

Season 2, Episode 3: Elements of a Learning Environment

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GREG: Welcome to the Exploring the Core Podcast. I'm your host, Greg Mullen.

In this third episode, I'll be sharing two conversations with two educators who are leaders of their own self-directed learning environments - for elementary age learners up through middle school, and even high school ages. There is something different I'll be doing in this episode - I'll be sharing segments of both conversations, at the same time, in order to highlight elements of a framework which I'm also really excited to share with you, because it's a framework that represents a critical layer to understanding who we are and how we learn. This layer, or framework, is a series of elements that, I believe, are important for understanding what makes a learning environment what it is: things like Philosophy, Norms & Traditions, Government, and Structural Relationships, which are just four of the seven elements in this framework. And I'm happy to go into more detail about all of these elements, but I think it might actually be more helpful if I highlighted just these first four elements through actual examples from innovative leaders in education today.

And so, I'm excited to introduce two such leaders, Cassi and Megan, and share segments of my conversations with each of them, about their self-directed learning environments.

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GREG: Cassi Clausen is the Executive Director for The Open School, a K-12 self-directed democratic school in Santa Ana, California.

CASSI: "Hello, Hi, nice to see you."

Megan Grieco is the Lead Mentor for PETALS Learning Community, a homeschool collective and an early-stage Agile Learning Center in Topanga Canyon, California.

MEGAN: "How are you, Greg."

My conversations with both Cassi and Megan covered a variety of topics, including their own experience with conventional schooling and their own personal journey toward discovering self-directed learning. This taps into the first element I'd like to explore, the Philosophy element, the reasoning and rationale for the beliefs we hold - especially for educators about their learning environment.

Here's Cassi, at The Open School, speaking about her past experience in traditional school and what led her to discover self-directed learning.

CASSI: "For me, I came from a pretty traditional education background. I have a Master's in Education and I taught at a school that was a private college prep school, very academic focused, and at the same time I was getting my Master's, I remember my Philosophy of Education class learning about Dewey and Montessori and A.S. Neil from Summerhill being the big Ah-Ha moment, but reading about these educational philosophers and then seeing such a huge contrast in the conventional schooling, it just started that cognitive dissonance as a teacher that I just thought, I'm spinning my wheels, what am I doing, and, I really, the thing I loved about teaching was working with kids, just being with them, they're so fun to be around and, I was in high school so I was working with teenagers, I adore teenagers, and some people think that's crazy and I don't know why because they're fabulous... [18:55] and these highschoolers are, I felt like I could talk to them like peers, and I just loved watching them learn things and understand things and wrestle things, and that's why I wanted to be in teaching. I didn't want to be in teaching because I wanted to do lesson planning, and behavior management, and grading and assigning homework - that's not why I wanted to be in education. It started my whole self-reflection journey and just for myself, growing up in a conventional educational space, there was so much about my own desires, my own dreams, my own beliefs, that I hadn't discovered yet because there was no space for that and it had to be pushed aside, who I was and what I really felt passionate about, you know, in high school people ask what your favorite subject is and that's the closest you get to figuring out who you are and what you're about. So I thought I knew because I thought I had a favorite subject and that's what I wanted to go into and it was not accurate at all. So there's a lot of unlearning for myself in my early twenties, really reflecting on what is this education thing I thought I wanted to be in, I don't like this, and then discovering Summerhill and discovering that democratic self-directed learning exists, it was completely new to me - I didn't learn about it until my Master's Degree in one class, on article, almost happenstance that I learned that it existed, so it opened the world to me and because a thing that, once I knew about it, researched it, visited Summerhill, it was my point of no return, I could not put myself back into that conventional education space. Then I was lost, I don't have a career, and we moved to Southern California and there was no option where I could work, we started having children, well we're going to be unschooling, I'm going to be a stay-at-home mom and I'll unschool my kids. Then as far as my own personal dreams and goals, I said, I want to work at a school like this, it doesn't exist in Orange County, so I guess I'm starting it."

As I spoke with Cassi, I was able to relate to this kind of shift in Philosophy, because I, too, taught in a conventional schooling setting only to come to a similar realization that my own philosophy really didn't gel with the philosophy of schooling as I had experienced it. So it was really interesting to have also spoken with Megan and hear

about her experiences in traditional schools and what led Megan to discover self-directed learning.

