The Big Picture

Prior to starting this class, I admit that my views of data were somewhat cynical and simultaneously superficial. Richard Farson would probably argue that this is an example of Chapter 1 of *Management of the Absurd* in terms of the "coexistence of opposites" (Farson, 22). I would say cynical because, as a historian, I know that data often comes down to the person using it; it can be used to support, deny, refute or indicate many things depending on who is wielding it. I would also superficial because at the outset, I simply thought of data as statistics. Statistics are completely acceptable, and a legitimate form of data, but they are also only one of a seemingly endless array of data available.

It is in the context of more superficial data that I think that schools generally focus on. In particular, this often comes down to test scores. While the general trend in education, especially progressive education, is to disavow test scores as a quick Google search will demonstrate, it is important to recognize that test scores *do* in fact measure many standards and accomplishments. For example, a standardized test can indicate general trends across a period of time. Take the example of the California History Standards. In the 10th grade, many California high schools attempt to get through the end and results of World War II – CA History Standard 10.8. This means that by the end of the academic year, standards 10.1 through 10.8 are generally completed. Interestingly, the CA STAR test contains questions dealing with historical events and figures that come much later in a chronological timeline, and the STAR is usually given in March or April. Therefore, not only do many schools not cover some of the material that is on the test, some schools won't cover approximately 1/3 of what appears on the test! As a school leader, if I was looking at grade-wide STAR test data and saw that many students were answering 1/3 of the history questions incorrectly, I might be alarmed. But, what I'm really looking at is a measure that shows me a general trend of how far along the history classes are in March or April. Test scores measure what a student remembers from a specific class on a specific day under specific condition. It is important to understand that while test scores do not define us as teachers or as schools, they do provide general indicators especially when viewed in a macro sense.

Beyond the test scores, schools should also be looking at things like college acceptance, and post-high school career selection. Schools can also look at data measuring affective standards as well. Things like attendance, student perception of rigor, safety, etc. can provide an important window to how successful a school is meeting the needs of students. Imagine if a school leader noticed a correlation between attendance and students who repeatedly take summer school classes. Or a correlation between FRL students, use of public transportation, and student perception of safety. These sorts of indicators can provide much more valuable (if not to politicians and community officials but to actual stakeholders in the school) information than a standardized test score summary.

To support colleagues in using data to inform practice, I think it's important to remember that data is simply another word for evidence. If you think you are being successful with a certain class, what does the evidence show? It's a similar question that we would ask students, and it's important to ask colleagues the same thing. If you think you are ineffective in project design, what does the evidence show?

Picking the right evidence can be just as important as actually measuring it. For the example regarding project design, something like student satisfaction would be a good indicator. This could be measured in a survey, a focus group, or a classroom discussion. There are numerous ways to collect evidence and data, it's really more a matter of availing yourself to them. Of course being willing to accept, and make changes based on, the results. In order to encourage school staff, I think that requiring mid-year or end-of-year surveys as a professional development activity is a good start. These wouldn't have to be shared with anybody but I believe they would be useful to draw upon for year-end wrap ups. To use the example above, if a school leader is completing a year-end wrap up with a teacher and the teacher says "It was a very successful year for me" it would be great for that teacher to be able to show the student survey that supports that assertion.

Actual PITP

For my PITP using data, I wanted to measure student perception of efficacy as it pertains to our upcoming HTHNC Challenge Day activity. In the Challenge Day activity, student leaders engage their colleagues in structured, and difficult, conversations regarding topics such as bullying, sexuality, academic struggles, etc. We conducted this activity last year, but students had relatively little training leading to some groups going exceptionally well while other groups struggled. The goal this year was to provide more training to students in order to prepare them to lead groups rather than simply be the ones who spoke most, or just asked the questions.

The challenge here was, and continues to be, other students' negativity towards the event. This is taking a tremendous toll on the student leaders' confidence and perception of their own ability to conduct their groups with gusto. I wanted to capture their own perceptions of these abilities prior to completing the training sessions (approximately 40 hours) and then have them complete the survey again at the end of the training sessions. My suspicion is that a marked increase in perceived effectiveness and ability will be demonstrated. This standard pre/post survey model has yielded useable results in the past work I have done in youth development, and it seemed most fitting for this group and event.

The survey was focused on how the students identified their own abilities and their own feelings towards the topics we were preparing to engage other students in. The responses to the questions were mostly on a 5 point scale, with the lower numerical value indicating a low efficacy with the high number indicating a higher sense of efficacy. In its original incarnation, the survey was entirely about the student and their own perceptions. However, after going through a project tuning with a thoughtful and helpful critical friend, I added more open-ended questions per the requests of said critical friend. I also revised a few of the questions to be more clear in terms of what was being asked. One of the interesting things to come out of this process was my critical friend's suggestion that there should be a question regarding what students wanted teachers to do during the Challenge Day activity. These responses were directly used to facilitate the meeting with colleagues.

The meeting with colleagues went reasonably well. Rather than just presenting the data and leaving it to be, I used a modified dilemma protocol as I was running into very real logistical problems in terms of scheduling the actual event. I did not want to make such a community-

effecting decision without the input of teachers who would be directly affected by that decision, so I presented the dilemma as "how can I meet the needs of student leaders *and* the needs of teachers for Challenge Day?" I began by presenting the data (as seen on the video), and then asking for clarifying and probing questions. My colleagues then began their discussion, presenting alternative schedules, ways to include more students, how to select groups, etc.

If I were to conduct this meeting again, I would present a more cogent summary of the data. As seen in the video, there is a lot of data to present and not all of it pertains directly to the question posed above. For example, I present lots of information regarding what students felt comfortable leading discussion about although my question really didn't address that issue. One of my colleagues also made note of the fact that this survey was conducted *prior* to the trainings being completed therefore what students identified as difficult to talk about may actually change as they attended more trainings. Touché.

Had I the ability to go back and collect more data, I would want to get more student feedback about the day itself. One of my colleagues asked a question regarding student preference about the event, and the only data I had was one question dealing with group selection. In hindsight, I would want to know a bit more about their reasoning for their responses.

As I prepare to continue to use data, I continue to wonder what types of data are the most useful for certain inquiries. And how can I gather data using something other than surveys? I think that this is perhaps most useful at a school that uses surveys frequently and "survey burnout" sets in after the third or fourth survey, even though the third and fourth survey are not any less important than the first or second survey.