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Pedagogy of Place
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Seminar - The Science of Breaking Out of Your Comfort Zone

Field Study theme:

Our intersession theme is “Chart Your Course.” Many of our freshmen begin high school without a clear idea of where they want to be headed (college, career, other goals). Those that do aren’t very sure how to get there. These unknowns, along with the overall stress of moving into high school can cause a lot of fear and discomfort. To be successful, however, students will need to chart their course into and through that unknown. They need to accept that this will push them out of their comfort zone and embrace the opportunity.

When will they read/view/annotate?

Students will be given the seminar article and instructions on the first day of intersession. We will have a block of work time that day, so they may choose to begin reading and annotating during that time, at home, or during one of the subsequent work cycles prior to the seminar discussion. An Intervention Specialist will be available during the work cycles to read with a small group.

How will they self-assess?

We will review seminar expectations with students and provide the rubric for seminar self-assessment when they receive the article. I have included the rubric I used this past year during seminar. *Disclaimer: the seminar rubric is not my original work.*

Where will it take place?

Seminar will take place at school. We have four teachers on our team available to facilitate discussions, so we will run four parallel sessions of the seminar (in different classrooms).

Writing Question (2-3)

- Describe your perfect “Comfort Zone.” What would it include?
- What is the weirdest/craziest/scariest food that you love to eat?
- Draw a Venn Diagram that represents things you want to accomplish or try and things that are outside of your comfort zone. Include things in the overlapping space that are currently outside of your comfort zone, but that you still want to try.

Opening Questions (2-3)

- Why is it important that we break out of our comfort zone?
- In what ways does the article suggest that you break out of your comfort zone?

Core Questions (3-5)

- Why is it important to push yourself out of your “comfort zone” when charting your course through high school?
- Do you agree that we can experience a level of “optimal anxiety”? Why or why not?
- How is expanding your boundaries important to moving forward on your path through high school and beyond?
- How can we use our community to help us break out of our comfort zone? What would you be able to accomplish?

Closing Question/Whip Around (2-3)

- We have already tried a lot of new things this week. Name one thing that has pushed you outside of your comfort zone in a positive way.
- Have you been pushed outside of your comfort zone yet this week?
- On a scale of 1-10, how much are you willing to push yourself outside of your comfort zone next week?

Seminar Student-Evaluation Rubric

(I have a cleaner copy to print in landscape for the students)

