

## **Creative Tensions** ***Sustaining High Quality Schools***



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***Engaging a school's creative tensions will empower the faculty to sustain innovative and accountable practice, resulting in a high quality school.***

- Tensions indicate energy available.
- Creative underscores how these tensions are adaptive 'system conditions' in a school environment.

### **Critically Valuable**

Understanding creative tensions in a school allows the educators to reduce the likely drift away from the school's VISION and MISSION, and INNOVATIVE processes. Along the long arc of a school's performance, year in and year out, it is very likely to encounter a rebound back to old habits and silos, or an entrenchment in methods that don't fully actualize the school's vision and mission.

Over time, difficult scenarios will happen naturally, with subtle shifts in teaching away from a school's core beliefs. Unless and until, a school's creative tensions are consistently brought into the life of the school these shifts can accelerate and turn into cliff edges.

Creative tensions should be understood by faculty as normal organizational paradigms that need attending to in all schools – they do NOT need to become divisive forces – faculty taking one side or another – but this is often the case when their very nature, and influences, operate below the cognition radar of the full faculty.

**For a school to mature and sustain itself, creative tensions -- as part of a school's dynamism -- need to be understood, managed, and even celebrated.**

Done well, the school's application of creative tensions will inform discussions, identify challenges, and provide perspectives. End result, the use of these creative tensions will generate and sustain a positive learning community. In effect, the bottom line is that as a faculty become conversant in these nine creative tensions, and adaptive in their usage, the professional capacity to sustain effective learning communities, increases.

### **Empowered Faculty**

Powerful and deep learning relies on the resourcefulness of the learner. An empowered faculty assumes the mantle of accountability and relevance and places it squarely in each other's lap. Mutual accountability is an educator collaborative. Understanding the creative tensions is a skill that benefits, simultaneously, the faculty cohesiveness and the community life of the school.

### **The 9 Creative Tensions**

These creative tensions should not be viewed as continuums where, for example, freedom occupies the left side and responsibility the right side. Nor should they be seen as solitary goals, rather creative tensions exist as a single entity, in effect -- complementary pairs -- that, together, define a potential scenario, or in other words an organizational ingredient that never leaves, is always present, and is part of the power of the school as a learning community and evolving organization. These are the nine creative tensions evident in schools:

1. Freedom/Responsibility
2. Individual/Community
3. Student Self-Management/Teacher Control
4. High Cognition Capacity/Bridging Academic Gaps
5. Strategic Thinking/Tactical Thinking
6. School as Life/Life as School
7. High Quality/Successful Completion
8. High Expectations/Limited Resources
9. School and Community Interactions

### **1. Freedom/Responsibility**

*How do members of a learning community experience freedom as learners experiencing responsibility?*

Freedom and responsibility co-exist in each other's reality. One does not exist without the other. Being able to respond in a productive and timely manner to the choices unleashed by personal freedom is central to successful learning. This constant ebb and flow of freedom bringing on responsibility, and responsibility bringing on more freedom permeates the daily work of learning. How does one support a student developing freedom of choice? How does one support a student developing capacity of responsibility to that emerging freedom agency? As students mature, being free to engage learning choices, while at the same time, obligated to responsible actions is a tension that surfaces often in the life of a school.

### **2. Individual/Community (Existential/Social)**

*How do we balance a distinctive integrity of the student with her or his social connections to the school as community?*

What is the proper balance between an individual act of learning and the social milieu in which it occurs? Relationships amongst teacher and students undergo a back and forth dynamic. For the teacher, it takes time to facilitate productive individual and group accountability in the process of learning. For the students, it takes time to learn how to learn, as an individual, and as part of a social community and its resultant obligations.

The creative tension of community/individual asks for accountability to learning, accountability to self, and accountability to others, rather than merely a 'rugged individualism' where students stand alone following interest regardless of other colleagues and the community they inhabit. Individual action in community context can build the kind of learning that lasts a lifetime. Fundamental to the sustainability of a

school, this individual/community tension will create social bonds that are equally as important as individual achievement.

