

Design Thinking in the Classroom



June 20, 2009

The Bully & The Bystander Design Challenge

It began with a short story. It ended with tears and a new-found sense of empathy for both bullies and bystanders. As the school year was coming to an end, middle school literacy teacher Melissa Pelochino wanted to leave her students with something powerful. She did. Design Thinking is all about building creative confidence- a sense that “I can change the world.” In the Bullies & Bystanders Design Challenge, the students discovered that changing themselves might be even more important.



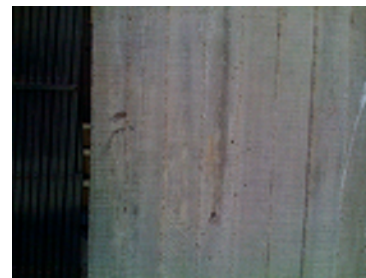
Melissa had attended a Design Thinking professional development workshop for teachers at Stanford’s d.school hosted by the K12 Initiative Research

Team.. The workshop focused on the six stages of the design process: understanding, observation, defining a point of view, ideating, prototyping, and testing. Their challenge was to redesign the downtown Friday night experience in the current economic downturn. They began with the first step of the design process: observation and interviewing. They watched where people gathered on a Friday night in downtown Palo Alto and talked to people in coffee shops, yogurt cafes, hookah bars and gift stores. On Saturday, they convened at the Stanford campus, and began to focus their observations to solve the challenge. The teachers’ creative energy was astounding as they learned that design is a vibrant, human-centered, empathy-driven interactive process. The workshop ended with a discussion of how to bring what they learned back to their

classrooms. The research team was eager to learn how design thinking affected how teachers teach and how students learn.

The Hidden Camera

In the weeks following the workshop, Melissa began implementing design challenges in her classroom. Using short stories as springboards, she introduced design thinking. For the final challenge of the school year, Melissa chose the story *The Other June*, which



chronicled the experiences of a young girl who was teased and tormented by a classmate.

“Everything changed when I began using the design process as a

vehicle for instruction. Engagement in school increased as students became responsible for their own learning. The purpose for reading changed from “I am reading because my teacher told me to” to “I am reading because I need to solve this problem.” As they read the story, the students focused on uncovering the needs of the bully and the bystanders.



This design challenge spoke to the students' real life experiences, as bullying thrived on their urban campus, where classrooms were housed in corrugated metal portables and conflicts colored the school day. When Melissa asked the students to brainstorm what they knew about bullying the students had much to say.

"A bully tries to make someone feel insecure about themselves."

"It doesn't have to be people that are smaller than you- it can be people that are bigger."



"If you don't stand up to a bully they're just gonna keep on doing it."

As part of the observation and interviewing phase of the design process, the seven students

decided to conduct an experiment. They set up a hidden camera outside their classroom, and, as other students approached, they enacted a scene where one of them was being bullied. They circled the 'victim'

with taunts and they waited to see what would happen.

"Where did you get those pants- like the Goodwill, charity, the second hand store?"



They were astounded when six bystanders walked by. They questioned those who walked by.

"Why didn't you stop? Dude, you didn't want to? You're supposed to help the other person."

Only two people stopped to help. As they returned to their classroom, they discussed the results of their experiment and imagined a bully-free world.

"If people were more like Gina and Tim [the people who had stopped to help] then there wouldn't be bullying at all. There wouldn't be a rule of definition of a bully. There wouldn't be a word."



The Breakthrough

As they left class, Melissa gave each student a notepad and asked them to conduct their own interviews on bullying.

Each student interviewed at least three people. Their observation experiment led most of them to focus their interviews on the needs of bystanders. But they also used the task to reflect about their own actions. Eddie –who had played the victim on the hidden camera skit- interviewed someone who he had bullied.

Change Agents

The next phase of the process spoke to the most impactful part of design thinking. The students tackled the challenge of how to stop bullying in their school. Most importantly, they had acquired the creative confidence to act as change agents in their own environment.

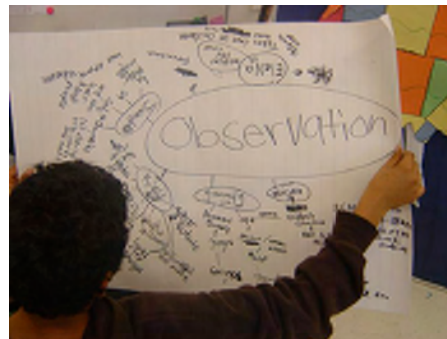
They decided to create a prototype for a movie that showed the effects of bullying and shared it with another class to get feedback they would use to iterate. The students who watched the film were asked to share what they thought in a brief survey. When the students reflected on the survey results, they felt as though they had not been successful in stopping bullying.

“It worked for a day- but that was it.”

Melissa led them in a discussion about what they should do next. They talked about brainstorming and trying to better define the problem. Denee suggested modifying their movie, and

incorporating some of the footage from the hidden camera tape. Then, they discussed the heart of the problem.

“We have to give them empathy.”



Melissa pushed them to think about how they might do that. Denee said it was different for different groups. Viola chimed in, “If you just stand up to them, bullying would stop.” Edgar said. “The problem is there are no leaders at this school.” Talk about following the crowd and making choices ensued. The class ended for the day. For these students, the impact of this final design challenge was just beginning. They had creative confidence.

“I decided to interview Dwight, because to be honest, I bullied him sometimes and I wanted to see how he felt about bullies.”

Dwight told Eddie it was “horrible.” After talking to him, Eddie said that for the first time, he understood how it felt to be a victim of bullying.

Juan talked about how he felt when he listened to a boy talk about how much it hurt to be bullied.

“I told him that I would back him up, that he could come to me if he was bullied.”

Each student shared a personal story of how they had been bullied- both at home and at school. Their pain was palpable and their tears seemed a comfort. They truly understood the devastating power of bullying.

The Power of Design



As children move from kindergarten, to middle school, and to high school, instruction shifts from stories to facts, from speculation to specifics, and imagination fades from focus. Design Thinking provides an alternative model to traditional ways of learning academic content as it challenges students to find answers to complex, nuanced problems with multiple solutions and by fostering students’ ability to act as change agents. This is critical, particularly in underserved schools where a focus on basic skills may impede the development of critical thinking skills.