



**I am responsible for creating my own positive reality:
to the desert and back again as an 8th grade advisor**

Jennifer Patrick — Katherine Delmer Burke School

I am a 7th and 8th grade English teacher and 8th grade advisory at the Katherine Delmar Burke School, a K - 8 all girls' private school in San Francisco. I have taught for about 8 years in a number of capacities: 7th grade Humanities, 9th grade English, 6th grade humanities, dance, journalism, English. My curriculum for these various disciplines has been carefully constructed; I approach my academic teaching with clear objectives in mind and am deeply invested in the progress of my students. I am disappointed when my expectations for outcomes are unfulfilled. I take responsibility when students don't seem to "get it" and take steps in order to ensure that next time, they will. I have a lot to learn as a teacher but I feel that I have the capacity to teach well and with a little more effort, a little more energy, I will succeed.

Although I have been advising for as long as I have been teaching, I have not been nearly as deliberate about structuring an advisory curriculum as I have been about structuring an academic curriculum. I like to listen; I enjoy being part of a group; I laugh easily. I have a few games up my sleeve and I know how to establish rules for conduct in an advisory group. Beyond the force of personality and initiatives gleaned from countless ropes courses, I have left my groups to fend for themselves. Up until this past year, I took responsibility for my role in the group by participating, listening, and occasionally instructing, but I did not take responsibility for the dynamics of the group as a whole.

This laissez-faire approach seemed to work fine until last year, 2001 – 2002, when I had a group meltdown that left me reeling and which subsequently forced me to redefine my role as an advisor.

Every spring, the 8th grade advisory groups at Burke's go on a 6-day backpacking to Joshua Tree National Park. The quality of this adventure has varied in accordance with the weather, the leaders, and the students themselves, but there is a constant: magic. Some groups come together during this week in ways I never thought possible; others begin together and are challenged to stretch their cohesiveness. I had attributed the transformation of previous groups to the power of the desert itself, to the way in which it forces one inward, to the hard prickliness of it that prevents a group from settling into old patterns.

So, upon embarking on the trip in the spring of 2002, I trusted that the desert would wash away (or dry out) our problems. I had heard rumblings throughout the year about various individual concerns, but I assumed that the tension would work itself out as it always had; desert magic would put within reach the cohesiveness that had proved so elusive to us all. On the desert trip, I would remain a beacon of positive energy and the rest of the group would eventually be infected by it. I had not clicked with this group of eleven girls in the way I had with others, but the desert would enable us to get below the surface, to share our deepest secrets, to rise to the highest common denominator.

Given the tone of this preamble, it is probably no great surprise that the desert failed to work its magic for this group. It was indeed challenging – the girls were not only required to hike miles each day with heavy packs, but they also cooked, cleaned and navigated across valleys of Joshua Trees; they climbed rocks,

organized water distribution and pitched tents; they were responsible for keeping themselves warm, hydrated and fed. And they complained every inch of the way, wondering why they were required to undergo such hardship. They bonded on the negative, hating the leaders, hating me, hating the conditions. With so much hating, they became hateful themselves. One of my journal entries says it better than I can say now in hindsight: “OK. So I’m sitting here and I’m absolutely sick of these kids. They are the least mature, snobby group of girls ever. They’re sitting here talking about how they’d rather be elsewhere, whispering, being negative – perhaps I am, too. It feels like work this year! It’s never felt like work before. “ And later, “Unfortunately, this year the desert has stripped away the layer that protected me from the side that is so reprehensible [in them]. It has not shown me the side of them that I want to know more. It’s as if they have become or gone to the lowest common denominator rather than the highest, because there is no high center in this group – I certainly am not it...” Finally, “Ughhh. Then there’s next year. I don’t even want to fathom that. I think I have one last year of this in my system. No more.”

Two months later, I attended the Project Zero Summer Institute. Having been an apprentice at the Shady Hill School in Cambridge, MA, I was somewhat familiar with principles of Teaching for Understanding. I had implemented some of the practice in my curriculum, particularly in 8th grade English, but I needed to know more in order to teach effectively. I entered the Institute assuming that I would come out of it with a revamped seventh grade curriculum. However, my feelings about the disastrous trip to the desert were as yet unresolved. The year had not ended well for me. I liked some of the individuals in my group, but as a group, they remained difficult. Nor had I done any satisfactory reflection about the experience, given the whirlwind of activity that engulfs teachers and students alike at the end of the year. So, throughout the discussions, lectures and activities of the Summer Institute, the desert fiasco was never far from my mind. It lurked there, waiting me to pay attention to it, while I meditated on possible Throughlines for the seventh grade English course.