MEGAN: “I remember my first day in a public school, I was an AIS Teacher so I provided academic intervention services and pushed into other teachers’ classrooms to teach literacy, and I’m sitting with a group of Kindergarteners introducing myself and they’re asking all sorts of questions and one of them is like, ‘are you a grown-up?’ and I was like, ‘I’m so happy you asked me that’, because every other teacher sits in their rocking chair and addresses the students in such an authoritative way and I’m just on the floor with them having a conversation, and I was like ‘thank you, yes, just please don’t see me as that, I absolutely want to, I love those questions ‘are you a grown-up’, well, only when I have to be, you know? But we all need play in our lives so the fact that I get to go to work and do those things, there are some days where I’m just, ‘really? That was work? That’s so awesome.’ As opposed to being in public schools, I remember there were days, especially around testing times, where I’d leave work and feel like I should turn myself in for child abuse right now because you have five-year-olds taking standardized exams on computers when they haven’t developed fine motor skills to manipulate the trackpad, but that’s what their placement is based off, and that’s what the teacher’s performance reviews are based off, and that’s what the school is judged on, and that impacts funding, and it’s just, like, how is that the cycle of our education system? [...] and to think that there are other models like this, there are other options, it’s just so important for parents to recognize that there are other options, for administrators in public schools to recognize that just because it’s always been done that way doesn’t mean it needs to be done that way. When I started learning about democratic education, my first thought was, ‘wow, this is a cool new thing’, and I started researching it and thought, ‘oh, wait, this is a hundred years old, what are we doing?’”

The way Megan and Cassi talk about their background, is actually very similar to many conversations I’ve had with a lot of educators, similar to Megan and Cassi, who knew something wasn’t quite right and just weren’t aware of the kind of self-directed learning environments that existed outside of their own conventional school experience.

But I’d like to shift focus to how this element of Philosophy overlaps with another element, Norms and Traditions. This element explores the behaviors we praise which feed the kinds of traditions we value; we see this in how we place expectations on students and promote behaviors we believe are appropriate, resulting in “norms”, or what are considered normal behaviors specific to the learning environment you’re creating for your learners.

This comes up in both my conversations with Cassi and Meagan, and it became evident the kinds of expectations they both had for their learners and, equally, for themselves and their staff, were starkly different than what I imagine when I think of my own conventional school experience growing up. In fact, I specifically ask Cassi at The Open

School if students come to her wanting to learn in a more conventional way, wanting to learn more academically-focused topics, and how she approaches this desire for more conventional behaviors, or norms, in her self-directed learning environment.

CASSI: “It does happen. It doesn’t happen as often as adults would hope it happens. Because academics and subjects are usually really divorced from real life and our kids are interested in real life projects, so they are interested in, like the art student who is doing the screen-writing and teaching himself how to animate and score, all of these things are integrated into that project, so they’re learning writing and composition but it’s part of the greater goal. Students will say, I want to work on this thing - the thing is, I don’t know if you’re familiar with Naomi Aldort, an unschooling writer, I saw her speak a few years ago. One of these things she talks about is this disease that adults have called ‘Teacheria’ - this desire that as soon as a kid says something, ‘I might be interested in...’ or asking ‘how many planets are in the solar system’, that instead of just answering the question... and moving on, they’ll be like, ‘well, so the sun is the center of the solar system and then you have...’ and become teachers, it’s this disease, that we have to over-explain and the kid regrets asking. We have to be really careful because it’s such an impulse to want to jump on those things, but what happens is, a student will say, ‘I want to work on this project’ or ‘I want to do this thing’ and our first step is just to really understand what their vision is. We had a kid that wanted to learn programming, but that’s huge and I don’t know what you mean by that - what programming, what direction are you thinking, and it took her a while to even have a vision. At first, I wasn’t sure if she was just, ‘I want to understand computers’, but she eventually got to a place where she was learning how to program a video game and has been working with one of our staff members on a weekly basis for a year and a half, and basically she created the class, in a way, they co-created it, he’s helping her to reach her goal, but sometimes the first step is getting them to understand what their goals are - and we don’t know, I can’t prescribe what her goals are to her, she has to grapple with that question and then come up with it. So, sometimes students, especially when they come from a traditional background, they don’t want to do that work. They really want to have the adult say, ‘oh, here’s what you have to do’ or ‘here’s the next step and the next step’ and it feels safer for them when they do that, but it’s more rewarding and meaningful when they come up with it.”

