

## **Camille's story: The power of being different**

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### **Inspirational leaders all around**

My story begins with two names – **Ms. Brown** and Ms. Techla Austin. Both of these ladies were my teachers in primary and secondary school. They demonstrated how the subject of Math can be interesting and made the profession as a teacher look effortless. Ms. Brown was my standard four teacher at Sacred Heart Girls Roman Catholic, one of the top primary schools in my home country of Trinidad and Tobago. When she explained how a problem should be solved, it just seems to make absolute sense and as such Math was a subject I didn't really have to think hard about. This feeling of me being one with math-related topics and the like continued in secondary school at St. Joseph's Convent with Ms. Austin. At the same time I was heavily into the performing arts – mainly dance (i.e., Ballet, Modern, Jazz, Tap, Folk, Indian, etc..). There, Ms Patricia Roe made me love dance and showed me how you can

instruct someone without touching them – another skill that is very hard to acquire. She also gave me my first teaching job, as a substitute instructor for tap and after that I went on to teach ballet, modern and jazz to various levels of students. The combination of dancing and doing math just seem to make me feel fulfilled – like I had a place in this world. Later I would see how these become the foundation of interest in Education Technology.

Throughout my primary and secondary education I followed my Dad around his office by sitting in his meetings. He was an executive in the telecommunications company and through his interactions with other executives I learned a variety of management skills. These skills then manifested themselves by my being asked to lead many extra-curricular events/projects – President of Interact, Sports Vice-Captain of my School House, Vice President of Rotaract and this continued through my undergrad where I was a member of my University's Student Guild. I didn't see these as leadership positions but more so opportunities to see what my contribution to the world would be...

After completing my BSc in Computer Science at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad, I got married and tried to fit into the world of being a systems analyst. In Trinidad, there were only two organisations that employed systems analysts, Banks or Insurance Companies. I ended up at a Bank. It didn't take long before I was bored with

the routine ways of coding, designing and documenting such efforts before I asked for other types of work. This of course was not an accepted practice – deviating from position descriptions. During this time, my mother worked for the Government and came across a scholarship to pursue postgraduate studies. I applied for the scholarship and decided to pursue a more managerial role. My application was soon forgotten as I then met my husband and got married – new paths meant new meanings because I still stuck out as having wild ideas and going against the norm. As I was settling down to married life in Barbados, I received a notice that I was accepted to Rochester Institute of Technology on a full Organisations of American States (OAS) Government scholarship with the aim to return to Trinidad and help the Government improve its computer infrastructure and programs/systems. I took the opportunity...

### **Finding your people...**

Rochester Institute of Technology, offered a MSc in Software Development and Management where you can mix information technology, computer science and business courses to create your best degree. Here I pursued organizational leadership and culture courses from the business school alongside my programming and design from the computer science and information technology departments. During this time I was asked to be a teaching assistant for a course titled Human Interaction Design. It is whilst TAing for this subject that I felt my calling to the field of Human Computer Interaction. The

subject content was fascinating but what was mostly noticeable was that the way it was taught and assessed made it a difficult course to take – it was not a fun course but it could be...☺  
Needless to say my TAing that course was short lived as they discontinued the course. So I decided to participate in an internship program which would place you and your skills into a local company. Rochester, New York, at that time was the hub for many top organisations - Xerox and Kodak were most noted companies then. I was offered an internship with WestGate Inc. (now Thomson Reuters) and hired as a software test engineer to work on WestLaw projects. WestLaw, at that time, was the only company converting all of the laws and statutes for each state in the United States into a searchable database. The culture at WestGate was very inclusive. Differences were celebrated and a key part of the culture for growing the companies initiatives. We had a lawyer who was a paraplegic, a female head of department who was divorcing her wife, a blind programmer who had English as a second language, a lead programmer who was transgender (and may have been transsexual had the term been used more then), we had it all and I felt welcomed to challenge and provoke thoughts.