Finally, I had to turn my attention to the problem. Although I had proposed to develop a Throughline for the seventh grade as my Fellows Project, I changed my mind as soon as I began to tackle the desert with the Teaching for Understanding framework in mind. On June 20th, I wrote, “How do we define our reality? - Throughline for advisory?” Then other scribblings on the 21st, “How do we define our own reality? We define our own reality. We create our own reality.” I knew I had to place the onus of the experience in the desert on the group. If they viewed the desert as an experience defined by teachers who wished them to learn from adversity, they could reject this experience as yet another in a long series of institutional impositions. They needed to own the experience as theirs, as their own opportunity to grow, rather than perceiving it as a requirement. They needed to become agents in creating their reality while they were out there rather than becoming victims of reality, victims of the hardships of the desert.

I can’t exactly remember where the language for this particular Throughline originated. I have recently become an avid practitioner of Yoga, so perhaps it filtered in through an asana. However, I think the Throughline runs deeper than that. Four years ago, in the spring of 1999, I felt compelled to return to the east coast, where my family lives, after spending four years out west (two years in Spokane, WA and two years in San Francisco). I wasn’t exactly sure why I felt so compelled, since I loved San Francisco, I liked my job, and I didn’t particularly miss my family. However, a job at a school where I had always aspired to work beckoned me, and so I left, only to discover, immediately upon arrival in Boston, that I needed to return to everything I had left behind in San Francisco. And so, the following January, I informed the head of the east coast school of my intentions, convinced Burke’s to take back their prodigal daughter and returned to San Francisco in the summer of 2000. That year had convinced me that although no school was perfect, I could make a school better; I learned, at a profound price, that I was responsible for my reality – that if I didn’t like the way something was done, then it was up to me to make it better for myself rather than passively complaining about it. Complaining got me nowhere. I needed to act. I was responsible for creating my own positive reality.

Consequently, personal experience as well as the desert disaster informed the creation of a throughline for advisory. After attending the Summer Institute, I knew that I needed to treat Joshua Tree as one in a series

of Performances of Understanding. I needed to prepare my kids for the experience in the desert! How could I expect them to take reality by the horns and wrestle it to the ground if I didn't show them how? If they weren't even aware of the fact that reality had horns that they could grasp? I needed to make my expectations clear.

After writing and rewriting a Throughline sentence, I began to talk to people about it. I talked to other fellows in small groups; I went out to lunch with another fellow and continued the conversation. I talked about it with my boyfriend and my non-teacher friends. I needed to know if the idea made sense; I also needed to make sure the Throughline was communicating exactly what I wished it to communicate. These conversations bolstered my confidence and gave me new ideas about the language. Consequently, by the time school opened in August, I felt ready to introduce the Throughline to my group:

“We are responsible for creating our own positive realities.”

I wrote it on poster board and posted it in my classroom. I have many quotations up in the room, but I attributed this one to myself (-Ms. Patrick) and set it apart from the others on the advisory bulletin board.

Early in the fall, during the tone-setting outdoor trip in Calistoga, I talked about the Throughline with my group. I told them that I was interested in how people could effect change in their lives. I shared a little of my own experience with them, not the move to Boston, but another recent, less personal example of how I had created my own positive reality. I told them that the Throughline would be posted in the classroom and that it would surface throughout the year. Finally, I told them that the ultimate test for the idea would be the trip to the desert. This was very different from the way in which I had approached the desert trip in the past; never had I mentioned it so early in the year. But I wanted them to see that the Joshua Tree Trip had a purpose: it was a “Performance of Understanding” (I didn't use that language with the girls, of course, but that is how I considered it); I wanted them to understand that they were responsible for the creation of their own positive realities and that the desert would ask them to do just that.

During the beginning of the year, I relied on anticipated teachable moments for public recollection of the Throughline. When discussions turned to high school applications, a milestone in the life of a Burke's student, I brought up the idea of creating one's own positive reality. When the homework load grew heavy, I asked the girls about their approach to the load. We talked about complaining. Does complaining help you feel better? Sometimes. But does it help the load feel less heavy? Not usually. So, perhaps a change in attitude would help? Whenever I could, I tried to bolster their confidence in their own ability to effect positive change, for 8th graders can most definitely feel powerless in the face of overwhelming expectations. I also said the Throughline as often as I could, repeating it when a girl complained about not getting the part she wanted or when the group complained about different teaching styles – whenever it seemed appropriate.

In retrospect, I wish I had designed lessons more intentionally around the Throughlines earlier in the year. I depended too heavily on the moments that I knew would arise. It would have been more effective to construct performances of understanding in anticipation of those moments, so that the girls could have done the work of applying the Throughline more organically. However, the work did seem quite organic – I brought out Throughline when it was necessary, as I would a tool, so I didn't need to contrive an experience to teach them about it.

I also wish that I had shared the Throughline with my colleagues earlier in the process. It wasn't until the second week in February, the week following the 3rd Fellows meeting, that I had the confidence to go public with my colleagues. And they loved the idea! We even talked about adopting the Throughline as for the entire 8th grade year.

