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CIS Writing—Block 1

Ethnography

19 March 2014

Challenge Accepted:

An Ethnography of a High School Destination Imagination Team

I. Preface

I’ve always enjoyed problem solving—while others cringe at doing a word problem in math class, I secretly and blissfully label variables and draw diagrams until I find a solution. I love being able to face a challenge and prove to myself that I can overcome it. This is a common thread through all of my activities, from cheerleading to mock trial to my church youth group.

Until last year, I had never heard of the activity Destination Imagination until a friend from my youth group, Conner, described it to me. Although his explanation left me confused, I got the impression that it involved building structures and solving problems in fun and creative ways. In my head, I had the image of a group of teenagers constructing mini formations out of toothpicks and marshmallows. It seemed like an activity that I would have liked to been involved in when I was younger.

When it came time to choose an ethnography topic, Destination Imagination was brought back into my mind, and I contacted Conner to inquire about observing his team at Mound-Westonka High School. The stars, and our schedules, aligned, and I was set up to go observe their upcoming regional meet.

I assume that Destination Imagination requires a lot of collaboration between members, which is why I also assume they will be very close-knit. I expect the members to be highly
intelligent, creative, and quirky people with grand *imaginations*. I suspect they will be pretty nerdy, with interests that diverge from those of the average teenager. I also expect them to have a witty and sarcastic sense of humor. I am somewhat anxious to approach the group, and I hope that I am accepted.

**II. Background Information**

Destination Imagination, known until 1999 as OM Association, Inc., is an international, non-profit educational activity that started in 1982. There is an estimated 200,000 annual participants who represent 48 states and 30 countries. The program is run by approximately 38,000 volunteers. The mission statement of Destination Imagination, according to their website, is “To develop opportunities that inspire the global community of learners to utilize diverse approaches in applying 21st Century skills and creativity.” (“Mission”)

In Destination Imagination’s “Challenge Program”, teams of up to seven students develop and present a solution to an open-ended “Challenge.” The Challenges are sorted into seven different categories, ranging from technical to fine arts. (“Challenge”) Their solutions are then evaluated at regional, state, or national tournaments, and the top-tier teams move on to the Global Finals, the “world’s largest celebration of creativity.” (“Global”)

Minnesota Destination Imagination is separated into eight different team regions. Each region has its own regional tournament, and teams compete by Challenge and by level (elementary, middle, or secondary). Top scoring teams in each division advance to the state tournament. (“Regions”) The Westonka school district’s first DI team was started in 2004 by a second grade teacher. The program has since expanded, and is now represented by three teams: a middle level team from Grandview Middle School, a middle level team from Mound-Westonka
High School, and finally, the team I will be observing, a secondary level team from Mound-Westonka High School named “Higgs Boson.” (Battis)

The Challenge Higgs Boson chose this year is “The Tension Builds” from the structural category. To solve it, they must build a structure to be tested against two forces at the same time, assemble a prop during their presentation, and make a story to go along with it. (“Challenge”)

III. Observational Analysis

Practice Observation: 6 March 2014, 5:00-6:45 p.m.

I pulled up next to a crowded driveway in a small suburban cul-de-sac in Mound. I was nervous; although I was pretty confident I was at the right place, I couldn’t bring myself to get out and knock on the door. Thankfully, I saw my broker, Conner, approaching my car in a Chris Farley-like run. He greeted me and led me inside the cream colored house.

The entryway was cluttered with shoes and backpacks, and down the hall a group of teenagers sat on a couch, the floor, or in one case, a black exercise bike. There were five people total, four guys and one girl. They waved at me and Conner did introductions. Although Conner was intimidatingly tall and towered over most in the group, he gave off a friendly and excited energy. Having been in DI since eighth grade, he was completely comfortable with the processes involved with it. “We’re just brainstorming some ideas right now.” That gave one explanation for the exercise bike, to help get the blood and the ideas flowing.

In one corner of the living room sat two large cages, complete with ladders and different levels, that each held a chinchilla. They gave the house a slightly putrid, musty smell, like stale feces. The opposite side of the living room held a conglomeration of random items: cardboard structures held together with duct tape, a seven foot high pyramid of boxes, and what appeared to be an hourglass constructed out of Culligan bottles. Although I considered these objects junk,
they used them for props in their activity. This showed how they can find value in what others deem worthless.

