

## **An Odyssey of the Mind**

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“You have one minute to think and two minutes to respond. You can ask questions, however your time will continue. You will respond in sequence. You cannot skip your turn, or repeat, or pass. If one team member is stuck, the whole team is stuck. Your problem is to name something that changes something else and tell how it changes it.” Your time begins ... now!

These are typical instructions that teams receive when participating in a “Spontaneous Problem” at an Odyssey of the Mind tournament. My heart rate goes up a bit just reading those directions, and I can only imagine how my students must feel. They are being asked to think creatively, with little contemplation, while being scored on the quality of their responses as compared to other teams. Creative thinking, as a team sport! In addition, “Long Term” problems are distributed each year and are rooted in language arts, physics, mechanics, art, and engineering, but usually have aspects of each required in a “solution.” Problems are solved by 5-7 member teams who choose at the onset of each year which problem they will work on.

I was introduced to Odyssey of the Mind, quite by accident, a little over ten years ago. A new after-school enrichment program was using my room one day a week. I greeted this new “team” of students and their “coach” with the usual skepticism of anyone encroaching on my sacred classroom space. Over the course of the next few weeks, I progressed from glaring over my computer monitor, to brief interjections, to joining the circle. I was a full-fledged assistant coach within the month and my Odyssey was about to begin.

Odyssey of the Mind has its roots in the classroom of Dr. Sam Micklus at Rowan University, in Glassboro, New Jersey. In the early 1970’s Dr. Sam, as he’s affectionately known, challenged his industrial design class to solve open-ended problems in small teams. Word spread of his challenges and local students soon became involved. In 1978 Dr. Sam created challenges for middle and high school students and a local competition emerged. By 1980 teams from other states, and eventually other countries, began to form and Creative Competitions Inc., a small family business, was created to facilitate the tournaments. Today Odyssey of the Mind has thousands of teams supported by associations in every state and 25 countries around the world.

Dr. Sam and the founders of the Odyssey program understood the value of STEAM education long before there was an acronym. Today STEAM education is beginning to flourish. Administrators have recognized its value, and educators are teaching curriculums that

acknowledge the connections between the disciplines. Science, technology, engineering, the arts, and math are not individual subjects. They rely on each other for their existence.

Although solving an Odyssey of the Mind problem can be a unique process, it unavoidably culminates in a competition. I struggled with this at first. Competition was not a part of my childhood, and winning or losing both felt extreme. I came to learn however that adults and kids have very different responses to competition. They mostly find the competition aspect exciting and motivational. Regardless of the results. It is the adults that agonize over a loss. Although the kids may have an emotional reaction, by dinner, and definitely after a consolation ice cream sundae, they easily turn their attention to the positive aspects of the experience.

I also worried whether it was beneficial that my students work be measured against others. Isn't creativity highly subjective anyway? These questions are not easily answered, but with the right perspective, competition itself, along with measured results, provides valuable insights. Odyssey tries to address the subjectivity of judging a creative problem by creating a highly detailed rubric for scoring. Students are asked to create projects that go well beyond the big ideas and highlight the details.

I have been fortunate to have had some exceptional teams over the years and have worked with some amazing kids. In discussing the program, however, one of the misconceptions I have frequently faced is the belief that Odyssey is a gifted program. Odyssey can be strong enrichment for capable children, but it is not exclusively a gifted program. A strong Odyssey team should include a writer, an artist, and an engineer. There should be linear and divergent thinkers. Perhaps most importantly, you need kids who bring enthusiasm and a willingness to work hard. A team member with a great work ethic brings a special form of giftedness.

It's wonderful when kids are able to work collaboratively, and for those who do not come with those tools, the goal is to teach these skills. Odyssey projects serve well to foster team-work and trust among peers. I look for the moments along the way when I see unique contributions from each student. I use those moments to highlight that the project could not be successful without the particular talent that each team member brings. I find that when kids are keenly aware of their strengths and how that qualifies them to contribute, they conflict less with their teammates. They are confident in their contributions regardless of whether they are big or small. Conversely, they also need to be aware of the skills they are developing and where they will be expected to contribute more in the future.

Odyssey is by no means the perfect program. Each year there is one problem that is designated for kindergarten through second grade and the other five problems are distributed to students

in third grade through high school. While the lack of differentiated material contributes to the challenge, it can be difficult for younger students to decipher problems independently. One of the cornerstone principles of the program is to give team members **no** “outside assistance.” In other words, **no** help with ideas or the creation of materials related to their solutions. While this precept is one of the programs biggest strengths, the lack of leveled material is an inherent weakness. It is up to the coaches to facilitate the students’ understanding of the materials without providing hints or suggestions.

The Odyssey program is as special as you make it and the skills that are fostered are as strong as the skills that you teach. What attracted me to Odyssey, and continues to keep me participating, is that the program provides an opportunity to apply educational practices that I am passionate about with a small and less formal class. As a specialist in project-based learning, I have adapted my practice around state social studies standards. While the idea of a student-driven curriculum can sound intriguing, the reality is that I take great pride that my classroom lessons align with standards.

For me, coaching and competing in Odyssey has helped me make several leaps “out-of-the-box.” I’ve learned to value departing from the structure I usually embrace. Creating lesson plans would be pointless in Odyssey because the ideas are generated entirely by the kids. In fact, planning what they should do at the next meeting would be a huge disservice. Homework assignments are written up on the spot in response to the ideas generated during the meetings. It runs counter to some of the training teachers receive and yet it has been the incubator for much of my professional development.

If you think you may be interested in Odyssey of the Mind there is much more information on the Web. This grassroots movement has sustained itself on a steady stream of overworked, mostly volunteer, teacher and parent coaches who each have their own story to tell. The story I tell my kids is that if they were to win first place, at the Odyssey World Finals, a helicopter would land outside the arena, where I would be airlifted out, waving to them from the sky, never to be seen again. I can’t believe they think I’m kidding!

## References

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