### **3. Student Self-Management/Teacher Control**

*How do I co-operate as a member of my school's learning community?*

There is a developmental continuum for the teacher and student, as each begins to ask how it is best to shift from teacher control to a productive teacher/student collaborative. Being aware of this creative tension can facilitate the progress along a continuum of diminishing teacher control that will open the space to empower a level of increased student self-management. This developmental work is one of proportion, timeliness, and workability. Self-management means many things, but above all, it means being resourceful. Key to students gaining this resourcefulness is the teachers understanding of leadership and facilitative teaching strategies.

### **4. High Cognition Capacity/Bridging Academic Gaps**

*How do we meet the simultaneous diverse needs of students from basic skills to advanced cognitive and conceptual learning?*

Comprehensive learning will strengthen basic skills as well as allow students to develop highly cognitive undertakings. For instance, in project based learning students indicate a project of interest, yet very often the associated basic skills to carry it forward need critical development. For instance, even after a 4<sup>th</sup> grade student's project is admired during a showcase presentation, the parents want to know that the student can read better because of it.

The academic gaps and the need for basic skills development should not restrict bringing highly cognitive experiences to someone with low basic skills. More of the same is often not the answer with a struggling student. What matters is a learning dynamism where the student cares to reach beyond their skill. This energy will address the skill gaps effectively when big ideas and purposeful concepts are part of the mix, along with the basic skill targets.

### **5. Strategic Thinking/Tactical Thinking**

*How do we use tactical and strategic thinking to attend to short and long-range issues?*

Schools exist as entities. It is common for there to be a constant back and forth between short-term and long-term thinking, between narrowing a focus, becoming convergent, to get at a result and between expanding thinking, being divergent, so expanded considerations are brought into play. Strategic or tactical each serves a purpose, often defined by timing and need. Yet, often, one person operating from one mode while another person operates from the other mode can lead to misunderstood moments in good times, chaotic moments in critical times. Understanding this creative tension allows a group to select its strategic or tactical lens, thereby building better results.

## **6. School as Life/Life as School**

*How do the many occupations that make up a school play into the learning?*

Diverse roles make up a school, from teacher to bus driver to cook. Diverse roles make up the student's learning, from inventor to historian to author. What matters is how each person, adult and student, actually demonstrate these roles in the school/life tension.

Being able to manage time and complete tasks; being able to acquire, organize, and interpret information; being able to be persistent in problem-solving. These are skills both young and old use each day. How can these roles be celebrated? How are they acknowledged? How do they inform each other and are made more response to the life of the school?

## **7. High Quality/Successful Completion**

*Does high quality ensure a worthy knowledge and skills base? How is this tension managed?*

All schools, workplaces, and organizations ask for quality with their students, employees, and members. Learning has an inherent goal of quality as well. So every significant learning moment has to determine what is an acceptable threshold in terms of quality. This contrasts with levels of production – getting assignments done and then moving right onto the next completion task that is required.

Where does completing a stage of learning contrast with quality? Will too much work to complete result in getting things done at a lower level of quality? Are there compromises of quality that these conveyer belts of completion demand? This tension represents the ongoing concern of balancing the breadth of a school's curriculum with the depth of a student's demand for deeper learning.

## **8. High Expectations/Limited Resources**

*How do we maintain high expectations with limited resources?*

Starting a school, or starting a new unit results in high expectations by everyone involved. Schools of excellence have high expectations for the learning being produced. Yet, these high expectations have boundaries, such as the restraints of time, training, and resource limits. Managing this tension requires realistic steps without losing sight of the end result that everyone aspires to achieve.

## **9. School to Community/Community to School**

*What is the role of the school in the community? How does the community enter the life of the school?*

The mutual reciprocity between school and community can be vibrant and consequential or it can be minimal. What matters in this regard? How is it addressed?

*“The prairie, although plain, inspires awe. It teaches us that grandeur can be wide as well as tall. Young prairie plants put down deep roots first; only when these have been established do the plants invest much energy in growth above ground. They teach us that the work that matters doesn't always show.”*

– Paul Gruchow, Grass Roots: The Universe of Home