to do well in areas that the students have initiated themselves. The successful navigation of these “eureka” ideas through collaboration and a heightened sense of the teachable moments within the process are both crucial to satisfying and worthwhile leadership outcomes.

⁴ This will be true both of leadership development in particular and my regenerative hopes for this project in general.

⁵ An interesting corollary to truly effective work in the area of student leadership might eventually be the elimination of many leadership positions in favor of a system where all seniors have leadership responsibilities. There are some schools who have tried this, but the success rate is not clear.

for students to lead happened “on the spot.” That is to say that there was a directive presence – adult or peer – at the key moments of a leadership endeavor, and that it was this firsthand direction that propelled the effort towards success, made the student leader feel supported, and heightened the overall sense of collaboration. One key element of these interactions is the investment of students in their own ideas (not just true of students!), an investment which may make them somewhat more open to being instructed. It seems, too, that this investment resonates well with adults who actively and willingly seize upon such moments.

The challenge, however, in maximizing the number and effectiveness of these teachable moments is that they are, by their nature, fairly random in how they occur. Certainly, every effort must be made to heighten student and adult awareness of these interactions, of how these may be structured for success, and of how important they may turn out to be (see Faculty Summers, below). Beyond that, though, it is my plan to make more of these teachable moments accessible to students and mentors by chronicling them. The Critical Incident Questionnaire, as a tool, seems optimal for doing so. It asks students to reflect on key moments of engagement or disengagement, offers opportunities for threads to be evolved, and promotes reflective consideration for what has happened. Though one step removed from true “on the spot” teaching (which is still ideal), re-examination of the key moments through this sort of process allows the so-called “spot” to be well-considered even after the fact. There may be some residual benefit, in fact, for a little more reflection time between the original moment and the de-briefing about it.

The Leadership Calendar

A change in the leadership calendar represents a significant shift away from the view of leadership as a senior year concern, and it re-focuses it as an upper-school (11th and 12th grade) consideration. It recognizes much more than simple leadership outcomes, favoring instead progressive and personal ongoing leadership experiences that are marked by collaboration with mentors. It is an attempt to bring student work in leadership into a more sensible relationship with other demands placed on students during their upper-school year.

Faculty Summers

One of the first and most important steps will be to capture a number of adults who are specifically interested in working on this leadership initiative. They must be adults who are able either to offer specific leadership opportunities to students, or ones who are particularly open and responsive to student-generated leadership opportunities. In the first instance, we might be considering traditional leadership roles (leaders of clubs, captains, dorm prefects, etc.), whereas the second set of adults might be involved more in the area of student leadership aimed at the actualization of student ideas or visions (more interesting, in my opinion). This group will be professionally supported in this task by being offered the chance to attend The Gardner Carney Leadership Institute @ Fountain Valley School during the summer. The group will be expected to participate in or facilitate workshops, dialogues, and focused conversations, where possible, with student leaders, and to offer feedback, assessment and reflective support to the student leaders with whom they were working.

While it is never easy to ask more of any faculty group, I imagine little difficulty in assembling a core group of adults. The topic of student leadership is highly evocative for many of my colleagues, and there is interest in promoting it and doing a more effective job with it. I imagine, too, that success in this area will yield further success for adults. Many of my colleagues enjoy the successful leadership collaborations they’ve had, and would like to have more. The motivation for joining in this group of adults is the promise of doing better work in an area of personal appeal.

First Semester, 11th Grade

With an eye toward capturing the enthusiasm of the 11th grade, the class will participate in a number of workshops, with interested faculty and 12th graders, during the fall, with a few particular goals:

- To begin the process of defining leadership in a way that is accessible to them and which has meaning to their class
- To develop a sense of responsibility and empathic approaches to taking responsibility for others
- To consider effective leadership strategies or tools
- To begin to get to know the adults most interested in working collaboratively with them on projects or ideas of interest
- To begin to consider the most positive leadership attributes and who in their class possesses them
- To begin planning events or activities that will allow them to practice their leadership and influence
- To choose some task-oriented areas of interest on which they might work with involved adults