Cassi’s expectation for the kinds of behaviors, or norms, for students and staff really underscores this shift in what teaching and learning looks and feels like. I appreciated the way Cassi’s explanation built on her beliefs, the Philosophy element, which led her to start The Open School in the first place. And when I spoke with Megan, the kinds of Norms and Traditions she described at the PETALS Learning Community, it became clear that there’s no checklist of norms that make a Self-Directed Learning environment what it is, but that the way a philosophy influences norms, makes it possible for an environment to adapt to the needs of the learners and facilitators, in a way that intentionally shapes their self-directed learning environment. This came up with Megan,

and how students coming from a conventional classroom setting have adapted to the kinds of norms and traditions that are practiced at her PETALS learning environment.

MEGAN: “I definitely think it’s more powerful when the learners are reminding each other of things like that, and when they first come in from a traditional school setting, I feel likely to adhere to those operating procedures because that’s what’s been ingrained in them. So as they learn that it’s self-directed and they don’t need to participate in everything, and they have this choice, I feel like it sort of falls off and they think, ‘oh I don’t have to do anything’, and it’s this interesting curve of being spot on with everything and then doing nothing and then kind of finds its balance as they recognize how the other learners engage and participate in things.”

The way Megan described this shift from conventional schooling reminded me of the concept behind “unschooling”, and I asked Megan about this in context of the kinds of expectations which are being set for learners when they arrive there at PETALS.

MEGAN: “We definitely want our learners to recognize the power that they hold and that as a democratic model they have responsibilities. In a democracy, you have a lot of freedoms but you have a lot of responsibilities, and recognize that if you don’t hold up those responsibilities, the community isn’t successful. You mention the choice in participating in that and I think that’s huge, reminding learners that they and their family made a choice to be part of this community and if you’re going to be part of the community that does mean living up to our agreements, and we have three very simple agreements that go along with the Agile Learning Center agreements of (1) take care of yourself, (2) take care of each other, and (3) take care of your space. Basically, everything we’d ask them to do falls in those categories. I think that helping them recognize that responsibility is definitely one of the bigger jobs we as mentors have and it’s really powerful to watch as they step into those leadership roles, and they recognize that it’s their community, and if they don’t make it want they want it to be, then it won’t be what they want it to be.”

This conversation with Megan actually brought up another element, the elements of Government, which looks at the hierarchy of decision-making in a group setting. And I’d like to point out again how interdependent these elements are, like how Philosophy might influence Norms & Traditions, which might influence this Government element, and that it’s these elements that are helping us to reflect on the kind of environment we’re creating for our learners. And so it wasn’t surprising when this element came up in my conversation with Cassi, as we talked about how decisions are made at The Open School.

CASSI: “...because we’re a democratic school, what that means is every student and staff member has a vote in the school. We discuss and vote on rules, how we spend our money, where we go on field trips, even hiring and firing staff is all done in a democratic

process. What that means is the students are part of setting the rules for the school. It's their school - it's not the adults setting the rules and getting the kids to abide by them, which is what a traditional school model is and, why, in an authoritarian classroom, you have to worry about setting the rules but also enforcing them. In our school, the democratic body of the entire school body sets the rules and then we have a process for enforcing the rules which is also a peer justice system and it's less like a judicial process and more like a mediation, or like a problem-solving process. So if someone breaks one of the school rules, anybody can write a complaint about them, staff can be written up also, we're under the same rules as students, we're not above them, and that write-up goes to what we call a civics board. That civics board right now is made up of two students and one staff member, and there will always be more students than staff, that's intentional, and they process that complaint. They investigate what happened, what was the story, were there any rules broken, and then the person who was charged decides if they agree or not. You don't just get told you broke the rule and here's your punishment, that person gets to say I did break this rule which they usually do because they hear it and they're like, 'ya, I know I broke the rules', or they're like 'no, I don't think they did break the rule, I think the rule means something different, and they can make their case.' Then there's a process we call a resolution plan, what's the next step. If you're the person who broke the rule, how do you want to respond to the situation. It's a collaborative process with everyone involved. The person who broke the rule is not just on the receiving end, they're part of the process, too. And it's their peers so we're not in a situation, as an adult, and this is such a relief, as an adult to be in this school is such a relief to not be the police officer or the monitor who walks around and tells people they're breaking that rule or you can't do that - no, we're all responsible for our own behavior."

