

Interviewer: Tien Le  
Interviewee: Tom Oberhue  
Digital Technology Lab – Century High School  
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Q: What is your background regarding Century High School

My name is Tom Oberhue. I have been at Century for 5 years. Century is 6 years old. So I wasn't here the first year. I came originally as a social study teacher and I taught economics for 2 years and a half. Now, I move into technology and I am the head of the digital technology program. I teach Network Technology. This year and last year, I am also a half time teacher and half time tech support. Next year, I will go back to be a fulltime teacher, which I'm very excited about. Half of my day will be technology and half of my day will be economics. I am a very young teacher but regarding Century, I am a veteran. I have worked for Hillsboro School District for only 5 years and those 5 years are at here.

Q: What do you feel about this school year, a very eventful year for teachers and students alike?

Eventful is a very good way to put it. It's been a tough year, a challenging year. I think because of things outside of our building that have been really challenging to how we do the things we do. To me, I find it most surprising to see 4 or 5 teachers on the staff, whom I consider very veteran, very seasoned, very professional, shake their heads and say "Wow, this is a tough year!" When they do that, it makes me go out. It's not just me. It's been a very challenging years. We loose 17 days of school. It has been tough. The fact that our building will go from having a little bit over 2000 students to around 1500-1600 students next year, from a staff of 90 teachers to a staff of 50 teachers. That will be profound and brings a lot of anxiety and concerns.

It has been a very challenging year, a very powerful learning year for people to learn how to deal with stress and challenge and so forth. I don't think it has been one of our best years for teaching and studying. That works best when things are stable and people feel comfortable. I think people are anxious for the year to be over. They are also anxious, concern but excited for the next year to start and see where we are.

Q: It means that the spirit of the school is still high, despite the challenge?

Yes. It's high. But again, I think this year has been hard for people. Century at its core is very positive place. There are a lot of people that genuinely want to see Century to be a special place. It's tough when outside forces challenge that. That really makes you question what we are going to do and how we will do it. It's tough but I believe that at the core there are people who really want to stick it out.

Q: Talking about how people feel about Century, do you think that we have established some kind of identity as a community?

Absolutely, far more than when we first began. It was really interesting. When we first opened, there wasn't a real sense of tradition, of culture. Things are different now. I don't know how to describe it. But you can feel it. You notice that something is here. Things are a little bit stronger, a little bit more established. I'm excited for the people at

Liberty. There are very exciting experiences about opening a new school. And the excitement you get in creating things is very powerful. And there is also very powerful excitement in being part of a tradition. Century is currently in that cool phase in creating a tradition, a culture.

Q: Personally, how do you like that tradition to be? Do you want our school to be excellent in sport, or academic achievement, or technology etc.? What is your vision for our school, for the next 5-6 years.

That's an excellent question. It will be profoundly different for different people. Ms. Montgomery, as the leader of the school, has different vision. Students will have different visions. I, as a teacher, also have very different vision. I'm very tied to the digital technology program. The fact that we live in Hillsboro, so close to Intel. The fact that we live in the digital age. My vision is nothing sort. That Century's digital program is in the top 3 in the country. That we are truly a place where kids can get experiences in digital technology, which can competes with any community college and even with entry level college as far as how computer works, how software is created, how network is designed and so on. That's my goal as far as the curriculum. About the community, nothing will make me happier than having a right size school. Having a large school is good when you have a school between with 1200 and 1600 students. You benefit a lot from the size. But too big is too much and you will have negative effects. I'm very excited when we now have the opportunity to be a big small school not a small humongous school. If we have a small humongous school, it will feel like an institution. It's not a personal world. I'd like our school to be more like a community. Hopefully, we will grow more into that; our school will be keep a manageable size and students will be very excited about coming, learning and being part of a community.

Q: Do you worry that with the current budget crisis, we may have too many students for too little teacher?