6-7 workshops are planned during the semester, at least two of which will be based on a starting definition of leadership formed both from our work in dialogue and from a leadership “instructor” with whom I spoke during my research (Weber, 2007):

Leadership is: Influence by Actions
A Series of Choices that Demonstrate Your Values
Authority Built through Relationships
The Movement of a Group
The Setting and Pursuit of Group Goals

Of primary concern in these workshops will be the collaborative identification of outcomes that might indicate strong positive leadership, ones that will allow good effective leadership to be discussed easily and accessibly by students and adults alike. As preludes to a second semester that will see the 11th graders trying out their leadership by taking on various responsibilities (as decided by themselves), these workshops will be highly collaborative, they will make use both of dialogic approaches and focused conversations, and they will incorporate a number of creative thinking tools about how best to construct a leadership framework specific to the class. In all phases, interested adults and 12th graders will participate, the goal being (again) to have ample opportunities for interactions that might promote collaborative leadership down the road.

In the ideal, the 11th grade class will reach January with a heightened sense of leadership and responsibility as it pertains to them, some firm idea of things they would like to do and how to do them, and with a clear leadership metaphor or framework through which they might discuss and assess their experiences, and upon which constructive feedback might be based. Permitting the students to work their own way through this, with guidance, and to arrive at their own conclusions may not be easy in a teaching environment. In my opinion, however, doing so will be the key to maintaining the energy and enthusiasm of the class as students move into actual leadership roles. They will remain interested and invested, I believe, if they are working on something they have created themselves. They will be more likely, too, to engage in the reflection epicycles that are key to this process working well.

Workshop Topics and Approach:

1. Presentation, followed by Dialogue: *What is Leadership: Five Definitions to Consider and Refine*
2. Brainstorm: *The Best Leadership Definitions for the Class of 20??*
3. Guided Free-writing, followed by Focused Conversation: *Tangible Leadership: Metaphors and Accessible Examples, or How Will We Know When It's Going Well?*
4. Brainstorm: *What Actions Might We Take to Realize Leadership Potential, as defined by Example or Metaphor.*
5. Group Work (using small group activity roles): *Selecting Opportunities or Planning Events/Activities within which Student Leadership Might be Practiced.*
6. Reflective Dialogue, followed by Critical Incident Questionnaire: *Our Progress During the Semester*
7. Presentation, followed by Brief Writing Exercise: *Goals, Expectations and Hopes – The Start of a Process of Journaling*

Near the end of the semester, and with the guidance of the adults with whom the students have been working, students will choose an area of the school in which to try their leadership (the activities, etc. which they have been discussing and planning for). The majority of these, it is expected, will be related to the particular actions that were the outcome of workshops 3-5. By the nature of the planned actions, every student will have at least one adult with whom he or she will be working closely. It is hoped that one outcome of the time spent in collaborative work-shopping will be a sense on the part of the students of those adults with whom they would like most closely to work.

Second Semester, 11th Grade

The second semester of the 11th grade year will be primarily a time of Leadership in Action; a period of practical application, focused feedback, reflective assessment and supported adjustment. It is during this phase that effective dialoguing might be most fruitful, in terms of helping students to recognize their progress, successes and shortfalls. By the nature of this period, adult mentors and interested 12th graders will be intimately involved in offering insight and guidance to student leaders. Teachable Moments, made accessible through a series of Critical Incident Questionnaires, will be the primary educational tool of this part for the program, and will form the foundation of student journaling on their progress.

Dialogue on student conceptions and perceptions of leadership as developed through experience will also play an important role in this phase. It is hoped that the various metaphors and definitions settled on by the class at the end of the first semester will evolve throughout the spring, and feedback on this changing framework will be important to the process of group and individual growth. While most of the work will be within small groups, as defined by the projects in which the students are engaged, the class will want to revisit and perhaps clarify its definitions near the mid-point of the semester; this clarification might sensibly form the basis of some assessment levels as the 11th grade year, and the Leadership in Practice phase of the program, draws to its conclusion. A final two workshops near the end of the year on Building the Best Possible Senior Year will be aimed at setting goals and making plans for events, activities specific to senior year (especially the fall), and will be sighted at that point in an effort both to relieve planning pressures of the early fall of the senior year, and to capture the enthusiasm of the start of any year at its height.

