

Becoming Phoenix

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<http://www.ksd.org/phoenix/index.htm>

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. . . Once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always. . . It doesn't happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time. . . once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

– by Margery Williams, from *The Velveteen Rabbit* –

Happy Birthday

October 26, 2007—the day we became real. One day a collection of misfits with varying levels of commitment thrown together in one room that seemed impossibly limiting. The next day a learning community with common purpose, embracing new thought, and choosing to support each other. Jill and I recognized it at the same time. The last kiddo headed out the door. We started our usual debrief, and it didn't feel "usual." Both of us grinning, we felt. . . satisfaction? pride? confidence? I was struggling to put it into words, when Jill said, "Today we are a project-based high school." Yep. That's it. I'm not sure what August 28th was, but today is our birthday.

So we headed to Starbuck's to figure it out. What happened to all of us seemingly overnight? What are we seeing and feeling today that is so very different than what we were?

Language

Their language is different. John was struck by their language as he facilitated the focus group on Thursday. It really *is* different. They speak of their *passions* and their *interdependence*. They talk about *dialogue* and *reflection*. They talk about creating *open space* for new ideas and about the importance of *diversity*. They talk about *self-governance* and the importance of being *self-directed*. I was struck by their language during advisory today. I loved hearing Dylan talk about "reaching down and finding *courage*" and encouraging his advisory-mates to stop being afraid to contact community *experts*. I loved hearing Emily talk about changing her *quality indicators* to *reflect* her *new learning* instead of what she already knew. They own that language. It's not just teacher talk.

A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.

- Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, No. 115

Ritchart says something similar, that language allows us to organize our thoughts and that language governs our actions. Language is power. The language we use can create a "culture of thinking" and set an "agenda of understanding." Jill and I have been deliberate in the language we use. Consistent in the language we use. We have our own Phoenix lexicon as a reminder. It was necessary at first as we retrained

ourselves. While we haven't shared that dictionary with the kids, we have been deliberate in giving students access to the language itself and in supporting their attempts at trying it out and applying it. Language both creates and defines a culture. I can't wait to see the DVD of the student focus group. I suspect the definition of Phoenix will be laid bare.

Thinking Routines

Their approach to learning is different. They are less inclined to wait for an answer to be handed to them—more inclined to recognize that the tools for finding answers exist within themselves. We need to keep building on that. They ask better questions. They are learning humility—that not knowing something is OK. Our focus on developing habits of mind, work, service, wellness and community is slowly beginning to change the way in which they view learning. They are beginning to see that it is about much more than reading a textbook and taking a test—though that old belief runs deep and seems to be the hardest to let go of.

Several structures or systems are now firmly in place that seem to work together to create thinkers. Twenty minute advisories in both the morning and the afternoon have become incubators of thought. It's a protected space in which they can test ideas and ask questions without fear of ridicule. It's a space in which they feel validated and affirmed. There is hell to pay for Jill and I if we shorten that time in any way or, God forbid, cancel one for another activity. The kids make it very clear that they need that time together. When it is working well, it is magic. I get goose bumps on those days when they are searching for answers together and simultaneously discover new thought. They recognize it when it happens. We experience mini-moments of collective joy and grins all around when we "get it" together. There are still days when they lapse into silliness or they bring in tension from other situations, but they are fewer and farther between, and they seem disappointed when they occur.

Weekly Socratic Seminar has become a marvelous thinking tool. Together we have grappled with rigorous text and big ideas from the works of many big thinkers—from Simon and Garfunkel to Blaise Pascal. They read a passage from Frederick Douglass and think they are never going to understand it. Then we tackle it together, with the agreement that we are going to each enlarge our understanding of the author's message. We force each other to refer to the text, clarify for one another, respect everyone's effort, and come away with much greater understanding than we went in—and frequently with more questions that we apply elsewhere.

At the end of each day, just before afternoon advisory, students engage in reflection on their time and learning for the day. This twenty minutes of uninterrupted writing has had huge payoff. I am amazed at the growth in their ability to express themselves in writing and at the increased depth in their thinking. They use this time to celebrate daily successes, air frustrations, ask questions, analyze work patterns, and set goals. They clear their heads and make plans for continued growth. They also share personal struggles and celebrations—share the things that they are involved in outside of Phoenix. Jill and I are still responding to each reflection in writing every night. While this has done wonders for building relationships and has

allowed us to model good reflective habits, I don't know how long we can keep it up. It's a huge time commitment for both of us.