Absolutely. I've lived in Oregon all my life. I grew up in Beaverton. And nothing is more disappointing for an Oregonian than to see Oregon struggling for so long with how it fund education. I am overtly biased. I believe that education is a phenomenal investment. I believe that you can't spend too much on education. I believe that we need to make education more of a priority in the society and commit more to it. Those are my personal beliefs. Yes, that is definitely a concern. Next year, class size will be large. Regardless of your educational philosophy, I believe that one of the best things you can do for educational reform is to make class smaller. I don't care what you are thinking. I know that when class size is about 1:25, great things are going to happen. When class size is about 1:35 or 1:40, not so great things are going to happen because the class is just too large.

Q: I agree but Measure 28 has failed to pass so we may have to have it for quite a long time. It's kind of sad for our school. Let's talk about the technology in our school. Students are complaining that the computers are so slow, that the net is so slow. What is the problem with our technology?

We have a lot of it but it is not very good. That's a curse of technology. Technology improves at such a fast pace that something that is good or adequate 5 years

ago will be terribly inadequate now. Century has 580 machines but they are Pentium running at 120MHz. Now we have machines that are Pentium 4 running at 2.4 GHz. The analogy would be something like taking a kick scooter and throw it again a racing car. There is no comparison. That's a real struggle. We have lots and lots of computer. But they are old, slow computer. And that go right back to the budget issue. We have to think, as a community, as a school district, as a school, how we are going to spend our resources, which is a real question. I think there has been some really interesting conversation about less is more. Maybe we don't need 580 machines. Maybe we should only have 300 machines but they are better machines. Maybe rather than buying machines, we lease them. At Century, the dilemma is we are blessed with a lot of technologies. But they are poor technologies, at this point. That's a real struggle. What I think it will force us to do is to be more thoughtful about where we put technology. Things like the communication lab, the web design class etc..., which are very technologically intensive, need Pentium 3 and Pentium 4 machines. Places like the regular computer lab or the media center will get more basic machines. They need to be better than the machines we have now but they don't need to be the latest, greatest machines. They just need to be machines that are solid. That's the struggle for Century.

Q: Will we have an upgrade soon?

No. The answer is that we are not. Because of the same reason, people have to make decision between class size and computer. They will pick class size to get them smaller.

Q: So, everything comes down to the question whether we have enough money to do what we want, doesn't it?

Yes. It ties right to economics, my most favorite subject in the world. It is nothing sort. In economics, we have limited resources and we need to decide how we are going to allocate those limited resources. That's a challenge. That's a source of frustration. But I think it's a good opportunity to be thoughtful and to ask, "What are our priorities? What do we value most?" And then we will put those resources into what we value most. That's part of being a community.

Q: You seem to be very positive. OK, the glass is not half empty. It's half full. That's a good sign for the school. This year, we have many things going on. The economy is not very good. On top of that, we have a war. Do you think that the war will have any impact on the school, staff or students?

I think everything from 9/11 to what going in Iraq creates an underlying element of stress. I think that is the reality we live in. In saying it's the reality we live in, I think that it does affect our world. For anyone who travels, going through the airport is a different experience. For anyone who watches the news and sees whatever is going on in Iraq, in the Middle East or whatever, the world is full of conflict. That conflict does bring stress. How it manifest itself directly at Century is very hard to tell. It does affect the world we live in.

Q: Talking about stress, I remember back in the 1<sup>st</sup> semester, when we have the talk about a possible strike. People said things like "We are about to have a strike. Maybe next week

or next two week.” It was a very big uncertainty. And it seemed to be a really stressful time. What is your experience of that period of time?

Yes, I think you are right. It was a very stressful time. There was a lot of conflict in the. I think it is one of the things that are hard to project to the outside world. Hillsboro School District is known as the school district that has the shortest school year in the entire country. That’s bad. But part of the reason, I think, it happened, is because of the dynamic that happen within the school district. On the state level there is less revenue. So the school district has less revenue. That’s one thing. But how the administration had dealt with the scheduling of teachers and what happened over Hillhi and Glencoe create another layer of stress. Internally, I think there is a lot of stress among teachers. A lot of anxiety and frustration. On top of everything else, there is a real feeling of ... Well, let say, it was just not a very positive experience in regard to how the district administration and the teacher union interacted. It seems to have been very mean spirited. It seems to have been very tactical, very calculated. That’s not what we want. What we want more than anything is to be in the classroom, teaching kids in the most positive way possible. But when that thing happens, people feel bad. It does mean a lot when it’s your salary, your life; it’s your life, your job. And so, some people get really passionate. Some people are calmer. But is stressful and it has been stressful. I think it’ll be interesting because I think the after effect will be felt for the next couple years.

