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Scenario Thinking – Learning Log

One aspect of my personality that I expanded upon was my ability to be creative and not demand structured situations. I have to credit all of this experience to Professor Daniel and my colleague Hugh Malkin for forcing me to reevaluate myself and stretch my mental limits. The Scenario Thinking course has many elements that are not structured and require creative thought and innovative processes. These concepts are almost foreign to a structured person such as me.

My background and personal habits are very structured and demand clear, logical thinking. The personality survey provided by the professor resulted in identifying me as a theorist. Reading the characteristics and description of this personality type I would have to strongly agree with the description. Two key points taken from the survey describe me directly. 'They think problems through in a vertical, step-by-step logical way. Their approach to problems is consistently logical.' Hugh Malkin's personality type is a bit of activist and pragmatist. His creativity helped push me to explore ideas and concepts I could not think of on my own.

My previous job was being enlisted in the military. This is an organization that is highly structured. In many aspects of daily military life it is highly discouraged to think independently or creatively. There are situations in which people's lives are in danger and to question or hesitate from the prescribed instructions can be detrimental. For me it is highly natural to approach situations with preconceived notions and to desire a formal process in order to discuss the topic. The Scenario Thinking class and Hugh Malkin greatly challenged this assumption and perspective.

One example of my learning how to think creatively was during the exercise of creating our system map. The system map is a tool to visually brainstorm ideas and make connections among the various topics. Our professor instructed us to simply start with a single subject and then brainstorm subtopics and connecting ideas. The exercise was a simple brainstorming exercise, but the lack of established criteria, process, or even an idea of the end result stunned me. I hesitated for at least thirty seconds because I simply had no idea of how to start or proceed with this prescribed process. Fortunately, Hugh took the initiative and began to write down "random" thoughts that he believed were relevant. It was only after a few ideas and their connections were written down did I begin to understand the intent of this exercise. During the exercise I was continually seeking guidance. After several rounds of brainstorming I would ask to pause so we could establish a framework or gain advice about our system map. I felt uncomfortable with continuing a brainstorming session that had no definition. Fortunately my team members pushed me to continue forward and keep writing down ideas. As we covered the entire page I could see how ideas began to cluster together. From these clusters, topics and driving forces began to form. I see now that my desire to stop early would have created an incomplete picture of the scenario.

Another experience in which my team assisted me in being creative was the Numbers that Matter assignment. It was decided that the topic would be on blue fin tuna and the decline of the species. I was chosen to take the lead on the project. I became very frustrated by the project and the information that I had to research. This was because I was unable to view the project with the many potential possible topics. Originally I was only given the idea to research numbers regarding the decline of the Atlantic blue fin tuna species. In my typical mindset and how I address problems I focused on finding the number of remaining fish. This became an enormous and inconclusive task. The basic problem is that no one can effectively count the number of fish in the sea. I researched the official government agency that controls the fishing of Tuna and the scientific methods that they use to talk intelligently about the subject. I say talk intelligently because even they admit there are major assumptions and flaws with the methods that they use to generate their figures. And to compensate for the assumptions and flaws they create complex statistical methods and presentations. I spent hours trying to deduce their methodology and just trying to find a single number that gave an estimate of the remaining population. There simply was no single number because the scientists could not make any statements based on enough scientific evidence.

Fortunately for me I had my team members available to support me. I expressed my frustration and inability to find numbers regarding Tuna. With their assistance I was able to redirect my efforts not on the birth/death rates of fish, but on the economics behind fishing tuna. Yes, a single number giving the estimate of remaining fish is good, but was it really important. With my group's ideas I was able to focus on the economic impact of fishing tuna. Which groups benefitted from the sale of tuna? How much economic output does fishing tuna provide compared to the overall GDP of a country? Of Europe? Of Japan? The frustrating part is that I studied economics for my undergraduate degree. I became so focused and frustrated by finding the number of remaining fish that I did not even think about looking at economic factors. After I received comments and ideas from my team I redoubled my efforts to work on the tuna project. It was much easier to discover economic data rather than scientific estimates.

During the last group meeting I truly observed people's discomfort with being creative versus having a set format and prescribed methods. There were only two other team members during this meeting. Hugh Malkin was out of town and unable to contribute his creative insight. We were finalizing the style and format for writing our scenarios. One point to mention is that the other two team members were a Japanese and Singaporean national. I still wonder if the cultural aspect played a role in their discomfort with our methodology. The Singaporean was the one who requested that we meet in order to have a more thorough format and framework for our scenarios. At a prior meeting, which this person was not at, the group decided to use a common timeline and drivers when writing the scenario. We left loose guidelines as to how the scenarios were written. The idea was to have each person write the scenario and then pass it amongst the group members to contribute. This would allow for a common voice to be created as the drafts were passed around. This lack of structure made my colleague uncomfortable. She felt that this would create double work and it was more efficient to establish a clear structure and format so that all scenarios would look similar.

I found it intriguing to interact with other students and discover the reason for their dislike of the format of the class. A conversation with a Taiwanese student enlightened me. She said that she felt that most Asians in the class disliked it, while most Westerners seemed to appreciate the class. I proposed the idea that it was the lack of structure and reliance on creativity that was the most frustrating aspect of the course. I pointed out the differences in eastern cultures regarding their approach to education. Stereotypically most Asian students are simply told what education they need to have. They are not given many opportunities to think critically or even creatively. She acknowledged the potential connection, but was not sure if it was the only explanation. I bring this up because I happen to be of East Asian decent and perhaps I was taught in similar methods.

The best way I can describe the limits of my thought process is: It feels like I hit a brick wall in my thought processes and then Hugh comes along to crack the wall just a little bit. Then I can follow his lead and provide a wave of other ideas. What I need to learn and practice is to break down this mental wall myself. Continue coming up with ideas until I am completely exhausted. Perhaps I should focus on a time deadline rather than the number of ideas I create. This way it forces me to continue to work and not quit until I have sufficiently exhausted all possibilities.