

Innovations in Thinking and Learning

Pieter Toth – Toth on Toth

PIETER: I've been doing this for 23 years now, and I love every day. I come into work, and I get to spend time with these people. You know? With people. With all these different people. Get to know them. And the social aspects of it, in terms of watching them develop and grow. And it's almost like trying to see what I can do to help them. And that's what I see as -- I have very much a service mentality. It's when I'm here, I'm here to help. And I think it pays off. Like, the students that are here, they bless me as much as I bless them.

I did not enjoy school when I was a student. When I was in high school, I did not like it. Not even a little bit. I had maybe one or two teachers that I connected with, but for the most part, I was a terrible student. Like, I did well, but I was bored all the time, and there was nothing that engaged me. Nothing I found exciting. And everything was just rules, rules, rules, rules, rules, rules. And half the teachers never even knew my name. Halfway through school they still didn't know who I was. So that was the first part of it.

The second part is my personality. Like, I've -- In my life I've spent a lot of time reflecting. I'm a very reflective person. So I like to reflect on who I am and how I grow and how I develop. And what's important. And so for me, that became front and center.

The third thing would be my employer. So, HWDSB is an incredible board. Right? It has its flaws, it has, you know, all these different things, but it has allowed me to experiment, to explore, to play. I have great administrators that support me taking these chances. And I've been blessed with them over the course of my entire career. When I first started teaching 20 years ago, I was that weird, non-traditional, odd teacher who's doing different things. And, you know, it wasn't always supported. But over time, people realised it wasn't a fad. Like, I was actually trying to experiment and develop my understanding of how students learn. And I realise that they learn when they feel safe, when they feel engaged, when there's -- so when they feel like a real person. And the thing I hear a lot from students is that I treat them like they're a person. I talk to them like they're people, and I treat them like they're people. Not like they're minions or subordinates or anything else like that. And so creating that environment allows me to get permission from the students to try these things. And having great administrators allows me to experiment in a way where I know they will back me up.

They say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. The way to a student's mind is through their heart. When you reach a certain age and, like, you -- I get used to the fact that my emotions are like this. Right? You know? But for teenagers they're like this.

They're, like, these up and down and everything. And so I have to be sensitive to that. I have to be empathetic. And that's in our school vision, which is amazing. I have to be empathetic to the fact that these students don't experience the world the same way that I do. And if I allow myself to forget that, then there's a disengagement. But if I can immerse myself in their way of thinking about things and their way of seeing things -- And that is through emotions. That is through genuinely caring about these students, and genuinely caring about this place. When I'm here, I give everything that I have here. I'm involved with extra-curriculars, I'm involved with staff, I'm involved with -- everything that I can be, because that's why I'm here. And the students see that, and they see that that's real.