Socratic Seminar Rubric

| Socratic Seminar Rubric | Text Preparation—reading and annotation of text | Engagement—participation in discussion and on-task | Use of Text—support of ideas with text; | Conduct—encouragement of group; participation is civilized and respectful | Listening—Building on ideas from others | Insight and Reasoning—asks thoughtful questions; makes significant connections or brings new ideas | Openness—Acceptance of other points of view |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 5 Exemplary | Remarks and written work reveal a critical reading of text with annotations, vocabulary and at least four critical, discussable questions connected to the text. | Demonstrates thoughtful and active participation throughout seminar. Consistently stays on task. Body language is active. Consistently makes eye contact. | Initiates specific references to text to support and defend ideas without external prompting. | Contributes to the success of the group and makes invitations by name to include and support all participants. Is consistently nonjudgmental and respectful. | Listens unusually well. Frequently responds using names. Comments indicate accurate and perceptive listening and connect directly to what has been said. | Questions and comments are insightful, logical and contribute to deeper construction of meaning. Presents new ideas and makes connections to previous/outside topics or dialogues. | Accepts points of view other than own and uses them to expand own ideas and discover new meaning about concepts. |
| 4 Accomplished | Remarks and written work reveal text was read—ideas are relevant. Annotations are present and three or four critical, text-based questions are present. | Demonstrates active participation throughout seminar. Stays on task. Body language is active. Often makes eye contact. | Makes specific references to text to support ideas. Uses text effectively when challenged to do so. | Demonstrates respect and enthusiasm attempting to include and support all participants. Makes invitations to participants. | Listens and is able to respond to ideas and questions from others with little digression. May sometimes use names in responses. | Questions and comments are apt, logical, and relevant but do not necessarily offer significantly new insights or ideas. | Accepts points of view of others and attempts to use them to expand own ideas but may reflect set thinking. |
| 3 Average | Remarks and written work reveal text was read, but ideas may be irrelevant or annotations may be scant with only three or fewer questions present. | Demonstrates active participation through most of seminar. Stays on task most of the time. Body language and eye contact show some engagement. | Occasionally makes references to text to support and defend ideas but may have to be challenged to do so. | Demonstrates general respect for the group but is not always supportive and inclusive. May at times be judgmental or impatient of others. | Generally listens but is not always attentive as evident in some unconnected responses. Frequently focuses on same people. | Questions and comments are apt and logical but do not move the group forward to a deeper understanding. Some ideas may be off topic. | Acknowledges other points of view but may try to argue or refute them. Points reflect a lack of flexibility. |
| 2 Needs Improvement | Remarks and written work reveal cursory reading of the text. Few questions present or questions lack substance for discussion. | Participates in seminar although may be off task. Occasionally carries on side conversations. May be disengaged or lack eye contact. | Makes few references to text and is unable to defend origin of ideas when challenged to do so. | Speech and manner suggest a lack of support and/or respect. Lacks awareness of group dynamics by conversing with same people most of the time. | Comments are relevant to topic but lack connection to what has been said by others. | Questions and comments reveal personal reactions but lack logic and/or insight. | Argues with other points of view and is reluctant to acknowledge them as possible or relevant. |
| 1 Undeveloped | Remarks and written work suggest the text was not carefully read. Questions lack substance for discussion. | Is a passive observer of seminar or is off task. Side conversations are frequent. | Makes no references to text to support and defend ideas. Ideas appear "off the cuff." | Makes no attempt to be inclusive. Uses disrespectful language. Centers dialogue on self or specific classmates. | Does not listen adequately; therefore, comments are random and may be irrelevant. | Questions and comments are illogical, difficult to follow and offer no benefit to the group. | Does not acknowledge or accept other points of view. Engages in debate over dialogue. |

Adapted from Matt Copeland's Socratic Circles: Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking in Middle and High School.

Reflection Question:

Describe an idea that someone other than yourself shared during seminar that moved you, changed your mind, or in any other way sparked your interest. _____

Self-Evaluation:

| Number Rating | Student Comments | Teacher Comments |
|---------------|------------------|------------------|
| | | |

Mapping Tool

- I don't visually map my seminar, but instead allow a student volunteer draw the map of student interactions. I allow students to determine the mapping style they prefer as I don't use it for grading. I do find that students like to glance at the map while they are self-assessing.
- Instead, I prefer to take notes on student contributions and behaviors that mirrors the rubric.

| Student | Engagement | Use of Text | Conduct | Listening | Insight & Reasoning | Openess |
|-----------|------------|-------------|---------|-----------|---------------------|---------|
| Student 1 | | | | | | |
| Student 2 | | | | | | |
| Student 3 | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |

The Science of Breaking Out of Your Comfort Zone (and Why You Should)

You've seen inspirational quotes that encourage you to get out and do something strange— something you wouldn't normally do—but getting out of your routine just takes so much work. There's actually a lot of science that explains why it's so hard to break out of your comfort zone, and why it's good for you when you do it. With a little understanding and a few adjustments, you can break away from your routine and do great things.

It's important to push the boundaries of your comfort zone, and when you do, it's kind of a big deal. But what is the "comfort zone" exactly? Why is it that we tend to get comfortable with the familiar and our routines, but when we're introduced to new and interesting things, the glimmer fades so quickly? Finally, what benefit do we derive from breaking out of our comfort zone, and how do we do it? Answering those questions is a tall order, but it's not too hard to do. Let's get started.

The Science of Your "Comfort Zone," and Why It's So Hard to Leave It

Simply, your comfort zone is a behavioral space where your activities and behaviors fit a routine and pattern that minimizes stress and risk. It provides a state of mental security. You benefit in obvious ways: regular happiness, low anxiety, and reduced stress.

