



The Team, The Team, The Team

Michelle Vanhala

One teacher reflects on how a shared space impacted her team's work together.

Beginnings

Our principal locked himself in classroom 205 with his wife and twin toddlers for a day over the summer. As each member of our newly-formed interdisciplinary freshman teaching team prepped our own rooms, we made excuses to walk by the middle classroom, surreptitiously trying to peek past the covered door window to the source of the hammering we could hear from within. Later that day, my science teaching partner Lynn¹ texted me—"WAIT UNTIL YOU SEE IT."

Just weeks before, a tense team meeting ended in tears when Lynn and I had advocated for traditional teacher desk spaces in our own classrooms. We had pushed back when our principal articulated his expectation that our team would complete all of our prep work together in this shared space rather than at desks in our separate rooms—citing the drab off-white walls and anticipating the chaos that would inevitably emerge with nine teachers trying to work alongside each other.

Amidst a bevy of structural and curricular changes that included new classrooms for all of us and the implementation of project-based learning integrated

across subjects, Lynn and I grasped at something we felt like we could control—this shared physical space and how it was to be used—as we challenged our principal's vision. TJ, a math teacher on our team, finally interrupted our protests and effectively silenced our arguments; "It's no big deal," he said with an easy-going shrug. "I can work wherever."

Resigned to giving it a try, we continued to prep our classrooms and procrastinated the work we knew we needed to put into our shared team room until that summer day when our principal surprised us. Walking in, I failed to hold back tears as I saw the former French classroom transformed by bright cerulean paint. On one wall where faded, torn posters from the 90's had once resolutely hung there was now a new sign: "Our Happy Place."

In the center, nine brand new black rolling office chairs were situated around six tables pushed together around laptop charging stations, with a collection of pencils, erasers, and post-it notes set out for each of us. A basket of candy—the good stuff—sat on a chalkboard-painted shelf which was pushed against the opposite wall that read "Enjoy!" at the top. Over the next few days, each member of our team claimed their spot in the team room, settling in with pictures of family members, piles of papers, and towers of books.

Lynn and I got there first. "We should make sure we get seats next to each other so that we can plan together," she reasoned. Her profile to my left quickly became a familiar, comfortable thing; her spot was strewn with pictures of her two kids and husband, healthy snacks and empty bags of chips—clutter that contrasted with

¹ Names have been changed to protect privacy.

her incredibly detail-oriented mindset and organized, composed nature.

Andrea used to sit at the far end of the table, but relocated to the opposite side of the table in October, next to Lynn. It happened suddenly, with little fanfare, after a quiet conversation between her and Lynn one lunch period—she piled up her towers of books and wheeled her tall shelf of papers over.

Her abandoned spot was next to Janet's seat, which sat empty most of the year. Janet could usually be found in her room, where her computer was always hooked up because of the technical issues she experienced regularly. Janet's rare presence in the room was usually marked by a notable hush—we were afraid to be honest around her because she was known for cornering administrators to discuss her concerns about our team's direction.

The only one of us whose voice would subdue Janet's predictable protests was Tom, whose meticulously clean table was on my right. A confident, experienced social studies teacher who moved from teaching Advanced Placement courses to juniors and seniors in order to work with our freshmen, he said that our work together transformed how he views education. Tom liked to get close and whisper intently in a way that made you feel heard. He recently shared an adage with me: "I'd rather teach something new every year for 30 years than teach the same thing over and over for 30 years."

Megan and John sat directly across from us. At Megan's desk, everything had its place. Disney-themed scissors and office supplies were placed into an organizer on day one and were artfully arranged each afternoon before she packed up to leave. Megan was known within our team for being the one to say, "Yes, and . . .". I looked across to her when I needed calm support.

Next to her, John's seat was often empty, as he was out and about running around from classroom to classroom to support his special education students. Between his and TJ's spot was a table-top basketball hoop toy that John's oldest daughter put together for them. "I figured you guys might need a stress reliever some days," she explained when she dropped it off, with a glance towards Janet's empty seat and a knowing smile.

And indeed John and TJ were often seen ping-ponging the mini-basketballs-on-strings from their catapults into the attached hoops. Expletives regularly came from that side of the table as the two close friends laughed and aimed to outshoot each other. TJ, whose friendship with John went back to their high school days, rarely was seen sitting down—more often he was pacing in circles around our table to rack up even more steps on his Fitbit, which

probably had already recorded thousands of steps from his morning 6-mile run. As the school's award-winning head wrestling coach, it wasn't unusual for TJ to initiate a friendly wrestling match in the room's corner when one of his wrestlers would pop in with a quick question. TJ was always good for a one-liner and was known for his smirk, which effectively grounded any anxiety in our collaboration as he reminded us not to take life too seriously and go with the flow. From my vantage point, I could see a post-it note on the back of one of his photo frames: "Lighten up, for f***'s sake," it said next to a smiley face.

Zach's seat was to TJ's right. A big, football-player kind of guy, he was usually quiet and looking down at his computer, except when he spoke up passionately in a way that surprised everyone who didn't realize that he was listening intently the whole time. Zach didn't say much—but what he did say was always meaningful and positive. Zach had shared that he viewed his role on our team as that of a servant-leader; his answer was a reliable "yes" when asked to do anything.

