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"From There to Here" - A Reflection on My Summer and Classroom Experiences

As a veteran fellow, I welcomed this Educational Transfer Plan option because it gave me the opportunity to view my professional and personal experience and place it into an historic and developmental context. We're often so busy with the "day-to-day" that we miss the opportunity to reflect on how much we've accomplished; the impact we have had on those working with us or in my case, learning from us. That is why I've entitled my essay, "From There to Here".

I thoroughly enjoyed the first day of "blogging", in which everyone was asked to introduce themselves and provide a bit of background. At first this exercise seemed a bit daunting (as I've been around for a few decades) and I was torn as to how I should begin. I include this initial entry here as my "there" statement so that you will have a hint of "where I'm coming from":

*"I often begin my story with the line, "It all began on a small farm in Tacoma, Washington". OK, I wasn't actually born on a small farm but did grow up in a military family, definitely qualifying me for the term "Army brat". The early school years were spent in Kaiserslautern, Germany (nothing like attending Kindergarten in Germany) and Fort Huachuca, Arizona, before we finally settled in Los Angeles. Prior to the Los Angeles experience, the phrase "fast and furious" could accurately be used to describe my friendships. As the other kids were also Army brats, we couldn't count on our families being in the same place for any length of time, so we got used to making several friends in a hurry! Remarkably, I'm still in touch with a few of them but most are out there, somewhere.*

*The "Los Angeles Years" (3rd grade through high school) were spent in South Central Los Angeles during the early 1960's and 70's---turbulent times in this country's history as well. I often tell my students about witnessing integration, segregation, rioting in the streets, and the establishment of a major street gang (The Crips). These things alone could fill out the rest of the summer's blog entries but I also speak to my students about dedicated parents, teachers and counselors who believed in our ability to succeed and gave us the inspiration to attend some of the finest universities in the nation!*

*My college experience was spent in Northern California at "The Harvard of The West", during which time I attempted my first teaching experience with middle schoolers in East Palo Alto. That bit of experience caused me to look anywhere else besides teaching for a future career, as there was little subject matter being taught but plenty of "baby sitting". At any rate, after graduation I returned to Los Angeles where I worked in civil service (City of Los Angeles) and insurance (personal lines) before embarking on a 20+ year career in Information Technology that eventually brought me back to the Bay Area. Well, we are all well aware of the cyclic nature of life and here I am in teaching again (completing my 3rd year) but this time I'm handling both subject matter and classroom*

*management with equal skill----perhaps a little too well at times. The Information Technology background has proven invaluable to my middle school, as we've made the transition from few computers in the classroom to several, including the establishment of three campus computer labs (two with wireless capability). We're excited at the next academic year's possibilities! As for my first day at work, well...it has been an easy transition back into corporate life. Of course there are several names to learn and procedures to follow and the effects of reorganization in my working group (perhaps resulting in a mentor change) but I've found the group to be quite affable, cooperative and supportive."*

At this point in my fellowship, I've discovered that flexibility, adaptability, affability and creativity are strong traits that I've observed within the people in my department. The group is often working on several projects or completing them concurrently, while having to prioritize tasks and report on their progress at a moment's notice. Problems are solved collaboratively but "group think" is not apparent. Often, I have heard the question, "What do you think?", asked and honest answers given. Opinions are not only encouraged but listened to and acted upon.

How do I fit into this scenario? My main tasks have involved information-gathering (including asking questions of experts) with the intent of creating a tool (document, webpage) that will greatly aid everyone (regardless of skill level) in hopefully learning more about their software environment, what it means and how to communicate it clearly so that others can understand and more effectively perform their duties. While doing this, I've had the opportunity to use software (Microsoft Office, Lotus Notes, et al) that I had gained familiarity with during my prior corporate experience. Additionally, my information technology background has provided me with knowledge to ask the correct questions and discern whether additional questions are necessary. The "crowning achievement" will be fitting my relatively lower-level skills into something as sophisticated as a corporate website and provide ongoing value to skilled professionals.

How will my students fit into all of this? I can safely say that my message to them will speak of perseverance, risk-taking, and not being afraid of becoming a "lifelong learner". The journey towards a hopefully successful future can begin with something as simple as my first step in this paper---a thoughtful introduction of where they have been and where they hope to go. Admittedly, as daunting as this task may seem when first introduced (and students will find any excuse not to have to write), my intent is to have each student do a careful self-examination of what makes them unique. I work with a student population that largely thinks it is not special, and in fact deficient in many respects. Surprisingly, those inhibitions seem to disappear when describing details of their lives: their friends, their likes or any other important parts of their lives.

Overall student success begins with setting expectations. This "discovery exercise", accomplished via Blog or simple journal, lets the student know that he is important, as is anything he wishes to share. Along with that, I would certainly include some "academic rigor". As my summer employer expected the best from me at all times, I will do likewise with my students. Additionally, I will emphasize the importance of being able to identify and use varied skills. For example, during my fellowship, I not only made active use of my writing skills and

computer skills but actively used my verbal communication skills to remain in contact with my Mentor and team members, coexist with my “cubicle neighbors” and certainly do something that most students are reluctant to accomplish...ask for help when an assignment was unclear or if I was learning a new skill or information.

As I was forthright about my past, or as I like to call it, “before teaching time”, I will likewise be so with my students, hopefully showing them that it is possible to excel despite existing in a difficult environment. Further, as I often do, I will continue to make “strategic stops” along the way, highlighting significant historic events taking place during my lifetime (Civil Rights movement, etc.) and stressing the importance of students “knowing their way around” personally and historically.