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Rachel A. Gugich

Western Washington University

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Dobrodošli: Sensitivity in Learning and EE

Rachel A. Gugich, Western Washington University

Abstract

Rachel Anne Gugich defines herself as a superhero. In this speech, Rachel described how being an introvert gives her a “superhuman sensitivity” to her surroundings and work. She hopes to continuously create educational opportunities where students can each bring their own powers for the betterment of learning.

Keywords: sensitivity, environmental education, introversion

Welcome/[Dobrodošli](#) this is hello in Croatian.

I would like to acknowledge the Skagit River tribal governments, the Upper Skagit, Sauk-Suiattle, Swinomish and the Indigenous peoples that call the North Cascades home.

I would like to give thanks to my family who are joining us today.

I would also like to acknowledge the North Cascades National Park complex, the shores of Diablo Lake and you all present including Mike, Kelly, Chelsea, Kevin, Gavin, Lauren, Petra and Liz. The 9 of us are on this amazing, crazy journey called graduate school and I'm honored to call you all my friends and I thank you for your support and encouragement.

The Environmental Learning Center was my home during my residency and I'm excited to be back to present for you all today.

And I want to give special thanks to Nick for his support, guidance and encouragement. Also Jordan and the graduate writing center for helping me bring my thoughts to the surface and craft my capstone in a clear and concise way thank you.

I also placed in front of me on the table literature that was helpful in guiding my capstone.

On your seat you will find a clipboard with 2 slips of paper and a marker. On the smaller of the slips of paper I want you to write a worry that you are currently feeling.

Now that we have all of our worries written out. I have this trash can here and as I walk around the circle I want you to toss



the worry away. You can choice and verbalize your worry as I come around the circle or keep it to yourself. As we have witnessed through these capstones and discussions this is a safe space to share and also support if you want to keep your thoughts to yourself. I will go first my worry is this presentation but I'm throwing that worry away it isn't completely gone but I choose to have this worry guide my presentation.

Thank you.

My name Rachel Anne Gugich I grew up in Washington State on the East side of Lake Washington in the town of Woodinville. My last name is Croatian. My great grandparents immigrated from the island of Korcula and the town of Vela Luka on the shores of Adriatic Sea. They settled here in the Pacific Northwest in towns including Anacortes and Everett where my relatives still reside to this day. To move half-way around the world must have been very challenging, perhaps even scary, and also exciting to be in this new environment. I am going to talk about a few of these emotions today in reference - but I am getting a head of myself.

I received my undergraduate degree from the University of Washington with a Bachelors of Arts in Comparative History of Ideas and a minor in History. When I received my degree in 2006 I was excited to see that my hard work and perseverance was rewarded. After graduation and during my journeys over the next decade I was able to work in some amazing places throughout the Western United States including Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Oregon and here in Washington the foothills of the Cascades. I worked with kids and adults, in deserts and forests....

Then in February 2014, I received an email that said I had been accepted into a Master's program, where I would spend a year living in a National Park; I knew another journey in academia was about to begin for me. My family was just as excited. My twin sister was beginning her Master's degree around this same time. She will be graduating with her degree in Library and Information Science this June from the University of Washington - so we are still connected in our timing in so many ways - congratulations Heather. Bringing it back to when I found out I was accepted here: My parents gave me a celebratory dinner and Heather gave me a congratulations balloon similar to this one here and the balloon traveled with me to the learning center. To me the balloon represents a childhood innocence, celebration, and excitement but also as I look back now and see I was appropriately naïve to the journey that awaited me. Skipping ahead to now, in March 2016, I am about to complete my Master's degree which has been a lot of hard work, determination, tears, practice and patience. I learned more about myself than I had expected, more perhaps then what Masters experiences are "supposed" to normally offer. But I am getting ahead of myself again...

To my right is the full value contract that many of us put together at the start of the week and have been referencing to throughout these capstones. It serves as a reminder to us of the importance of holding space for each other that is respectful and compassionate. Constructing my capstone hasn't been the easiest process. At times it

was not even an enjoyable experience. This process has pulled back some layers that have been exciting but also scary and made me feel very vulnerable.