Having now looked at three of the seven elements of this framework, there's one more element I'd like to explore. This fourth element is an element called Structural Relationships, and in my own opinion might be the most important element because it's all about how we designate a power-balance between ourselves and others. It looks at how we treat a person, and how we expect that person to treat us, and this also has to do with whether we're talking about our own family relationships, friendships, teachers, and even strangers or larger social groups, because unlike Government that looks at who we want making certain decisions for a group, or Philosophy that looks at the reasoning and rationale behind our decisions, Structural Relationships looks at how we define a relationship in order for us to talk about how we might want to treat one person differently than we treat another, like how a person with a certain level of authority, like a parent or teacher, might be treated differently than a friend or a casual acquaintance. This element came up when I asked Cassi about lesson planning and behavior management, two common topics for teachers in conventional schooling who are trying to manage a group of students and maintain a certain amount of order and control over the learning happening in their classroom, and how she addresses that kind of structural relationship between herself and the learners at The Open School.

CASSI: “It’s interesting you say that there’s an element of lesson planning in what we do because it’s certainly not the way I think about it; but it’s my relationship with the students that is just much more equitable. It’s more like the relationship I’d have with a friend like I’m getting to know who they are. I’m curious, as a human being, I’m not trying to manipulate the learning, I’m not trying to create situations to try to coerce them to want to do something I think is valuable - it’s 100% about them. Sometimes there’s a brainstorming element involved, I see that in some of our teenagers, or mid-teenagers, where they’re really starting to delve into things they really enjoy, what sparks them, what brings them alive; one of my students who has been at my school for four years, so I’ve seen her grow up, we’re having conversations about, she’s super interested in interior design. She’s 14, and she has an instagram art business where she sells art on her instagram, she’s done all of these kinds of business things, so she’s going to be giving me an interior design consultation... but we’re just having a conversation about what are her goals and what’s her interest and what she’s into right now, and similar you’d have with anyone you’re getting to know. Not because I’m the adult and you’re the kid, and you have to tell me things, but just because I’m curious about you as a person. So then we’re naturally talking about the things on my walls and then saying like, are you interested in doing interior design stuff, and she’s extending her pinterest boards, and that’s where if there’s any “lesson”, the idea came organically from a conversation with her and with me knowing her well as I’ve been with her for a while. There’s a lot of students, most kids think of things for themselves and if I come up with an idea or suggestions I’m just slowing them down by suggesting things, and they’re like, ‘I already know, I’m on this track’, and they really are the ones asking me for support or even more like an advisory role where they’re like, ‘I’m doing this thing, what do you think?’ I have this student who’s doing a screenplay for a whole animated series and he’ll use me to ask, ‘What would a school do if this happened...’. That’s kind of how lesson planning, if you have to think of it, it’s just organically arising from relationships. Then behavior management, that’s a whole other thing that does set us apart from unschooling, and we do have the word school in our name, but we’re school in the sense that it’s a gathering of people. We’re all kind of headed in the same direction, we’re supporting each other in those ways, but we’re not a school in any kind of conventional sense. I tell people who are new-ish, you almost have to pretend like you’re an alien from another planet, you’ve never heard the word school before, anything to do with school... the word school can be problematic because people bring their own assumptions for what that means... and the idea if we were to scrap the whole system we have, and just start fresh with just, ‘how do people learn’, ‘what’s the best way to do this’, we would not end up with the system we have now. We’d end up with something like self-directed learning because people are like, oh, we have interests, we have questions, we follow those questions.”

Structural Relationships also came up in my conversation with Megan as she described the meaning of the name, PETALS, which is an acronym for Play, Earth, Tinkering, Art,

Language, and Strength. As she spoke about the Earth aspect of her learning community, it sparked an interesting conversation about behavior and how they manage relationships in their mostly outdoor environment.

MEGAN: “as far as behavior management, being outside and connecting with nature, I’ve found, is so critical to learners just feeling comfortable in their skin, to connect with nature, we have a really special set up where we are mostly outside in a yard but we have a yurt space and have trails all around us so we encourage children to go on hikes, all self-led. We have walkie-talkies so they can go more independently... and it’s amazing how even the youngest of learners, just their maturity, they step up and recognize I’m about to do something that has a risk to it and I better pay attention. It’s incredible to see that focus in such a self-directed way and that it’s not like, ‘you better sit down and listen’.”

It was really fascinating how Megan described this Earth component of her PETALS name and it led me to ask Megan about her thoughts on how she works in academics and social-emotional competencies into the relationships that grow there at PETALS.

