

Focus Group on Dream It Project

By: Adrienne Keiner

Putting a focus group together is very frustrating. The student focus group was easy because it was completed during class. But trying to get eight to ten adults together voluntarily is incredibly difficult.

I started by showing my Dream It video to my students, 25 in all. I got a lot of, “how did you do that?” and “was that hard to connect the music to the video?” Students showed immediate excitement. I then introduced the items, mathematically driven technology projects, they would be completing throughout the school year. I knew that technology would be an issue at the beginning of the year because of the results from a parent and student survey I had received from each family. The students knew that lack of technology at home plagued some families as well, which had the majority of the class asking how they would accomplish such projects. Some questions from students were; “Can I use my moms phone?”, “Can I do this on a tablet?”, “Will you be showing us how to do these things or the technology teacher?”. After answering some questions I reminded students that me answering their questions was not the point of the focus group and that I should be asking questions to them and gauging their feelings on what is to come from this school year. I got a lot more hands in the air and many more questions, but instead of me stopping the conversation I realized that was the way they were telling me their thoughts and feelings on the Dream It project.

They were afraid. Afraid they would not succeed. I say they were afraid because some students stated they had never used google, memes, vines. youtube, “what’s a vine?” they said or “I don’t have youtube!”. Due to their confidence levels in the use of many technologies I knew I may have to cut back on some projects and focus more on using a couple of projects to really dig deep into math being in everything all around us. So, I started a different discussion. I asked what they thought was the main idea I wanted them to walk away with at the end of 6th grade. Incredibly they answered with what the video had stated, math is everywhere! Which got me excited. “Oh good”, I thought, “They get the main concept!”. Now I just needed to gear everything in the direction of math is everywhere.

After the class discussion with my students my main take-aways were:

1. Create a novice environment: Everyone starts from the beginning even if they know somethings. There are always more tricks and shortcuts to learn from each other.
2. Learn from our mistakes: display everyday mistakes and discoveries from those mistakes, so as to promote failures as positives. (Stolen from Candace)

3. Make every objective hands-on: Because of their lack of confidence with technology and their fear of failure I need to have computers and detailed written instructions ready for students that freeze up when asked use technology. These instructions can be slipped to them without others seeing or used as guidelines for step by step directions.
4. Multiple uses: I will stick with using padlet, memes, vines, and youtube for this first year of DREAM IT, but, I will do these multiple times so students can become experts at these main uses of technologies. If they become experts then they will feel much more comfortable using new items to drive their learning.

I foresee many of my main take aways changing as the students change, but for now I feel I should start small and have everyone master the idea that math is everywhere.

The teacher focus group was a bit of a joke. I was extremely frustrated with getting a focus group together. I had 3 separate meeting times and only 3-4 people showed up each time. The 4th time I just kept them and went ahead with the discussion. If I was only a little frustrated at first it only going to get worse when I had a teacher ask if they were going to get paid for their time. I laughed at that comment because I thought they were kidding and then they left after ten minutes, apparently they were not kidding. The teachers that did stay had some concerns and showed some interest in what I was trying to accomplish. I started off the same way as I did with the students. I showed the Dream It video. I was met with, “cool” and “that’s nice”. Not the same enthusiasm as the students, but I get it, it was after school and our brains were a bit overdone. I wasn’t going to get the same questions from the teachers as I did from the students, which means I had to pry. I tried some open ended guiding questions to start a discussion.

“What did you guys think?” = “Seems cool.”

(Silence)

“Any questions about the video?” = “You want them to see math everywhere, yes?” (Yes!)

(Silence)

“Any suggestions on how to accomplish that?” = “Looks pretty straight forward.”

(Silence)

“How should I have students express that math is everywhere?” = “Well, what do you have planned?”

“Before I dive into what I’ve planned, how would you have students accomplish this?” = “The video did a lot of that work.”

(Silence)

Okay... I got really frustrated at this point and decided to show them what I had planned from my website. In retrospect I probably should have led with the projects and ended with the video

to build some sort of background, but I was hoping the teachers would have opened up their creative side and shared how their subjects intertwined with math. But, just like the students, I saw fear in their eyes. When I explained and demonstrated the items and technologies I was implementing I was met with a lot of, “hmmm”. No suggestions, no questions, nothing concrete. WOW. At this point I just got real. I explained that I was conducting a focus group to help drive my Dream It project and I needed them to talk. “Oh.” one teacher said. I knew I had come off a little harsh and my tone wasn’t exactly loving. I had put myself in this situation and my attitude was not helping their attitude.

“I’m sorry.” I had to win them back. The fear I saw in their eyes was not fear, it was stress from the day, day dreams of where they would rather be, and thoughts of what they had to do before they went to bed that night. I thought my emails explained everything I wanted to accomplish but that would of meant the long, long, long email I sent was read. I knew how it felt to get work piled on and to just glance at things and wish I was somewhere else.

“I’m sorry guys.” I explained that I just needed them to tell me their thoughts and ideas on getting my main idea of ‘math is everywhere’ across. I also had to explain that they would have no other work from me and that their names would not be used in anything. After pouring my heart out and begging for them to open up, they did. Just like the students.

“Some of the students won’t have such technology, how will you address this?”

“I can have them create memes and vines in art.”

“I can also build on those in reading and language arts.”

“How will you share their work?”

The discussion lead me back to what the students had said and helped me keep the four main items I would have students master. If I had to complete a focus group again I would have done it completely differently. I definitely would of brought snacks!