First Semester, 12th Grade

As the 12th grade year begins, some students will have taken on leadership roles with clearly delineated responsibilities and goals (a task for a different project...⁶), but it is hoped that the class will have come to understand itself, via its work the previous year, as a leadership unit capable of supporting successful and positively influential leadership within the framework it has created for itself. All interested students⁷ will be invited to participate in the then 11th graders' start on their leadership cycle and workshops. Many seniors will have been involved in ongoing planning of a number of tasks for the fall during the summer. With success in these, it is hoped that the senior year, the second half of the class's leadership calendar, will begin with a significant level of leadership momentum.

In recognizing the time pressures facing the seniors, a great deal of the work with student leaders in this phase will be on the spot, and it is here that the ability of adult mentors to direct, re-direct, assess, comment, etc. via teachable moments will be so important. Hopefully, the trust built and the collaborative spirit generated by the previous year's work will form the basis for positive and productive interactions, ones that point out either the positives or the ways to attain the positives. Hopefully, too, relationships will have been formed that will leave open opportunities for student-adult collaboration on visionary ideas (eureka moments) as they arise. These, it is worth remembering, were characterized as exceptionally satisfying by students and adults alike, and the more often these scenarios take place, the better off the program will be. A significant source of energy and inspiration is to be derived from these also.

Epicycles – Dialogue and Reflection

Second Semester, 12th Grade

With an engaged group of 11th graders taking on responsibilities around the school, and with the 12th graders beginning to disengage from school (particularly as college results arrive), this phase of the leadership cycle will be aimed at two primary areas: Guidance, as interested, for the 11th graders, and Reflective assessment of the time spent and lessons learned during the leadership cycle. Assessment will be of two kinds, one part aimed at considering the process on the whole, and the other considering progress individually. Dialogue and journaling will be the main tools of this phase, both within the context of an ethics discussion course the seniors already take, and which is part of their movement away from school and towards college. This course meets for 90 minutes each week, and it provides the perfect atmosphere for reflection on this and other topics of student development.

In the ideal, some number of 12th graders will be serving as leadership mentors, though long experience with seniors in their final semester hints that this may be difficult. Still, if students are feeling positive about their own experiences, and if they think the process has been worthwhile, they will likely continue their involvement. Their doing so would be to the great benefit of the class behind them, and it would provide excellent closure, both symbolically and practically, to the process of their own leadership development.

⁶ Too few leadership positions at the school have delineated charges or job descriptions. It is hoped that future phases of this project might involve the tailoring of these roles to fit the definitions and frameworks that are being created by each class of leaders.

⁷ Interest in this should be the key factor in participation. It might even be desirable for named leaders, who potentially have other responsibilities, to focus on those tasks rather than on the workshops, etc.

Epicycles – Constituency Building

An important element in this plan is its heavy reliance on the building of constituent support via its highly collaborative nature. From the first steps of information gathering through the implementation of the plan itself, and then further along as the plan evolves over time, there is an intention here to build not a directed teaching structure, but rather an interactive set of collaborative learning relationships and opportunities centered on the topic of leadership. Doing so is an integral part of this plan, whereby students and faculty build and re-build this program, to a certain extent, with every 11th grade class. This process will demand the best of what student-adult relationships have to offer – mutual respect, trust, open communication, shared values, common goals, etc. – and it will require a certain vigorousness of approach. The pay-off, however, will be an ongoing, regenerative process that benefits the constituents, even as it is evolved by them.

Assessment and Measures

Student Level

It is the teachable moment that is at the heart of individual assessment in the area of leadership, and it will be up to the adults and students to collaboratively and vigorously apply the agreed-upon standards of achievement to the experiences as they are happening. There are, of course, the means to assess failed or successful outcomes, but the task of evaluating a process is by far harder, much more subtle, and more reliant upon personal interaction and guidance.

