

Teaching Teamwork through TV (or: How I Learned to Stop Directing and Love the Struggle)

Earlier this year, a student in my 4th period was passing back graded work. Halfway through the stack, she flipped her ponytail, held a paper up to my face, and asked, “WHO IS THIS?” in a voice louder than I would have liked her to.

I tried to discreetly point across the room to a quiet boy in the corner, but it was too late—he had heard and seen. I was horrified. It was *January*. We had been in school for *four months*, and there were only 24 people in the class.

I felt like I had failed them.

I had become so consumed with their individual growth and success that I had lost sight of what I believe to be the real purpose of education, [best summarized by David Foster Wallace](#), which is to teach students to connect with one another and to overcome their “natural default setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone, day in and day out.”

There were two other problems. First, my high-achieving students were so singularly focused on grades and being seen as smart that they struggled to collaborate without competing. Second, my reluctant readers were so afraid of being wrong that they practiced a “learned helplessness,” in which they would wait until a teacher gave them the right answer. Both of these problems kept my students isolated from one another—alone—day in and day out.

I resolved myself to help my students expand their lonely universes. I wanted them to work with each other to enhance their learning. I wanted them to be able to manage, discuss, and problem-solve with one another and feel proud of their collective work. I wanted them to *know* each other.

Collaboration requires students and teachers to think about their class as a team rather than as individuals who have little to offer one another. High school freshmen have a hard time with this. It’s hard to blame them: [their brains really do make the world revolve around them](#). To be honest, I had a hard time with it, too. How exactly can you *teach* students to work together? What if they hate each other? What if “hogs” and “logs” are just a part of life?

Even with all these fears in mind, I asked them to complete one of the most collaborative storytelling endeavors I could think of: I asked them to create a pilot episode for a new television show, concept to post-production. How hard could that be? They all watch Netflix all the time, anyway, right?

Although at times it felt like a swan dive turned belly flop straight into the deep end, I waded cautiously into the waters of teaching teamwork through television.

Know thyself

Before they started generating ideas for TV shows, I wanted my students to take inventory of their own work and leadership styles. As much as they may protest, few teenagers will let the opportunity to talk about themselves pass them by.

One of the exercises that has taught me much about myself, even as an adult, is the [True Colors Test](#), a simplified version of the [Myers-Briggs personality test](#). We spent an entire class period taking the test and diving in to our results. I even took it with them, and students had fun discussing how well their “color” fit them.

They were obsessed. They thought I was doing some sort of magic mind-reading.

It’s more than just a fun exercise; collaboration is often successful because collaborators are aware of the ways their personalities match or clash with others. Many students had never thought about *why* they found me intimidating (I’m a pensive Green) or why they felt like they wanted to talk *constantly* (in one class, I had 12 chatty Oranges)!

For each class, I posted a color-coded list of all of our colors and posters of conversation structures that students could reference as they worked together.

Let them call the shots... literally

After spending time studying the [narrative structure of television](#), I invited my students to ask “What if...?” questions about *Romeo and Juliet* in order to develop a TV show concept. [What if Romeo was an assassin sent to kill Juliet](#)? What if Romeo and Juliet were students in our class? [What if Romeo and Juliet was a mockumentary instead of a play](#)?

True Colors: Conversations

In order to speak to a ___ in a way they will understand, you should ...

Green: Use clear and precise language Use logic in support of your decision Get right to the point Keep the conversation relevant Ask meaningful questions Talk about possibilities	Gold: Give straightforward direction Use references to the past and tradition Not get sidetracked Keep conversation in order Follow an agenda Talk about responsibility
Blue: Relate what you are saying to feelings Avoid open criticism Put their needs ahead of procedures Be honest and genuine Leave room for input and questions Keep your promises	Orange: Cut to the heart of a problem Give them the straight stuff Be bold and say what is on your mind Focus on action Talk about results Keep the conversations lively

1ST PERIOD COLORS

NAME	I'M AWESOME AT...	HELP ME WITH...
Mrs. Fryar	Green	Gold
Mrs. Simpson	Gold/Blue	Orange
James	Blue	Gold
Erin	Gold	Green
Lindzey	Orange	Gold
Meredith	Green	Blue
Micah	Orange/Blue	Green
Abby	Green	Orange/Blue
Tyler	Gold/Blue	Green
Will	Green/Gold	Blue

These questions became the bedrock for our television pilot episodes: students crafted [elevator pitches](#) which they presented to one another, and *they* decided, as a class, which show to develop.

Allowing students to convince each other to create *their* episode did more than allow them to practice their skills of persuasion: it built their confidence. One of my students was so mesmerized by the questions her classmates had generated, she asked, “Is there any way we can do *all* of them?”

Because they were able to choose the premise of the pilot episode, they all bought into the concept and made the final products much more interesting.

Each class period began with a whole-class production meeting, led by the student-selected director, in which they set the goals for the day. This didn’t always go smoothly. For the first few meetings, students spent a lot of time proposing alternative ideas for planned sequences.