In light of the full value contract, I am aware I speak really fast and that my mind can be really speedy too. I ask that you bear with me as I present my capstone. I am trying really hard to slow down my words and my thoughts so that you can hear my important message to you. I also request your support in this. If you find me hard to understand you can just quietly raise your hand and I will slow down my pace. Thank you.

Today, I am going to share some vulnerable stories that describe my experience of being a sensitive person engaged in Environmental Education.

Let's return to the moment with the balloon. In August 2014, I drove up to the Environmental Learning Center from Everett; I checked in and started to see a whole lot of new faces. I wondered "are you part of the new cohort? Are you part of the new cohort?" Then the first day began and I had my *Congrats* balloon sitting in the passenger seat of my car in Diablo where we are living until we could permanently move onto campus. I had my entire life packed into my 87' Honda prelude. "Bring it on!" I thought.

Of course, being environmental educators, our first act as a cohort was to gather in a circle and we were asked to share our background and more generally who we are. Now many of you probably had a similar experience in a new group when people introduce themselves in a circle: "whoa, I haven't done anything like that?" or "what am I going to say, what am I going to say, what I going to say?" I didn't know what to say at all by the time it is my turn I remember thinking "huuu oookk..."

Over the last 18 months I have returned to that moment, puzzling out what feeling and need I was having. I think my "huuuu" was coming from a feeling of anxiety and nervousness. My need for fitting in was already being exposed and challenged. I was being asked to process much faster than I was expecting to and share who I was and what I brought to this program. For the philosophers out there, you will know about the particularly challenging question - "Who am I?" Do any of us really know? For me this was a forced interaction, in a bottleneck of shared space and time. Of course this wasn't the first time I had experienced introductions like this, but my feelings still caught me off guard.

After traveling down valley to come to Western, I had some new experiences with a different community. In particular, some of the professors introduced me to the popular psychology notion of "sensitivity." I have come to realize that I am a sensitive person and that I'm proud of my sensitivity. In fact, I see it as a superpower and I am going to tell you why.

First, let's explore what sensitivity means. In today's increasingly social learning environments the term "introversion" can mean a variety of different things in different

contexts. Carl Jung defined it as an orientation through “subjective psychic contents.” Extraversion and introversion are two extreme dispositional poles on a scale which we all occupy. A common definition of the introverts is people who are energized by quiet space, introspection, and deep relationships and who are exhausted by excessive social interactions. Extroverts on the other hand are energized by social interaction and external stimulation and tend to be bored or restless by themselves. So these terms are often used as a way of explaining different personal reactions to similar settings. Opportunities to recharge require restorative activities like book reading, sleep, quiet time, space, a nice walk in the woods. How do you recharge? Without these restorative practices, introverts might experience emotional exhaustion, which can diminish personal and professional accomplishments.

Introvert or Extrovert Activity

Let us take a moment to explore and understand on our own tendencies towards introversion and extroversion.

Preamble: I have a sheet of paper here that I’m going to pass out. On the paper you will find a number of statements. You will have six minutes to fill this in using a rating scale of one to five; where one means you strongly disagree and five means you strongly agree with the statements. At the end you will add your numbers up and find my interpretation of the scales between extroversion and introversion.

Remember that this is supposed to be general, and that you should fill it out quickly with your gut. Also, it is not a diagnostic tool, so if you get to the end and think...“hmm I am not extroverted” – do not worry – we will have a chance to chat about it more once we are done.