The idea of the comfort zone goes back to a classic experiment in psychology. Back in 1908, psychologists Robert M. Yerkes and John D. Dodson explained that a state of relative comfort created a steady level of performance. In order to maximize performance, however, we need a state of relative anxiety—a space where our stress levels are slightly higher than normal. This space is called "Optimal Anxiety," and it's just outside our comfort zone. Too much anxiety and we're too stressed to be productive, and our performance drops off sharply.

The idea of optimal anxiety isn't anything new. Anyone who's ever pushed themselves to get to the next level or accomplish something knows that when you really challenge yourself, you can turn up amazing results. More than a few studies support the point. However, pushing too hard can actually cause a negative result, and reinforce the idea that challenging yourself is a bad idea. It's our natural tendency to return to an anxiety neutral, comfortable state. You can understand why it's so hard to kick your brain out of your comfort zone.

Even so, your comfort zone is neither a good or bad thing. It's a natural state that most people trend towards. Leaving it means increased risk and anxiety, which can have positive and negative results (which we'll get to in a moment), but don't demonize your comfort zone as something holding you back. We all need that head-space where we're least anxious and stressed so we can process the benefits we get when we leave it.

What You Get When You Break Free and Try New Things

Optimal anxiety is that place where your mental productivity and performance reach their peak. Still, "increased performance" and "enhanced productivity" just sound like "do more stuff." What do you really get when you're willing to step outside of your comfort zone?

- **You'll be more productive.** Comfort kills productivity because without the sense of unease that comes from having deadlines and expectations, we tend to phone it in and do the minimum required to get by. We lose the drive and ambition to do more and learn new things. We also fall into the "work trap," where we feign "busy" as a way to stay in our comfort zones and avoid doing new things. Pushing your personal boundaries can help you hit your stride sooner, get more done, and find smarter ways to work.
- **You'll have an easier time dealing with new and unexpected changes.** In an article at The New York Times, Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston, explains that one of the worst things we can do is pretend fear and uncertainty don't exist. By taking risks in a controlled fashion and challenging yourself to things you normally wouldn't do, you can experience some of that uncertainty in a controlled, manageable environment. Learning to live outside your comfort zone when you choose to can prep you for life changes that force you out of it.
- **You'll find it easier to push your boundaries in the future.** Once you start stepping out of your comfort zone, it gets easier over time. This same NYT article explains that as you step out of your comfort zone, you'll become accustomed to that state of optimal anxiety. "Productive discomfort," as they call it, becomes more normal to you, and you're willing to push farther before your performance falls off. This idea is well illustrated in this infographic at Future Science Leaders. At the bottom, you'll see that as you challenge yourself, your comfort zone adjusts so what was difficult and anxiety-inducing becomes easier as you repeat it.

- **You'll find it easier to brainstorm and harness your creativity.** This is a soft benefit, but it's fairly common knowledge (and it's easily reproducible) that seeking new experiences, learning new skills, and opening the door to new ideas inspire us and educate us in a way that little else does. Trying new things can make us reflect on our old ideas and where they clash with our new knowledge, and inspire us to learn more and challenge confirmation bias, our tendency to only seek out information we already agree with. Even in the short term, a positively uncomfortable experience can help us brainstorm, see old problems in a new light, and tackle the challenges we face with new energy.

The benefits you get after stepping outside of your comfort zone can linger. There's the overall self-improvement you get through the skills you're learning, the new foods you're trying, the new country you're visiting, and the new job you're interviewing for. There's also the soft mental benefits you get from broadening your horizons.

How to Break Out of Your Comfort Zone

Outside your comfort zone can be a good place to be, as long as you don't tip the scales too far. It's important to remember there's a difference between the kind of controlled anxiety we're talking about and the very real anxiety that many people struggle with every day. Everyone's comfort zone is different, and what may expand your horizons may paralyze someone else. Remember, optimal anxiety can bring out your best, but too much is a bad thing.