When I sat down on the worn, white leather couch, the group rearranged itself into a circle. This was a very welcoming action that showed how inclusive the group was. I sat next to Addia, a high school junior and the only other girl present. Wearing jeans, a baseball tee, a red scarf, and minimal make-up, she jotted down notes and sketches onto a clipboard. Although she has long been involved in speech and choir, this was her first year doing DI. “My story of joining DI is a long and strenuous affair,” she explained. “It seemed like a cool activity, but I couldn’t start my own team, so I had to wait.” Despite being new to the team, she spoke and contributed ideas often. “I think next time we should put the right number on the board,” she joked, and the rest of the team laughed in response. The group didn’t seem bitter about anything that went wrong during their last performance. They recognized that mistakes were necessary in order to improve.

“Can we involve the audience,” a lanky, dark haired Russian guy named Felipp quietly asked. Felipp, who was also in soccer, was constantly shifting positions or fidgeting. He didn’t say much—this was one of the only times I heard him address the entire group—and when he did talk, it was usually to the guy, nicknamed “Borndog”, next to him.

“No, we can look at them, but we can’t interact with them or the judges” responded Nick Battis, who had an extensive knowledge of the rules. A junior who had been in DI since second grade, Nick was obviously the leader of their group. His parents also helped manage the team, and the Battis’ house was used for practices. In contrast to the casual dress of the others, Nick wore khakis, a white dress shirt, and an argyle sweater vest with a tie tucked underneath. Nick seemed to take pride in the activities he was in, like DECA, which he mentioned seven times.
“I’m the only person who’s been [in DI] since the start,” he later explained. “I’ve seen so many people come and go. But we’re at a solid state right now.” Nick had invested much of his life towards DI, and he wanted the team to be successful.

The group continued to brainstorm, gradually switching away from structural ideas to lines for their skit. The practice didn’t seem to have a set schedule or routine. They would start off talking about an idea for their skit, but it didn’t take long for them to stray off topic. Their conversation would constantly evolve to new topics—one moment they would be discussing *The Great Gatsby*, and the next, would be singing the “FUN” song from SpongeBob. I had expected them to be interested in unconventional topics, but not to this variety. Every once in a while, the conversation would take an inappropriate turn. After a particularly crude joke, the group began to joke about their dialogue in reference to my observing.

“She’s going to have to put a star by it. Raunch.”

“Star, dollar sign, at symbol, exclamation point”

“She’s not going to be able to put anything. It’ll be a blank page.”

“Experiment failed.”

Their handoffs from joke to joke were seamless; in fact, watching them was like seeing separate parts of the same brain. They also were comfortable with the fact that their conversations were unusual, enough so that they were able to joke about it.

The talking continued, gradually getting more and more personal. They discussed concerns about Brock, one of the two members who wasn’t there, who had a new girlfriend they didn’t approve of.

“I don’t give people advice unless they ask for it,” said Addia.

“See, I’m the relationship doctor who’s never been in a relationship. Woo,” responded Nick.
It was an interesting shift in the conversation, away from the chaos and randomness of earlier. It showed that, despite their considerable creative abilities, they still faced the same problems that all teenagers do and were supportive of each other.

Eventually, everyone decided to leave. I thanked my broker, Conner, and he told me that “it was nice have someone interested for once.”

Tournament Observation: 22 February 2014, 3:45-4:45 p.m.

After squeezing into a spot in the crowded parking lot of Maple Grove Senior High School, I walked slowly towards door “D”, partially because of the icy sidewalks, but mostly because I was unsure if I was at the right part of the building. I entered and, to my relief, saw a balding man wearing a beige apron with the orange and purple “Destination Imagination” logo on it. I was in the right place. I meandered around, overwhelmed by the number of young kids—I didn’t expect the majority of students involved in DI to be in elementary school. Finally, I found my broker Conner and the rest of his team in a semi-crowded hallway between different gyms. They stood around a few black, wooden structures that included a podium with a diagram of a rocket, a larger, angled arch like structure with red lights and a keyboard, and a smaller black and silver cube. These were props they constructed themselves to help solve their challenge.