By the spring, our team had settled into predictable roles, our personalities (mostly) balancing each other out to form a cohesive unit that saw a goal, formulated steps, and moved forward to meet the needs of our students. We used our shared space to plan within and across disciplines, to meet formally utilizing protocols, and to eat the food we brought in for each other. "How is Susie doing in your class?" was a common informal conversation topic, often followed up with collectively-



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drafted emails home as we identified concerning patterns and talked across the table to suggest solutions. We used the white boards around the room to sketch out plans for each interdisciplinary unit, mapping out project timelines and visualizing how each subject's classwork would support the unit's shared project-based learning theme. This was a place where we could develop and refine our common grading practices—"Can you look at this? What would you say would take this student's response from a level 3 up to a level 4?"—but also a space to solidify our after school plans to meet up at the local brewery. We weren't perfect by any means, but we saw how we could be better, and we looked forward to starting and ending our day together in our blue team room.

Endings

The walls are still blue, and the desks are still circled around the megatable at the center of our converted French classroom. A list of dates on the front whiteboard count down the days until the end of the school year. There are handwritten notes in distinctly different colors annotating the makeshift calendar with our various thoughts and questions about each day's plans.

Messier with boxes and final papers, our team room is also notably quieter than it was in April. Janet is in the room because she needs help with end-of-the-year technology. Andrea has more books than ever at her spot—she will be moving classrooms this summer to take over what was my room, and the team room is her temporary holding space for piles of young adult novels and knick-knacks.

My space is the cleanest it has ever been—I am packing up and sending a student out to my car with a box of classroom materials each day because I am moving schools in the fall. My decision came after our newly elected school board fired our superintendent, hired someone with no educational background, voiced their opposition to project-based learning, voted to return to traditional grading in the middle of the year, and decided that we would not have a structure to support collaborative, interdisciplinary teaming in the next school year (see Figure 1).

Lynn is also leaving the district—but she has not cleaned her space yet, and there are still chip bags and pictures of her two children lining her desk. On my other side, Tom's space is meticulous as ever, and across from us are cupcakes that Zach brought in for the team from the local bakery.

Megan is working on grading—she has taken over half of the grading for TJ's classes—so she is stressed out with completing everything before grades are due. Next

January 25, 2019: Newly-elected school board cuts ties with Tecumseh superintendent

March 26, 2019: Tecumseh's new superintendent on leave amid allegations of 'harassment, intimidation'

March 28, 2019: Tensions high as Tecumseh school district looks to hire 3rd superintendent in 2 months

April 8, 2019: Tecumseh Schools paying 3 superintendents after hiring new interim

April 28, 2019: Emails show parents' frustrations with Tecumseh schools

May 16, 2019: Tecumseh Schools hires fifth superintendent in five months

May 20, 2019: Tecumseh Schools mourns teacher, coach killed in pedestrian crash

May 30, 2019: Tecumseh Schools pumps brakes on reconfiguring district buildings

June 7, 2019: Tecumseh superintendent on leave says board president ordered him to 'target and terminate' employees

June 13, 2019: Tecumseh superintendent under investigation resigns, calls for state to take over

Figure 1. Tecumseh School District news headlines. The headlines included here were reported on the news website MLive.com from January through June 2019.

to her, John's spot is almost empty, except for the tissue container between him and Megan.

John doesn't come into our team room anymore since TJ's accident—not because he is busy running around supporting his special education students, but because the room reminds him too much of his friend. When I saw him quickly walk in to grab his laptop out from underneath their mini-basketball court toy, there were tears in his eyes.

TJ's spot sits empty now. His table knick-knacks and pictures were removed by his wife for his memorial ceremony, but there is one orange, student-designed shirt that is folded on top of his desk. It features a picture of him with his familiar smirk holding a sign that reads "Why I teach: To be the difference" and the dates January 31, 1983–May 19, 2019.



*Seeds have been planted—
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collaboration."*

As I pack one of my last boxes, Tom pulls me aside for one last fervent whispered conversation: “Keep doing what you do, okay? Don’t change because you know these students and you know what they need. A new school? Doesn’t matter. A new city? Doesn’t matter. Doesn’t change who you are and what you know. Keep doing that because you’re going to do amazing things for those kids there.” Tom isn’t a hugger, so with a quick nod, he throws his bag over his shoulder and walks out of the room.

Megan, Andrea, Lynn and I leave together, each carrying a box to my car. I am leaving this room with just a few boxes, but I am also leaving with the fast friendship of these three ladies. I am leaving with the strength demonstrated by John and the passion exemplified by Tom. I am leaving with perseverance and patience cultivated through challenging conversations with Janet, and I am leaving inspired by Zach’s steadfast positivity. I am leaving with the memory of TJ’s energy: “Go out and kick the world’s a** today, everybody.” he once told us in a 5 am video sent via a group chat on his morning run.

Our team may be broken and our blue team room’s future uncertain, but seeds have been planted—seeds of constructivism, seeds of innovation, seeds of teamwork, and seeds of collaboration. Wherever we are in our separate spaces in the fall, we are leaving with lessons learned in our year of teaming together. We are leaving having witnessed the successes of an interdisciplinary, project-based learning curriculum for students who were more engaged than ever. We are leaving with the drive to continue to push the envelope, to challenge traditional, outdated practices, and, most importantly, to support those around us who share our views of transformative education for our students.

Citation

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