MEGAN: “I’d almost say the foundation is more play and that the academics and SEL come through that because so much arises naturally when learners are fulfilling what they enjoy. Whether they’re reading together and someone pulls the book away, or if they’re playing a game and someone loses and their feelings get hurt, or someone gets shoved in a soccer game - it’s just such natural opportunities to step in and help them to recognize what happened and use some non-violent communication type language. Then also to help the person who wronged them to understand why their actions could upset somebody; and sometimes it’s just as simple as bodily awareness. When they’re five or six years old, they don’t recognize necessarily where their body is flying when they’re going, so it’s not just their emotional awareness but their physical awareness of their space. I think that play is just an incredible vehicle for all of that.”

I also asked how Megan balances how much the students decide what to learn, when to learn, how to learn, versus how often she and the other mentors at PETALS decide what, when, and how learning happens.

MEGAN: “I think it’s probably more so them than us. We have a pond in our yard so over the summer they were really interested in playing in the pond. Well, there’s a bunch of tadpoles and fish in the pond so naturally I’m going to break out a lesson on life cycles and we’re going to talk about all the different types of cycles. Each student has a journal and, just spaced out in conversation like that, encouraged to draw about that, or write about it, and there are some who are like, ‘absolutely not’, and there are others who will take their journal and will sit for an hour. So, often, even if someone is just drawing, trying to build in some academics so like, ‘you drew a picture of the beach, so let’s label that beach so I hear a ‘b’ what makes the ‘b’ sound? And I hear an ‘e’, and

at that point, you know, you're five or six years old and the vowel patterns aren't developmentally appropriate at this point, so if you hear the 'e' and you write 'e' we're good. Then the 'ch', well that's kind of a different sound; but because having the mixed ages, it's just so invaluable, inevitably you have an older learner who comes over and says, 'oh, that's 'c-h'!'. And so they're getting to have that authority, and they're going to be the leader in that sense, teaching the little, that sound, that digraph, and at the same time the little gets to feel empowered because they're able to write the word for what they were caring about. So, a lot of that happens very naturally. I think the things I tend to plan more, often have to do with literature, or experiments. A lot of times I'll do a read-aloud, and then have some activity that goes with it. The participation always varies, there are some learners who absolutely love to hear stories, and some when you mention an activity they say, 'ok, I'm done now'. There are others who are not really into the story but are like, 'oh, ok, we're going to do an art project or we're going to build something, cool'. I read this book over the summer about these little tikes that become pirates, they're brothers and they turn into pirates; so I gave them a tinkering challenge, 'can you build a pirate ship', and in my mind I'm picturing cardboard and paper ships. Well, we've got all this wood and all of a sudden, next thing I know, learners are tying or screwing boards together, making rafts, and other learners are taking reeds out of the trees and strapping those together to make little flotation devices, and I'm just blown away by their creativity. So the fact that there is no limit is awesome, because I can present an offering and in my mind this is what we're doing, but they're like, 'no, this is what we're doing' - and that is awesome."

After speaking with Megan and Cassi, there's something about exploring these core elements of this framework, this layer of elements that define a learning environment, that I really want to highlight because, whether you're in an indoor or outdoor, or an unschooling or a conventional school setting, these elements *will* be present in some form or fashion. And by reflecting on these elements, you not only clarify your own vision for the learning environment you want to create, but also how you might need to adapt one element or another to accomplish that vision. It also highlights how adjusting one element may require other elements also be recalibrated to a degree. Now... it's important to keep in mind that this kind of intention is not always a *simple* process - change rarely is - and it can take time for this kind of conversation to take shape, but that doesn't mean we can't untangle and interpret these elements over time, to innovate and improve the learning environment we create, not just for our learners, but for ourselves.

You can learn more about Megan Grieco and the PETALS Learning Community through their website, Petals Learning Community DOT ORG. You can also learn more about Cassi Clausen at The Open School through her own school's website at Open School O C DOT COM.

Now as I bring this third episode to a close, I want to once again revisit this second season's introduction episode, where I talk about capturing a rainbow. This framework of elements is not in itself an explanation for who we are and how we learn. The topics and all of the people throughout this second season are all part of the environment responsible for this rainbow that is who we are and how we learn. The question to ask is not how this episode is solely responsible for who we are and how we learn, but how the ideas presented connect with the ideas in the other episodes to come to such a conclusion that is meaningful to you, your community, and the bigger goals you have that you want to share with your community both big and small. I hope you enjoy this second season and I thank you for listening. Talk to you next time.

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