After WestGate I had to return to Trinidad to fulfil my duties as per my scholarship – to help the government create an improved computer network and associated systems to help many the country. But, the government changed which meant that the agenda that needed my skills also changed. The only

job they could offer was as a Lecturer at the local college. I would serve as a Lecturer and then later as a Senior Lecturer in the Business and Information Technology Department for five years doing not only lecturing but also a lot of administrative work. This work included designing the programs by aligning the programs to the strategic policies for the institution and the governments vision for the college. I also, led evaluation committees, website management, instructional technology initiatives whilst coaching colleagues, mentoring students and teaching courses – this was my everyday life. As I got used to this life, I came across my greatest challenge – a student with a need. I was approached, “off the books” to review an enrollment application for a course I was teaching. The student wanted to pursue just the course in Web Design but she was legally blind. The euphoria from working at West Group had not worn off - *differences are celebrated*. I signed the waiver needed for the student to pursue her dream and immediately had every administrative challenge possible, two of which were 1) justify how she will work on the computers and in groups with her peers and, 2) managing the critique that I was being irresponsible for making her believe she could be employed. Needless to say, may reports, dozens of emails to facilities, Heads of Departments, Vice-Presidents, local and foreign software companies, blind institutes etc... and she completed her course. I then knew that I needed to find a way to make these types of solutions occur. An advertisement was distributed to all of the tertiary institutions in the Caribbean looking for applicants for the coveted Fulbright Scholarship

programs. My incomplete Fulbright application was accepted eight months later and I was off to complete my PhD at the University of Connecticut as a Fulbright Scholar.

### **Searching for my kind of different**

As I stepped onto the campus, excited to pursue what I thought to be my introduction to the field of education technology, unbeknownst to me University of Connecticut, Education Technology program was losing faculty so it was difficult to get guidance on the areas that interested me. I was assigned Dr. Robert (Bob) Hannafin as my supervisor and the one advice he gave was “..not every path in this field is meant for you...”. I internalized these words as a hint that the approach being delivered at UConn may not suit my expectations and with that I called the Fulbright organisation to request a transfer to another university. University of Missouri-Columbia was one of the Universities that accepted my application from Fulbright and offered me a position. It was here that my views were shaped and my values aligned to not only the field but the needs of those who interacted with the field. As I struggled to settle with my move from Connecticut to Missouri at the School of Information Science and Learning Technologies (SISLT), I met Dr. Margaret Grogan who gave me a couple of supporting words to begin my journey. Dr. Grogan was the Chair for the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis (ELPA) and I visited her to discuss having ELPA as my minor and to be assigned a faculty member to my committee. In one meeting she changed my view of myself as

she listened carefully to what I envisioned my career would look like. After talking with her about my goals, she said in a quiet, yet firm voice "...as a strong-willed woman in the field of education, you will be assigned many labels, they will call you aggressive, always nod your head and counter that you are **assertive**. Don't let anyone label you, you label yourself...". I left that first and only meeting remembering that I should never give people the power to guide my abilities – be humble and self-reflective always and then all that is left is hope.

As I followed Dr. Grogan's advice, I continued to meet people who would later teach me and/or serve on my dissertation committee. The first was Dr. Joe Donaldson, a very kind hearted Professor who took time to allow me to practice my research skills on his projects whilst at the same time listen to my concerns about my decisions to eventually pursue corporate learning. His guidance stated that I should never completely close a door on any opportunity until the callings attached to that opportunity is out of my system. Then I met Dr. Jeni Hart who further solidified my interests in the power of differences – her focus was gender and equality. Her kind words made me find strength to continue to be different from my peers – everyone was focusing on a possible academic career whilst my focus was corporate learning. I felt like a pariah – where many of my peers could share different methods and stories about their interests and research and to me, their responses would be "oh that's different". Then as I progressed in my studies I had, Dr. David Jonassen – in his many talks his advice to me was *to*

*choose my path and be strong...don't look back, unless it's to enhance my future.* These words still have lots of currency as I pursue my career but the one that is most memorable is Dr. Joi L. Moore. The time she invested in nurturing my emotional and mental awareness so that my research interests could prosper was and still is, never ending. When I was seen almost like a pariah early in my career as a student at SISLT she took the time to listen and contribute to the conversations I had been having with myself about field of educational technology. She took a leap of faith and officially jump started my leadership skills in the US by promoting me from being a zone mentor to being the Zone Manager at SISLT's Zone. At the Zone guiding peers through the instructional design process towards innovative designs and delivery, along with researching the teaching and design practices was for the most part - the gig. The ability to guide online design practices and then deliver and research them is my strength and my calling.

