MAKING STONE SOUP

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WORKING TOGETHER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

It is simply not possible for any of us to do our jobs well without the collaboration of others. Yet specialization abounds, jargon proliferates, and professional silos are everywhere. At the same time we all have a shared goal: to advance learning and teaching. How are we to balance these two seemingly conflicting characteristics in our workplace? How can we satisfy the demands of our day-to-day jobs and at the same time contribute to the work of others?

The answer is not technical but instead rooted in what it means to a part of a holistic group of people. The answer is rooted in things like the abilities to listen, to share, to learn, to go beyond tolerance and towards respect, to take a sincere interest in the other person's point of view, to discuss, and to take to heart the idea that nobody really sees the whole picture.

As people — members of the human race — we form communities with both our strengths & our weaknesses, with things we know would benefit the group & things we would rather not share, with both our beauties and our blemishes. This is part of what it means to be people. There is no denying it, and if we try, then we are only being less of who we really are. To deny it is an unrealistic expectation. We are not gods. We are not actors. We are people, and being people — real people — is a good thing.

Within any community, there are norms of behavior. Without norms of behavior, there is really no community, only chaos and anarchy. In anarchy and chaos, physical strength is oftentimes the defining characteristic of decision-making, but when the physically strong are outnumbered by the emotionally mature and intellectually aware, then chaos and anarchy are overthrown for a more holistic set of decision-making processes. Examples include democracy, consensus building, and even the possibility governance through benevolent dictatorship.

A community's norms are both written and unwritten. Our workplaces are good examples of such communities. On one hand there may be policies & procedures, but these policies & procedures usually describe workflows, the methods used to evaluate employees, or to some extent strategic plans. They might outline how meetings are conducted or how teams are to accomplish their goals. On the other hand, these policies & procedures do not necessarily outline how to talk with fellow employees around the virtual water cooler, how to write email messages, nor how to

greet each on a day-to-day basis. Just as importantly, our written norms of behavior do not describe how to treat and communicate with people outside one's own set of personal expertise. Don't get me wrong. This does not mean I am advocating written norms for such things, but such things do need to be discussed and agreed upon. Such are the beginnings of stone soup.

Increasingly we seem to work in disciplines of specialization, and these specializations, necessarily, generate their own jargon. "Where have all the generalists gone? Considering our current environment, is it really impossible to be a Renaissance Man^h^h^h Person?" Increasingly, the answer to the first question is, "The generalists have gone the way of Leonardo DiVinci." And the answer to the second question is, "Apparently so."

For example, some of us lean more towards formal learning, teaching, research, and scholarship. These are the people who have thoroughly studied and now teach a particular academic discipline. These same people have written dissertations, which, almost by definition, are very specialized, if not unique. They live in a world pursuant of truth while balancing the worlds of rigorous scholarly publishing and student counseling.

There are those among us who thoroughly know the in's and out's of computer technology. These people can enumerate the differences between a word processor and a text editor. They can compare & contrast operating systems. These people can configure & upgrade software. They can make computers communicate on the Internet. They can trouble-shoot computer problems when the computers seem — for no apparent reason — to just break.

Finally, there are those among us who specialize in the collection, organization, preservation, and dissemination of data, information, and knowledge. These people identify bodies of content, systematically describe it, make every effort to preserve it for posterity, and share it with their respective communities. These people deal with MARC records, authority lists, and subject headings.

Despite these truisms, we — our communities — need to figure out how to work together, how to bridge the gaps in our knowledge (a consequence of specialization), and how to achieve our shared goals. This is an aspect of our metaphoric stone soup.

So now the problem can be re-articulated. We live and work in communities of unwritten and poorly articulated norms. To complicate matters, because of our specializations, we all approach our situations from different perspectives and use different languages to deal with the situations. As I was discussing this presentation with a dear friend & colleague, a poem

attributed to Prissy Galagarian was brought to my attention.† It eloquently states the imperative.

How do we overcome these impediments in order to achieve our mutual goals of the workplace? The root of the answer lies in our ability to really & truly respect our fellow employees.

Working together towards a shared goals is a whole lot like making "stone soup". Do you know the story of "stone soup"? A man comes into a village, and asks the villagers for food. Every time he asks he is told that there is nothing to give. Despite an apparent lack of anything, the man sets up a little fire, puts a pot of water on, and drops a stone into the pot. Curious people come by, and they ask, "What are you doing?" He says, "I'm making stone soup, but I think it needs a bit of flavor." Wanting to participate, people begin to add their own things to the soup. "I think I have some carrots," says one villager. "I believe I have a bit of celery," says another. Soon the pot is filled with bits of this and that and the other thing: onions, salt & pepper, a beef bone, a few tomatoes, a couple of potatoes, etc. In the end, a rich & hearty stew is made, enough for everybody to enjoy. Working together, without judgement nor selfishness, the end result is a goal well-accomplished.

This can happen in the workplace as well. It can happen in our community where the goal is teaching & learning. And in the spirit of cooking, here's a sort of recipe:

1. Understand that you do not have all the answers, and in fact, nobody does; nobody has the complete story nor sees the whole picture.

2. Understand that nobody's experience is necessarily more important than the others', including your own. Everybody has something to offer, and while your skills & expertise may be imperative to success, so are the skills & expertise of others.

3. Spend the time to get to know your colleagues, and come to a sincere appreciation of who they are as a person as well as a professional. This part of the "recipe" may include formal or informal social events inside or outside the workplace.

4. Remember, listening is a wonderful skill, and when the other person talks for a long time, they will go away thinking they had a wonderful conversation.

5. Combine the above ingredients, bring them to a boil, and then immediately lower the temperature allowing everything to simmer for a good long time.

Finally, making stone soup does not require fancy tools. A cast iron pot will work just as well as one made from aluminum or teflon. What is needed is a container large enough to hold the ingredients and withstand the heat. It doesn't matter whether or not the heat source is gas, electric, or fire. It just has to be hot enough to allow boiling and then simmering. Similarly, stone soup in the workplace does not require Google Drive, Microsoft Office 365, nor any type of wiki. Sure, those things can facilitate project work, but they are not the means for getting to know your colleagues. Only through personal interaction will such knowledge be garnered.

Working together for the advancement of learning & teaching — or just about any other type of project work — is a lot like making stone soup. Everybody contributes a little something, and the result is nourishing meal for all.

† http://fraternalthoughts.blogspot.it/2011/02/person-next-to-you.html

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http://infomotions.com/blog/2016/05/stone-soup/

The Person Next to You

The person next to you is the greatest miracle
and the greatest mystery you will ever
meet at this moment.

The person next to you is an inexhaustible
reservoir of possibility,
desire and dread,
smiles and frowns, laughter and tears,
fears and hopes,
all struggling to find expression.

The person next to you believes in something,
stands for something, counts for something,
lives for something, labors for something,
waits for something, runs from something,
runs to something.

The person next to you has problems and fears,
wonders how they're doing,
is often undecided and unorganized
and painfully close to chaos!
Do they dare speak of it to you?

The person next to you can live with you
not just alongside you,
not just next to you.

The person next to you is a part of you.
for you are the person next to them.