I watched meeting after meeting devolve into fierce debates over whether the main character should wear her hair in a braid or a ponytail, whether the name of the show should be changed, or, once, six entire minutes on whether they should use One Direction or Demi Lovato as music for the credits. It was hard to watch, and at this rate, I wasn’t sure the episodes would ever get made.

Letting it go

It was easy to get frustrated with the perceived lack of progress. There were so many moments when it would have been so much easier for me to just take over the conversation, to make a decision for them.

However, I reminded myself that the end goal was *not* to create incredible pilot episodes that would get picked up by CBS or HBO tomorrow. The goal was for students to get to know each other. To learn to work together. To *collaborate*.

I learned to treat these as learning experiences and opportunities for reflection: *golden* moments. They became sacred in my mind. Instead of jumping in immediately, I would pose a question so they could brainstorm ways to improve their collaboration.

There were some questions that I ended up asking more than others, and modeling these questions led to students using the questions themselves.

This was part of the sacred act of letting go. Instead of offering them the answers, I offered them an opportunity to find an answer that worked for them. Finding the answers to these questions gave my class a common goal. I couldn't tell them what the end result would be—they needed to decide that for themselves—but I felt comfortable that I had given them the tools to figure it out.

My Frequently Asked Questions

- Who needs to be involved in making this decision? Who gets the final say?
- Am I taking this decision too personally?
- How can we divide and conquer?
- How can we make one another feel valued?
- What are we trying to communicate through this part of the story?
- Am I helping or hindering productivity?

Gaining confidence using those tools has led to some of my once-dependent students telling *me* what to do.

Getting out of the way

We were outside the boys cafeteria bathroom filming our final scene when everything clicked. It smelled like ammonia. It was not the ideal location, as it was fairly busy. We had tried to use the men's faculty bathroom, but it was *ocupado* by the Spanish teacher, who was none too happy to have his personal time *interrumpido* by a bunch of 9th graders. Alas, the cafeteria bathroom had to do.

The smell of the bathroom was too strong for me, so I asked them if they'd be okay if I helped them from the hallway. My students told me that my job could be to stand outside the bathroom door and ask other students politely to wait until they are finished filming to come in.

"You're set security," Hunter told me, disappearing back inside around a corner.

Just like that, I was out of the bathroom, and my students were in there, solving their own problems, fending for themselves.

Growing up is a lot like this: one minute, adults are cutting our food, putting us in time out, and stepping in whenever anything is too difficult. Then, eventually, we become the adults: we tie our own shoes and fix our own windshield wipers and if we really screw up, then we have to get ourselves out of it.

On that particular morning “on set,” I could hear the group of students in the bathroom, their voices layered, going through this very transformation. It was about as graceful as you’d expect.

“I think I should stand on the toilet and then pop up when I’m supposed to say my line.”

“Well the *script* says...”

“...okay but that doesn’t make sense based on what we just filmed coming from the lobby.”

“Oh my God, I think I just broke the toilet seat.”

“Are you going to stand there?”

“Yeah, what’s wrong with here? Is this where you want me?”

“Are you guys ready? Do you know your lines?”

“Wait, no... can I see my script? Okay... I think I’m supposed to be angry here. I’ll pop up above the stall aggressively. I fixed the toilet seat. And I’ll yell my lines. Can I yell?”

“You can yell, I think that’s a good idea, just make sure we can hear the next line.”

All the while, I stood in the hallway, still fighting the urge to intervene. As soon as they solved one problem, they created another. It was maddening, and yet, that’s life. I could have stepped in, but what would they have learned?

Then, I heard it: “Annie, you’re an awesome director. Just wanted to make you feel valued.”

The phrasing was clunky and stilted, but the sentiment was genuine. I had let go of controlling their every move, and they had seized that power right out of the air. It was a truly golden moment.

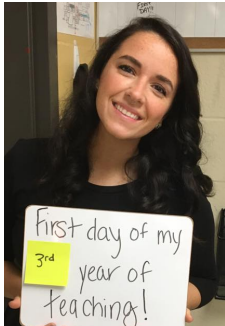
Will any of my students win an Emmy for the pilot episodes they created this year? No. But here’s what they did win: a clear picture of what it means to be a part of a team; former strangers turned friends; the satisfaction of having an idea that came to fruition; a deep understanding of how stories are crafted; an array of questions to ask when they’re feeling stuck; a new perspective on their personalities; the sharpened skill of collaboration.

I won, too. I learned that it is vital—sometimes painfully so— that we allow students the room to make their own choices, and sometimes, their own mistakes. We, as their teachers, must be the force that pushes all else out of their way and gives them room to grow together. Holding my tongue meant I got a rare glimpse inside my students’ heads: I watched how they interacted, how they problem-solved, and how they persevered.

“Storytelling has a huge core to it, like there’s so much that goes into it to make it good.”

—Hagen, 9th grade

However, it is not as simple as leaving students figure it out on their own. I will ask them to wade, rather than swan dive, into something new and scary. I will first ask them to think about who they are, consider what they can contribute to a team, and show them ways to interact, focus, and compromise. I will trust that I have done all those things well, and *then*, in a moment of sacred learning for all of us, I will let go.



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