In February, two months before the trip to the desert, I felt I needed to design some lessons and activities with the Throughline in mind. Upon the advice of a friend who led Outward Bound courses, I began to

read *Endurance*, the story of the Shackleton expedition across Antarctica, to my group at the end of the day, from 3:15 – 3:25. The other advisory groups liked the idea and so decided to read aloud the book as well. Although we all gave up on the idea within a few days (the book was too technical – I didn't have time to preview it before sharing it with the girls), it was a worthwhile activity in that it led to some discussion about effective leadership and it showed me just how much the girls enjoyed being read to in a non-academic capacity. Next year, I would love to come up with a set of readings on the theme of creating one's own positive reality (any suggestions would be greatly appreciated!) so that I could make reading aloud at the end of the day more of a tradition.

As a piece of Ongoing Assessment, I decided to have the girls write on the Throughline. I had had one encouraging conversation with a girl about the Throughline, in which she told me that she took the idea quite seriously and that she had found myriad opportunities for its application, but I needed a more objective appraisal of the girls' understanding. And so I asked them to write about a time when they had created their own positive realities; or, if they could not think of such a time, I asked them to write about an experience that did not go well for them where they may have had the opportunity to affect its direction positively. Much to my surprise, the girls went right to work, without any clarifying questions. They asked if they could write about more than one experience in which they had effected a positive outcome. They were eager to share after I had asked them to stop writing, and didn't want to stop the sharing process at the end of the period. They understood what it meant to create their own positive reality, and they were excited about it!

The following week, we role-played a difficult situation that I had experienced in the desert. Girls could opt in and out of the role-play to enact various choices. I wanted them to see that they do indeed have a choice when difficulty arises, that although they can't always avoid the difficulty, they can choose how to face that difficulty. I also created other scenarios that called upon the girls to make choices. These scenarios could have arisen out of the girls' own experience, but since they had none to offer, I wrote them with their experiences in mind.

So, I felt pretty good about their understanding of the Throughline prior to the Joshua Tree Trip. I also felt good about my group. They rarely whined. They rarely complained. They listened to one another and seemed to respect the differences in the group. There had been some personal conflicts, but I had talked to those individuals and served as a mediator for a conflict. In general, I was aware of my own power to effect change in way that I had never felt before. I was conscious of my role as an advisor, and I knew that the work I did throughout the year would bear its fruit in the barren land of Joshua Tree.

Unfortunately, the fruit borne by the Joshua Tree trip failed to meet my expectations. Granted, my expectations were high, so perhaps no trip would have satisfied me. However, this trip fell brutally short: the leaders had never led a trip in the desert before. One of them had not undergone training by experiential education program we had contracted. The leaders did not structure the experience in order to provide the girls with opportunities to exercise and build their leadership skills. They led us through the desert rather than teaching the girls how to do so. Until I interceded, the leaders determined where we would camp and where we would pitch tent. They did not teach the girls how to put on a pack without help. They did not teach them how to clean. They did not keep the group occupied with challenging games, and they did not give the girls time to reflect on their experiences.

I had decided ahead of time that I was going to take a few steps back from the group in order to observe them applying the Throughline. I had no need to contrive discrete Performances of Understanding, since they surfaced naturally in the hike across the desert. I wanted to listen and watch carefully. However, I was put in the position of providing structure for the group, of making sure they had the opportunity to find their own place to camp and to get much needed "solo time" apart from the group. I also ended up being deeply occupied by my own sense of frustration. I found myself repeating the Throughline as if it were a mantra, in order to help buoy myself above the frustration. Ironically, my success with my own application of the Throughline in this context was moderate at best. Perhaps my own understanding needs deepening.

On a positive note, the girls worked well despite the lack of structure. Although they were not challenged in the way I wanted them to be, the desert has its own lessons to teach, free from any structure imposed on it by well-meaning teachers. I had one conversation with a girl in which she said, "I'm trying not to complain, because I know that only makes it worse, but my shoulder is hurting me so much I could cry!" The group seemed to have an ethos of positivity; they seemed to understand that negative comments made their packs seem heavier. I really think that there was some sort of unspoken code among them, to remain positive, to help each other step above the immediate hardship of their surroundings. One girl who had a particularly difficult time attributed her change in attitude to a conversation she had had with two other group members who had talked to her about the fact that her complaining was actually making the hiking more difficult for her. By the third day, a smile rarely left her face.

Now, two weeks upon returning from this most recent desert trip, I still feel a little frustrated, but I am excited as well. The girls had a positive experience; not the one I had hoped for them, but it was special nevertheless. I remain excited about this Throughline. I think it's absolutely relevant to the 8th grade experience. I think the desert is a valid performance of understanding, but I need to go a few steps further with making the Throughline public: I need to tell the outdoor instructors about the Throughline early on and perhaps even help them make sure that there's a structure in place in order to support the girls' understanding. I met with difficulty because I was not able to develop the Performance of Understanding piece of the framework as carefully as I had developed the Throughline. I need to commit to the idea on a deeper level, to allow it to become a mantra, if I want my students to commit to it as well.

What have I learned from implementing the Teaching for Understanding framework?

We are indeed responsible for creating our own positive realities.

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