### **Sharing different approaches**

I continued to share this ability with the University of the West Indies Open Campus. The Masters in Instructional Design and Technology was a new, as a program and an agenda for the Caribbean. As a subject matter expert, in the academic sense, I led the design, development and delivery of the curriculum. This program uses established instructional design standards as the key learning outcomes and allows each of the courses to have unique designs and assessments to meet these outcomes. As the Academic Lead for the program I lead students and



other academics through this program. It is quite fulfilling as the need to combine design standards, with the culture of teaching and learning in an online space in the Caribbean is challenging and rewarding. Here aspiring to be sufficiently influential so that each student leaves with their own truth about their value to and of the field is my goal. I continue to lead these types of initiatives wherever I go – now its with the University of Melbourne where crafting an understanding for innovation in online and blended learning in this culture/context is the challenge. Knowing that I can guide an initiative where there are outcomes that were never expected, but very much valued by some is my goal in life.

### **How to lead with your differences**

Lessons learned is a management term that normally includes *what did not work well* as one of its descriptive. Rarely do people elaborate on what did not work well and see how something wrong could result in something positive. I always believe in turning my negative experiences into positive ones and remembering that unless you are working in healthcare, no one is going to die.

I've taken a lot of risks as a leader and this has led to many successes and just as many failures. My failures are the most valuable resources I have to keep me going. People rarely talk about their failures in interviews, I use them to show my potential employers that without failures I can't guide you on the path that is of most value to them. Be willing to

acknowledge when you are wrong and to then take the spirit of being wrong and share it with others. This is truly what a lessons learned database is and should be, and where true learnings would occur.

Differences matter when it comes to leadership. There is an age old wisdom to understanding that conflict and by association critique can be positive. As a leader and mentor, I've learned that most people fear conflict and critique without understanding the true definition of these words. They have both positive and negative inferences but are most often used in a negative way. Using these words in a positive way can only enhance your outlook on everything you do - it also makes you not just a leader but a true and valued inspiration. Being the one who is willing to respectfully poke the bear, the "what if" scenario teaser, the Ricky risk taker – this is what makes us unique and without it the field of educational technology will not progress.

Finally, people **always** remember how they feel when they met you, so as you try to be memorable treat people with the utmost respect, even if you have not been treated the same by them. This is especially so for women and even moreso for minorities. Our differences make us outliers and challenge others to acknowledge us equally so always demand respect – You know you deserve it.

*Never give people the power to guide your abilities – you  
guide you by being humble and self-reflective...ALWAYS*

## **Selected Publications**

- Dickson-Deane, C., & Asino, T. I. (2018, March 27). Don't Forget, Instructional Design Is About Problem Solving. Retrieved April 18, 2018, from <https://er.educause.edu/blogs/2018/3/dont-forget-instructional-design-is-about-problem-solving>
- Dickson-Deane, C., Toblert, D., McMahon, T., & Funk, C. (2018). Structuring and Resourcing your eLearning Unit. In *Leading and Managing e-Learning: What the e-Learning Leader Needs to Know*. Springer.
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- Romero-Hall, E., Aldemir, T., Colorado-Resa, J., Dickson-Deane, C., Watson, G. S., & Sadaf, A. (2018). Undisclosed stories of instructional design female scholars in academia. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 71, 19–28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2018.09.004>



## **Index Terms**

Grogan M.

Hart J.

Hannafin R.

Donaldson, J.

Jonassen, D.

Moore, J. L.

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Roe, P.

**Brown, Ms.**

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