



Parent & Faculty Education Conference EMPOWERING OUR KIDS Menlo School, February 6, 2016

Tiffany Schlain

Attendee Notes

Opening

Began presentation by watching her film [The Science of Character](#). (This film is also being shown to Menlo students grades 6-12 and discussed during advocacy or class meetings.)

There was some technical difficulties with her slide presentation at beginning of talk so Tiffany improvised during the troubleshooting.

Tiffany is a parent of a 6 and 12 year old, it is unusual for her to use technology on a Saturday. Shared story: 7 years ago she lost her father to whom she was very close. Turned off her phone during the hours of her visits with him, and afterward decided to institute a no screens policy with her family from Friday night to Saturday night, a "Technology Shabbat." It was life changing. Saturdays are now a time to slow down with one day of the week having no tech and enjoy the extra time. It is one of the most profound things she has ever done, and it reinforces her sense that we are all too distracted much of the time.

As the founder of the Webby Awards, it is not like she is against technology, and her husband is a robotics professor at UC Berkeley. She thinks about tech all the time. Her films are part 1 and the jumping off point for deep discussions about character. She has worked with the State Department to show films to other countries and help ignite a global conversation around character. Her journey on character started when she engaged on the issue of how we are developing ourselves with technology and how are we using this technology mindfully.

Why the sudden conversation about character now? Because science and values of the world are continuously evolving. In the last 3 years there has been lots of interest in this topic. Tiffany wants her films to be a catalyst to create deeper discussions.

Presentation

Past Work and Films:

- *Connected* film – Tiffany researched level of connectedness in our culture throughout history and how we connect in the 21st century.
- TED book/talk/film, [Brain Power: From Neurons to Networks](#)
- Her films are part of 13-15 American Film showcase with US embassy
- AOL original series *The Future Starts Here*

A Case for Daydreaming

Kids don't do enough daydreaming anymore – too many devices. We need daydreaming/dreaming to make unusual connections in our minds. When you are focused on a task you are directing your mind. When daydreaming, doing dishes, spacing out you allow your mind to go on a journey and make connections that wouldn't otherwise happen. Inspiration and creativity come from this. .

During their Technology Shabbat her kids daydream more. What is the answer to a question that comes up? They can't just go find it out with technology, they actually need to ponder the answer. 12 year old didn't get an iPhone – got a "dumbphone". Other days of week they are on tech and loving it. On Saturday night her family reignites with their phones and appreciate tech more.

Why are people so hungry to look at character?

Character has been neglected in US education in the 20th century, but previously schools and institutions discussed character and philosophy in a way that aligned with religious values. In the 20th century we emphasize individualism, separation of church and state, so now we've decoupled the conversations. Where did teaching of character and values fall? Values, morals and spirit became private concerns. But aspects of this conversation are very much public. How we treat one another? How we act in the world? These ideas are common and consistent across cultures.

A PEW study shows that religion is decreasing in the U.S. So now we are hungry to talk about character in a non-religious way. Developing who we are and how we want to be in the world needs to be part of family discussions and teacher-student discussions. For most of history, science and humanities were well integrated (e.g., Da Vinci). Art & Science became decoupled and now the connectedness is coming back.

We live in an ecosystem of developing people. Communities used to be more inter-connected, but not so today. **SHTEAM** is Tiffany's acronym for what we need to focus on to be a student/contributor in this evolving world: **S**cience, **H**umanities, **T**echnology, **E**ngineering, **A**rt, and **M**ath.

How do we have a global conversation about character?

There are 3 billion people online in the world. Her organization letitriipple.org wanted to start a global conversation and launched a Character Day with free screenings of its films. The first one was the global premier of *The Science of Character* that had over 1500 schools and organizations who participated in the Character Day screenings.

Three years ago Tiffany created a [Period Table of Character Strengths](#) containing 24 strengths organized into six categories.

Character Day 2015 was even bigger with 6784 live screenings in 120 countries viewing 3 short films supported by discussion kits and global Google hangouts receiving millions of perspectives. New films were [The Making of a Mensch](#) based on history of Jewish science of character, and [The Adaptable Mind](#).

Character Day 2016 will be September 22, 2016. Grant from John Templeton Foundation will expand reach/impact of Character Day 2016.

The Adaptable Mind film was shown

We need to prepare for a world that is constantly changing. 5 specific character traits are required to thrive in this world. These skills are the engine of survival.

Curiosity. Skimming vs. engaging. Look for ideas that aren't already out there. When curiosity is piqued our brains become happy. Humans are unique from machines. Our minds constantly adapt – unexpected pathways that lead to more curiosity. Pathways you open up lead to more creativity.

Tiffany believes that the core of thriving is curiosity. It allows one to be truly engaged. Curiosity allows for learning, improved memory and reward functions, and expands pathways leading to more curiosity.

Creativity – new synthesis. Liberating human energy. Creativity is so critical now that getting information is not the challenge – it's how you bring your own unique perspective to those ideas that differentiate people. No matter how many ideas you have, you need to do something with them.