Here are some ways to break out (and by proxy, expand) your comfort zone without going too far:

- **Do everyday things differently.** Take a different route to work. Try a new restaurant without checking Yelp first. Go vegetarian for a week, or a month. Try a new operating system. Recalibrate your reality. Whether the change you make is large or small, make a change in the way you do things on a day-to-day basis. Look for the perspective that comes from any change, even if it's negative. Don't be put off if things don't work out the way you planned.
- **Take your time making decisions.** Sometimes slowing down is all it takes to make you uncomfortable—especially if speed and quick thinking are prized in your work or personal life. Slow down, observe what's going on, take your time to interpret what you see, and then intervene. Sometimes just defending your right

to make an educated decision can push you out of your comfort zone. Think, don't just react.

- **Trust yourself and make snap decisions.** We're contradicting ourselves, but there's a good reason. Just as there are people who thrive on snap decisions, others are more comfortable weighing all of the possible options several times, over and over again. Sometimes making a snap call is in order, just to get things moving. Doing so can help you kickstart your personal projects and teach you to trust your judgement. It'll also show you there's fallout to quick decisions as well as slow ones.
- **Do it in small steps.** It takes a lot of courage to break out of your comfort zone. You get the same benefits whether you go in with both feet as you do if you start slow, so don't be afraid to start slow. If you're socially anxious, don't assume you have to muster the courage to ask your crush on a date right away, just say hello to them and see where you can go from there. Identify your fears, and then face them step by step.

There are lots of other ways to stretch your personal boundaries. You could learn a new language or skill. Learning a new language has multiple benefits, many of which extend to learning any new skill. Connect with people that inspire you, or volunteer with an organization that does great work. Travel, whether you go around the block or across the globe. If you've lived your whole life seeing the world from your front door, you're missing out. Visiting new and different places is perhaps one of the best ways to really broaden your perspectives, and it doesn't have to be expensive or difficult to do. The experiences you have may be mind-blowing or regrettable, but that doesn't matter. The point is that you're doing it, and you're pushing yourself past the mental blocks that tell you to do nothing.

Trying new things is difficult. If it weren't, breaking out of your comfort zone would be easy and we'd do it all the time. It's just as important to understand how habits form and how we can break them as it is to press yourself out of your comfort zone by doing specific things.

Why It's Important to Return To Your Comfort Zone from Time to Time

You can't live outside of your comfort zone all the time. You need to come back from time to time to process your experiences. The last thing you want is for the new and interesting to quickly become commonplace and boring. This phenomenon, called *hedonistic adaptation*, is the natural tendency to be impressed by new things only to

have the incredible become ordinary after a short time. It's why we can have access to the greatest repository of human knowledge ever created (the internet) at our fingertips (on our smartphones) and still get so bored that all we think of is how quickly we can get newer, faster access. In one way it drives us forward, but in another it keeps us from appreciating the subtle and the everyday.

You can fight this by trying new, smaller things. Ordering something new at a restaurant where you get the same thing every visit can be eye-opening the same way visiting a new country can be, and both push you out of your comfortable spaces. Diversify the challenges you embrace so you don't just push your boundaries in the same direction. If you've been learning Latin-based languages and you find yourself bored, switch gears to a language with a completely different set of characters. If you've taken up running, instead of just trying to run longer and farther, try challenging yourself to run on different terrain. You still get the challenge, but you broaden your horizons in a different way.

Take It Slow, and Make Stretching Your Boundaries a Habit Of Its Own

The point of stepping out of your comfort zone is to embrace new experiences and to get to that state of optimal anxiety in a controlled, managed way, not to stress yourself out. Take time to reflect on your experiences so you can reap the benefits and apply them to your day to day activities. Then do something else interesting and new. Make it a habit if you can. Try something new every week, or every month. Our own Adam Dachis has committed himself to doing something weird and new every week, just to test his boundaries.

Similarly, don't limit yourself to big, huge experiences. Maybe meditation pushes you out of your comfort zone just as much as bungee jumping. Try the former if you've already done the latter. The goal isn't to become an adrenaline junkie—you just want to learn to learn what you're really capable of. That's another reason why it's important to return to a comfortable state sometimes and just relax. Just don't forget to bring back as much as you can carry from those inspired, creative, productive, and slightly uncomfortable moments when you do.