Conner and Borndog stood out in the light blue sanitation suits they wore. They were meant to be dressed as astronauts, but since authentic astronaut suits would be out of reach, they used their resourcefulness and creativity to come up with a cheap, but still effective, option. Three others wore laboratory safety goggles, and one guy, Zach, wore large “nerd” glasses. All of these artifacts would be unusual in a normal social setting, but here, it was completely acceptable to wear them. Even some of the staff wore unusual clothing items, like an Uncle Sam hat, showing that the larger DI culture encouraged uniqueness.
The group conversed as usual, with Conner, Borndog, Nick, Zach, and Addia at the heart of the chaotic conversation, and Felipp and Brock listening more than speaking. Zach’s voice, in particular, stuck out, and I heard snippets of his dialogue, “In the hands of Donald Trump . . .” and “Can you shut up? I’m trying to get my lines for the first time ever.” Zach’s flaming red hair was the perfect match to his bold personality. Zach had been in DI for three years, and was also involved in theater and speech, which helped explain why he was so easy to hear.

One of the aproned staff came over to the group and informed the group that they were ready for them. The team picked up their structures and shuffled into a small, single basketball court sized gym containing a completely filled set of bleachers. There were not only family members, but other teams and friends there too. The size and support of the audience was surprising; I had assumed DI was some odd activity that nobody, besides supportive parents, really cared about. The room buzzed with energy, and the team stood on the side of the bleacher, waiting to be announced. They had stopped talking to each other, and most focused on the staff member talking in front. Conner and Nick slightly bounced up and down. Even the outgoing Zach leaned over and gave an exaggerated “shush” and an eye point to some talking little girls. Everyone was nervous and wanted to successfully perform.

The staff member finally asked “Team, are you ready?” and they responded with a loud and unified “Yes!” This cultural ritual showed that most of them had been through this process before and, despite their nervousness, knew what they needed to do. The staff responded with “You have eight minutes,” and they silently set up in front of the bleachers.

The skit started off with Zach, in a loud and coherent voice, giving a narration that explained the context of their performance, which stimulated a NASA rocket launch in the year 2021. Conner and Borndog, the two astronauts, lied underneath their arched rocket. I assumed
that they acted as the two forces on a structure, a requirement of their Challenge. At one point during the “mission”, they burst out in their rendered version of “Seven hundred thousand Bottle of Dehydrated Water on the Wall.” Addia and Brock played members of mission control and used the podium. Felipp and Nick didn’t have any speaking lines, and instead worked behind the scenes, fetching and putting together props. At first, I was surprised Nick didn’t have any speaking lines, since he talked a lot at their practice. However, I assumed that he didn’t care about being in the spotlight, and would rather work behind the scenes to ensure that everything runs smoothly.

Throughout their performance, two aproned judges circled around their set, scribbling onto clipboards. I began losing track of what was happening in the storyline, and I sensed that many others watching were as well. They had many inventive ideas—so many that I no longer had any idea of what was happening. Suddenly, there presentation ended, and they all lined up in front of their set. Someone counted off a fast “5-4-3-2-1-Go” and, with straight arms and flat hands, they bowed with a karate-like “Ya!” Taking a standard behavior, like bowing after a performance, and personalizing it into something unique to their subculture shows that they value standing out.

After a quick group picture, they left the gym. They reflected on their performance, and, even though they critiqued what had gone wrong (Zach mentioned that he never got that line), they seemed much more relaxed.
IV. Conclusion

This subculture did meet many of my assumptions. Most were involved in other activities, like music or DECA. They had a variety of interests: some that applied to most teenagers, like relationships and college, but some that differed, like the symbolism of the color green and TI-84 calculators. They exceeded my expectations in their inclusiveness—even though they were very close-knit, they still welcomed others.

Although this group directly worked on the Challenge of building a unique structure that can withstand two external forces, their real challenge is much broader: to condense all of their creativity into something comprehensible. Generating original ideas came naturally for them, but boxing those ideas into something their judges and audience could understand was much harder.

This challenge was also reflected in their connection to a larger culture: their school. Although they had a lot of support at their tournament, Conner’s reaction to my interest in writing about them showed that they don’t get much attention from their peers. Not only does their school not even sponsor them, but they are ignored or misjudged by their peers who don’t fully understand what they do. However, DI is a place where they can express their ideas and help each other develop new ones, without the fear of being misunderstood or judged. That’s why the social aspect is one of the biggest draws to this subculture; the members can be around people who share similar interests, a sense of humor, and the ability to think outside of the box.

Although Nick is the main leader of this group, many of the others, like Conner and Addia, act as leaders as well. The group is predominantly juniors, so they also have another year to work and improve together. That’s why I predict this group will continue to be successful and will go to the Global Finals again. This team is its own brand of chaos, but they serve as a reminder that some problems require you to be a little outrageous.
Works Cited

Battis, Nick. Personal Interview. 6 March 2014.