In completing a cycle of leadership it is expected that students, having developed the framework through which leadership can be known, and having had a legitimate go at meeting their own requirements, will also have formed the basis for one or more exit assessments. This assessment will be based partially on reflective journaling done in conjunction with one or more adults with whom they have worked.

Importantly, the kind, quality and quantity of leadership opportunities must be assessed, as an outcome means to inferring the success of the larger program. Determining whether or not there have been more successful leadership opportunities as a result of this process will be important, as will assessing the quality of the interactions that contributed to these. A difficult component to assess will be in determining if the altered leadership calendar has in fact captured, as intended, the enthusiasm of the 11th grade, and/or if the workshop approach has perhaps even created more energy or enthusiasm. It is my hope that this might be inferred from all of the information to be gathered, but that it will be most evident in the level of involvement of students over the course of the 11th grade year. One simple measure, for example, will be in the number of students that see this process through to its completion (attended the workshops, took on a leadership role in the spring, maintained involvement as a potential mentor, completed a journal during senior ethics).

As in all things at school, one standard will be in the way students talk about these experiences in chapel or other public venues, and it may be worth keeping track of references to these in senior speeches (most seniors will deliver a senior talk). Being aware of these references will also play a role in measuring the atmospheric progress of the school in terms of student leadership.

Atmospheric Level

Of equal importance is the task of evaluating the school culture of leadership, of trying to assess whether or not progress in student leadership has been made in an institutional sense. Of this, I can say only that I expect the matter to be abundantly clear via the ongoing epicycles of reflection and dialogue on the topic of leadership, and in the exit assessments and journals of departing 12th graders. It is my hope to develop a pilot assessment, based on the information received in dialogue with current and upcoming leaders (who will only be able to participate peripherally in this project), against which to compare the current 10th grade at the end of its leadership year (2 springs from now).

The Pericycle of Regeneration

Though building upon the Cycles and Epicycles of Action Research as a framework for this project, a further feature has evolved for me, one which will, I think, play an emergent role in future versions of this project. It is also a potentially exciting development of the framework. What my plan proposes is not so much a plan *per se*, rather it is a template for incoming 11th graders to build the salient parts of their own leadership structure, their own leadership plan. Through workshops, better access to teachable moments, more tangible definitions, better opportunities to evolve their plans, etc., students will, I think, find themselves pulled excitedly forward in this process. The same will be true for adults, who respond strongly to student enthusiasm and energy, and the institution will naturally follow. The use of experienced 12th graders to bolster the involvement of adults and the idea of ongoing re-examination and re-assessment represent opportunities for perpetual reconsideration of what it is that is important and relevant, over time, in the area of student leadership and to the students involved in any given year. There is a regenerative quality to this that might move participants off the central AR cycle, and out into something of a pericycle of regeneration. I very much like the idea of outward moving spirals (not really concentric, because they are attached to the inner cycles) that have evolved from the central arc, and I think a desirable outcome of this project will be the inherent regenerative nature of it.

Actions and Implementation

I hope to begin implementing this plan with the rising junior class, with a first workshop slated for early October, 2007. In advance of that, I expect to travel this summer with a number of adults to The Gardner Carney Leadership Institute @ Fountain Valley School of Colorado. Though not having had appropriate time to develop the most effective exit survey or interview for departing senior leaders, it is hoped that some information will be gathered before graduation of this year. This information, which will likely be quite impressionistic, may be helpful down the road in forming a baseline against which to compare the next two classes of seniors, and I do not want to miss the chance to gather it.

Sharing Results – Shaping a Broader Constituency outside my School

I hope to be able at some point to submit for publication an article about this project to TABS (The Association of Boarding Schools), and perhaps even to present on the topic. While many schools are seeking more effective ways to teach student leadership, none that I know of will be

working so stringently with its 11th graders, nor will so much of the work have been focused on collaborative building of a system that is particular to individual classes. There will also be an ongoing, re-generative tenor to this work that could prove both fascinating and directly responsive to the institutional inertia that seems so often to plague such programs or initiatives.

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