Please fill out the following personality questions by circling a yes or no answer. There is no wrong answer; just answer as honestly as you can. This assessment is not based on any sort of scientific method or psychological study. It is simply a quick test to tell me more about who you are. Please rate your answer on a scale of:

1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 neutral 4 agree 5 strongly agree

QUESTION	ANSWER
1. I am deeply moved by the arts and music	
2. I enjoy being with a large group of people	
3. I prefer a quiet night at home instead of a party	
4. I have a rich complex inner life	
5. I am aware of subtleties in my environment	
6. I am easily overwhelmed and or affected by things like bright lights, strong smells, coarse fabrics or sirens	

7. My emotions play a large part in my ability to problem solve	
8. I am made uncomfortable by loud noises	
9. I often seclude yourself from others?	
10. If there is a small group of people around, are you content?	
11. I normally express myself easily	
12. Changes in my life shake me up	
13. When I must compete or be observed while performing a task, I become so nervous or shaky that I do much worse than I would otherwise	
14. I prefer to get things done by myself	
15. I enjoy singing and dancing over quiet enjoyment	
16. I often feel tired in the middle of the day	
17. I prefer one on one conversations to group discussions	
18. I dislike small talk, but I enjoy talking in depth about topics that matter to me	
19. People tell me I'm a good listener	
20. I dislike conflict	
21. I do my best work on my own	
22. I tend to think before I speak	
23. I feel drained after being out and about, even if I have enjoyed myself	
24. I often let calls go to voice mail	
25. If I had to choose, I would prefer a weekend with absolutely nothing to do to one with too much scheduled	
Total	

Key:**26-77 – lean towards extroversion****78- 104 – ambiverted or extroverted and sensitive****101 - 125 - more sensitive and introverted**

What did you notice when you were filling out the questionnaire?

I acknowledge that there is a problem with contrasting introversion and extroversion in this black and white fashion; and in some cases, people's dispositions shift depending on the time and situation. Most people utilize both introversion and extraversion in their daily lives. No one list of personality traits adequately captures the uniqueness of any individual, but serves as a beginning guide to recognizing and understanding behaviors.

For example, sensitivity can be considered a subset of introversion. A sensitive person has a sensitive nervous system, is aware of subtleties in his/her surroundings, and is more easily overwhelmed when in a highly stimulating environment. To me it explains some of the ways I engage in the world. Somebody can be extroverted and be sensitive too. I wanted to find an example of a person who is an extrovert and also sensitive. I thought of Saul who as the Executive Director of the North Cascades Institute and from my outside perspective is always around people and handling tasks of the job as an ED but then he has his writing and creative outlets so I thought Saul could be an extrovert. Perceptions and assumptions can be very different from how others think of you and how you see your true self. When I mentioned this to Saul that I would like to use him as an example in my capstone as someone who is an extrovert he said that he has always seen himself as an introvert. This made me reflect on the process of crafting this capstone and the activity that we just completed. It confirmed for me that introversion and extroversion shouldn't be considered as a binary. It's simply not black and white.

In my experiences, many schools and environmental education programs seem to be designed mostly for extroverts. For instance, this residency program could be described as being designed for people who tend towards extroversion. There were times in this learning community when I could not recharge after the constant exposure to such a stimulating environment. This often put me on edge, vulnerable and perhaps frazzled me more than I needed to be. Don't get me wrong, I really liked this program. I'm so happy I choose to be here, I loved my time and this was where I was meant to be. However, not all facets worked for me as someone who tends towards introversion and sensitivity. I need lots of time to recharge and restore myself on my own. I am not anti-social, or even anti-collaboration; I just realized I needed less social stimulation and more freedom to think quietly. If we as a community of learners and educators have agreed to value student learning styles, we should also recognize that we need to do this for each other allowing more opportunities to play to own strengths. I worry that a push to drive forward in educational systems has resulted in a lack of awareness and understanding of introverted personality types which has led to what the *Harvard Business Review* recently termed "collaborative overload." Today's increasingly social learning environments are exhausting. I've felt exhausted. There seems to be a trend towards collaboration and group work, which I see the value of and have enjoyed, and yet I wonder if there is something lost in all that social learning?

This type of schedule and expectation for constant social interaction negates the possibility to psychologically "recharge" in relative solitude, something that's crucial to many introverts and sensitive people to be productive group members and to contribute to the greater good.