Q: If you was an administrator, what would you do to relieve that stress, to make this school district a better place for kids, for teachers, for every people?

That’s a brilliant question. First of all, I don’t think you can pay me enough to be an administration because I think it’s a very tough job. Honestly, my spirit is that I don’t like back room politics. But I don’t think the administration is completely to blame. I think the HEA has some issue there as well. I like things to be very broad, very straightforward. I think that’s manipulation. We are very legal, documented society. Everything is law. Law is powerful but I think there is a real problem when the letter of the law is superior to the spirit of the law. I think the spirit is that we are in the same team. We are trying to educate kids. So there should be a very cooperative environment, not a very adversary environment. What it feels like very much is that there is an adversary environment between the administration, or the school district and teachers. That’s too bad. I dodge your question. I didn’t answer it. I don’t know. I think there is a whole series of circumstances that creates this dilemma. And I don’t know what is the best way to deal with it. I think there was a real feeling that teachers were manipulated and treated unfairly. I’m sure the administrations have their own version of the story. It’s just too bad. It was such a negative experience because it was taxing to the teachers and stressful to students. And that was on top of the budget problem that existed for every other school district.

Q: It is a very stressful year with all kinds of bad news. Do you have some good ones to share, like some achievements of our school?

For the digital technology program, we have 5 students receive their CAM. We’ve never awarded the CAM before. So it was pretty exciting when we had our first 5 students to get this digital technology Certification of Advanced Mastery. In our digital technology program, one of our goal is to get the CCNA, Cisco Certified Network

Associate degree, which is an industry standard testing for networking. And prior to this year, we only had 2 students ever got it. This year, until this point, though we haven't finished yet, we had 10 students get their CCNA, which is pretty powerful because this is the same kind of certification that engineers at Intel and out in the workforce try to get. So, it's a very cool thing. We are excited for the fact that the program is still existing and moving forward. Those are very positive things.

Q: How about in a bigger scale, like in the whole school? Do you know much about what we have achieved this year?

I don't. I guess I'm caught in my own little world. It's hard to keep track of everything in a big school like Century.

Q: Do you have anything else you want to talk about this school year?

The effect of this school year is really going to be seen in the next 2, 3 years. Some years are years within themselves. They don't affect the next couple years. But this year will have a huge impact on what will happen in the next 5 years, because of Liberty's opening, budget... It's fearful that we are in a really bad cycle when it comes budget and education. And that effect will happen in the classroom. I think Liberty's opening is going to be interesting. Having a smaller school is going to be exciting. We almost have a new staff, a re-developed staff. So there will be a whole restructuring. Next year is going to feel different, to be new and interesting. This year will have a really powerful impact. What that impact is and how we respond to it are still to be seen.

Q: Having gone through the whole experience, do you want to leave a message for the future, just in case they will experience something as powerful, as stressful as this year?

More than anything, what is important is that we all remember that we are in it together, that we need to communicate, that we need to talk and that stress whether negative or positive forces you to really think. If we, as a community, can be a place where people can think, can talk, can disagree in a positive, responsible way, then it is a great community. If it's a community where people feel disconnected, unheard, then it is not a positive community. And that is really the goal for Century, for any institution, any school to be a positive, productive, learning environment. People need to feel welcomed, need to be part of the community and need to have a place to discuss. This year has been a very challenging year. But it really forces us to come up with what we think is important and what may be not so important. Any challenges will make you stronger when you are done with it. I don't know if is an advice. It's just my observation.