Students also reflect on their daily reading. We have 30 minutes of SSR every day after lunch. We collect their dialogue journals each Friday and expect to see at least two entries. Most are moving away from plot summaries and begin to grapple with making personal connections and analyzing author style and techniques. Jill and I respond to these journals weekly as well.

This kind of conversation also exists in project proposal conferences, project coaching conversations, and when a community issue must be resolved through circle processes. We talk a lot at Phoenix—the conversations, both in writing and aloud, are rich and varied. We use these opportunities to encourage looking at evidence, alternate points of view, significance, and connections to other learning. We are at the very beginning stages of seeing them internalize and apply habits of thought to situations outside of these structures. Oh, the power of that!

I love Sizer's description of habits of mind (8 of them) and Meier's description (5) and have found use in Costa's 16, as well. Trying to make sense of all of this tonight I stumbled across another model on the Project Zero website. They talk about Artful Thinking. I love that! Thinking well is an art.



Habits of Community

That language and those patterns of thinking/patterns of discourse both guide and are governed by our ways of being with each other. Phoenix students are beginning to have enough confidence in themselves and what they have to offer, that they are reaching out—at least to each other. I see them slowly becoming others-centered. They are beginning to see the impact of their actions on the community around them. They are beginning to see others' needs as being at least equally important to their own. This is huge for many of our critters. They are beginning to see themselves and their responsibilities differently.

It was so exciting to see Jose and Christian volunteering to work the Jail and Bail Breast Cancer Research fundraiser this weekend. I'm sure that they have wanted to do that kind of thing in the past but they didn't have the confidence that their peers would accept them as part of the work team and they lacked the confidence to speak to strangers. What has happened to them? It was so exciting to see Lindsay invite Chris (little nerdy socially inappropriate Chris) to her house to work on making pink ribbons for the fundraiser and him puffing up and accepting her invitation. It was so exciting to see Kayla take on leadership of this activity and actually work *with* people to make it happen. Ari, who was too terrified to speak to a community mentor, much less job shadow, made contact on Thursday and had a successful experience on Friday. Dylan spoke to Advisory Board, called in community experts the next day, and is well on his way to completing his Venture application and starting a music recording business. Becca emerged as leader of the group creating Phoenix Supports for Success to help kids who are struggling. Mike acknowledged that he might actually need to access expertise that he doesn't have and that he has issues with time management. Josh is requesting time to work separately in the conference room so that he isn't distracted. What is happening to them? I see a softening of the hard edges, a blurring of the sharp distinctions between them, much less rigid hanging on to what was, flexibility of thought and action.

They are beginning to see themselves as coaches, facilitators, leaders, organizers, innovators, designers, mediators, negotiators, advocates, supporters, and as important members of and ambassadors for a strong learning community. Stronger students are naturally mentoring those who are less skilled, less confident. They are growing together. A culture of interdependent learning has formed. Nice.

Embracing Rigor

Who would have thought they would ever complain about Early Release days and their impact on Independent Work Time? Who would have thought that they would resist sacrificing even five minutes of Silent Reading? It was thrilling when two very important members of the Student Focus Group this week struggled with giving up project time in order to participate. They asked us if they could take time from elsewhere so that they didn't shortchange their project work. Thrilling when two members of the Supports for Success group recognized a need to meet, but didn't want to do it during SSR—one because he's involved in an exciting novel and one because he had a small engine repair job to complete that night and had brought the manual to read.

Student reflections are deeper. They don't shy away as quickly from tough questions in advisory or Socratic Seminar. Project proposals demonstrate students choosing depth. They are starting to see the ***learning*** as the project—not the deliverable(s). They aren't as afraid of the state standards and are working hard to discover ways to demonstrate mastery.

Ritchart talks about "distance" that is created in the traditional classroom—distance between teacher and student, distance between the student and the subject. Maybe that's the difference here. With students in control and grappling with the content

without the middle man, maybe rigor happens naturally. Their questions are authentic and they must engage in serious work to discover the answers.

Phoenix Identity

I think we finally understand who we are. There is a confidence that didn't use to exist. Our students loved preparing for this week's Student Focus Group. They loved meeting in small groups and talking about what learning is and how the structure at Phoenix supports that. Even when talking about this weekend's Breast Cancer Research fundraiser, they decided that it was important to be able to explain to anyone who asked what Phoenix is. They worked with each other to come up with sound bites about our Phoenix vision. Who knew they could even begin to express that? They are proud of who we have become.

Today is our birthday.