For instance, in this program, we were obviously given time on own to journal and be on our own in nature. It is difficult to describe why this time didn't always work for me as my time to recharge. I am talking about the larger social movement that tends towards lots of collaborative interactions and unclear expectation setting.

How do we create environmental education programs that recognize sensitivity? Some of the critical areas for improvement revolves around the concepts of support, understanding and time or rather lack thereof. (Or rather lack of time) Here are three scales of recommendations as a way to answer the question of sensitivity. First educational systems should be built so that the curriculum allows for natural time sequences, such as seasons. The environment has built in sensitivity allowing for different ecosystems to thrive. I believe that educational systems are also sensitive to time. Perhaps we should build them to celebrate the seasons. The curriculum that recognizes and supports sensitivity could affect, not only those who are sensitive, but also the larger society. Potentially creating that compassionate support of understanding and time. Second what about the teachers within these systems? The rate of burnout among educators who identify with some facets of introversion are higher than that of their peers. This leads me to think that it is important to give trust and understanding to teachers so that they can utilize their creative outlets. Also how do they recharge? All teachers need breaks. Perhaps sensitive teachers need more? We also need to support teachers by creating solitary and collaborative space to develop new programs. Support, understanding and time.

Lastly I use the metaphor of your inner gas tank. The good news is that you probably start each day with as much fuel as the next person. You break at every stop so you don't miss anything. But as you go you expend more. Some need diesel so use hybrids. You need a full tank in order to manage everything a day can bring. Fortunately, when you are recharging or sleeping, the tank refills. As with any student within environmental education what are ways we can help? Keep their inner gas tank full? Time, support, the recognition of need for space. The opportunity to recharge. EE can be very structured but there are ways to divide your time and sustain your inner gas tank. What has helped me is the practice of meditation. I have found ways to recharge within group settings and sensitive environments. It is a way for my mind and nerves to calm and create that moment of Zen to find that space to refuel. These recommendations are the start of a larger discussion than what I could cover in an hour. This need to recharge. How might it look for the whole system in environmental education?

This balloon no longer represents the naivety before the program. It now represents the learning that has floated to the surface. One of the things that has floated to the surface is that sensitivity is actually a superpower. I also think that environmental education programs that recognize sensitivity are much more inclusive than programs that don't. Think of what a student body would look like if it was full of a bunch of sensitive superheroes who are celebrated!

Remember that I am sensitive. These are my superpowers:

I'm empathetic, conscientious, intuitive creative, curious, self-motivating, reflective, I generally try not to get involved in conflict, I think and feel more deeply, but easily shamed, I'm more emotionally reactive, focus on the positive, can be busy beating

myself up, I take time do something that feeds my heart and build in time for myself to recharge.

If we go back for a moment to the survey we all filled out earlier **what questions might be asked and suggestions crafted towards environmental education that includes sensitive superheroes and the superheroes in us all?**

At the end of my presentation we will have an opportunity for those who have formulated their responses to this question and ideas to discuss more what the outcomes, curriculum, and actions might look like? For those who want more time and reflection? This box in front of me will be located in the dining hall and the slot on top of the box you can place your pieces of paper which you will find on your clipboards. If anyone wants to discuss this further I will write my email on the board and or you can come and find me later on in the day. I'm more than happy to continue the discussion.

"The secret of life is to put yourself in the right lighting. For some it's a Broadway spotlight; for others, a lamplight desk. Use your natural powers- of persistence, concentration, insight and sensitivity to do work you love and work that matters. Solve problems, make art, and think deeply." From *Quite* by Susan Cain

Knowing who you are, not who you feel you need to be. I have my own needs and my own feelings. I can't fight nature. It's so much better to embrace every aspect of my personality my inner warrior, emotions, quick speech patterns and all.

A handwritten signature consisting of the letters 'S2SS' in a cursive, looped style. The signature is enclosed within a faint, light blue circular glow.