Creativity is part art and part execution. When you are creative you are bringing your own perspective to new ideas. Day dreaming and exercising both help to improve your creativity.

Initiative. Getting someone to commit and partner. If you don't take initiative your ideas won't go anywhere. Allows one to be more intuitive about what needs to get done. It also requires judgment so that you know when to reach out to people for input about your ideas.

Multidisciplinary thinking. Ask for feedback to improve ideas. Need to "multi-task" – across race, gender, age, discipline, culture and other professions. Solo thinking only gets you so far. Collaborating can be messy – but make sure mind is open to being changed.

Empathy. Sensing the motives and feelings of others – develops at 5 and grows over time. Takes practice. Take the time to know the stories of people you interact with daily. It takes practice to look people in the eye and connect deeply. Connecting broadly is meaningless unless you connect deeply. In college surveys, empathy levels have **dropped dramatically**.

We live in a rapidly changing world. Agricultural economy shifted to Industrial economy which shifted to knowledge economy 50 years ago. Now approaching shift to a "Human economy." Skills we need most are those that involve being human, the qualities machines don't have. *Human skills are just as important as knowledge.*

What can you offer the world?

Q&A

Q. Being steeped in values is important so how do we develop & instill these values at school?

A. This conference is a great example. Schools should focus on character. It is an ecosystem not just important at school. Whatever is taught at school should be "surround sound" taught at home too. She keeps list of family values on the fridge – kids add to it – it's there and everyone can see. Have an emphasis on character, talk to your kids about character. Know what they are learning and support it at home.

Q. As your kids get older, are they pushing back on the Technology Shabbat?

A. (I always get asked this question!) You are the parents - you make the rules. If you take the break without using screens, then you can make it happen. Actually her family all look forward to it, a day of doing different things. It is a relief from homework. It is the ritual that gives it the strength, not just a one off unplugged vacation. If friends come over they have to put the device away. Daughter requested that kids not bring phones to her bat mitzvah – wanted people to be present. Photographer will take pictures

so they don't need their phones. We say what is important and they learn. As parents, we have to model the behavior we want.

Q. What is the best way to cultivate a mindfulness practice?

A. Daydreaming and creativity. Tiffany is not anti-tech, but we need to create room for day dreaming.

Tiffany personal story: I am trying to meditate. I find it hard so I use a guided meditation app to help build my meditation muscle.

Being a teenager is awkward. High School is hard. If she had a phone in high school to allow her to not look at anyone she would have been doing the same. Big picture, Tiffany is not worried about the screen time. At some point they will have to make eye contact. When she was a teenager in the 70's she watched lots of bad TV (Brady Bunch, 3's Company) and her father said her brain would go to mush. It did not. If you look at kids on screen in the larger arc of history you will be less worried. Need to be more mindful in talking to kids, the rules you make and the modeling you do.

Q. Is character being a "mensch"?

A. Yes, I love Yiddish and mensch is a great Yiddish word for character.

Q. How do we keep the technology connection positive with all of the social media technology out there?

A. Be sure to still keep things like handwritten letters. Works of positive psychologists, Seligman and Carol Dweck's work on Growth Mindset are all important. Bullying comes down to character. Seeing character growth broken down into a list (the periodic table) helps you identify traits to work on. Tiffany is working on a **Character Hub**, partnering with Common Sense Media, which will be available by Character Day 2016. The hub will contain recommended lists of books and films that parent/child could read/watch that will help build each character trait/strength. The site will be organized by age and character trait. We are always working on our character and always faced with new situations in life.

Q. Are you designing ways for those in poverty to have resources?

A. Yes, see full partners list, resources are all free and provided to whole school districts. Example of San Francisco Unified where every single school in district did something for Character Day. *Science of Character*, highlighting 7 key character strengths to focus on to help children to rise out of poverty.

Q. My 8 year old sees the glass as half empty although the rest of the family does not. Any strategies?

A. Your child needs your optimism and enthusiasm. Use the chart referred to in question above as a way to support her.

Q. If you have spoken to people at the end of their life, what do they tell you is important?

A. Hospice workers say patients tell them it's:

1. Who they loved
2. Who loved them
3. Did they make a difference

Personal Story: at her dad's funeral, she had numerous people she did not know come up to her and tell her that "your dad always made me feel like I was the most important person in the room." Our phones are always at our side so when we are talking to others and also engaged with our phones, we are saying, "you are NOT the most important person to me". "Pay attention to what you are NOT paying attention to."

Q. Do you think Artificial Intelligence can take over the world?

A. I am married to a robotics professor and this is all we talk about. This is why we made the films, *Why we love robots* and *Adaptable Mind*. Our strength is we are human, we can empathize. She did not agree with Elon Musk, Stephen Hawking and others who are so worried about artificial intelligence

In closing: Be mindful in how we use technology. Technology is not happening to us, not descending down upon us from the sky. We created it. We need to be mindful in how we create technology. We can create boundaries for technology. Technology is an extension of humanity. Humans are good, bad and everything in between. Metacognition – thinking about thinking. Term “mindfulness” is overused. Think how we and our kids are using technology. Parents you have control!