



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

TRANSFORMING CHALLENGES INTO MEANINGFUL PURSUITS

"Obstacles don't have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it."

—Michael Jordan

OVERVIEW

Students reflect on a community challenge, and then think of solutions after experiencing an "awe" moment.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To cultivate students' sense of agency when facing challenging situations
- Anytime you want students to practice applying a growth mindset in their lives and develop an optimistic and problem-solving attitude

TIME REQUIRED

- 1 hour

LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School

MATERIALS

- Journal and writing instruments
- Online web access to or downloaded version of [Panyee's Football Heroes and Their Floating Pitch](#) (6:38)
- **Additional Story Resources:**
 - [12 Kids Who Are Changing Their Communities and Our World](#) (*Washington Post* article)
 - Ashoka's [Stories of Young Changemakers](#) video series

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Reflect on a real-life story of ordinary young people who powerfully transformed a challenge into a meaningful pursuit
- Reflect on a challenge in their community and use their agency to transform it into a meaningful pursuit

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Courage
- Hope
- Creativity
- Leadership

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Responsible Decision-Making

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Non-judgment
- Open awareness

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to reflect on a moderate level challenge you've witnessed or experienced in your community. This could be in your neighborhood, workplace, family, school community, or any other community that you are a part of.
 - Think about: *Who are the different people that this challenge affects, and how? What feelings does it bring up for me? Why does it matter to me? What values of mine are being compromised?*
 - Wonder about: *Can I reframe the situation in a way that helps me regain a sense of agency towards addressing the challenge, and that allows all the parties involved to retain a sense of*

dignity? What actions might I take towards addressing the challenge? What might be possible for the community if I take those actions? How might I feel after? How would it help me re-align with my values?

INSTRUCTIONS

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- According to [researchers](#), when we hear stories or see others overcoming obstacles, we are often left with a sense of awe and wonder—two ingredients that can inspire human beings to rethink challenges in transformative ways.
- In this practice, students have the opportunity to experience an “awe moment” when watching a real-life story of a group of young people who tackled a community challenge. Students then consider a challenge in their own community, helping them to recognize and use their own agency and craft meaningful pursuits for themselves.
- This practice invites students to be somewhat vulnerable to identify and confront a challenge in their communities, and also to curiously introspect on possible solutions. Consider: Are my students in the right mind-space for this today? What norms can I set with them to ensure they feel safe and supported through this exercise? Consider doing an emotion check-in with students at the start of the session, and if they seem ready, consider setting norms that reinforce:
 - (a) leaning into discomfort
 - (b) non-judgment for themselves and their community members
 - (c) being curiously and creatively invested in turning the challenge into a meaningful pursuit.

NOTE: You can consider using or adapting this [norm-setting](#) exercise with students.

PART 1: HOW WE RELATE TO CHALLENGES (2 MINUTES)

- Introduce the session by telling students:
 - *Challenges exist in all communities; sometimes they affect us personally, and sometimes they affect those around us. In the face of challenges, it is natural for us to sometimes feel lost, helpless, or simply confused on how to make meaning of those challenges. Sometimes, it is also natural to feel resentment, anger, or anguish about why that challenge exists or about the impact it has on the community. One might also feel apathy or resignation if one feels that nothing can be done about it. All of these are valid and natural ways we might look at challenges. But today, we will explore if there is another way that we can view challenges.*

PART 2: IDENTIFYING A CHALLENGE (15 MINUTES)

- It is natural for students to differ in levels of vulnerability. One way to ensure that students are checking in and choosing an *appropriate* level of vulnerability for this exercise is to consider the following scale that maps vulnerability on a scale of 1-5:

1	2	3	4	5
<p>The challenge at this level makes me feel mildly vulnerable. I can comfortably think about and work on this, right now.</p>				<p>The challenge at this level makes me feel extremely vulnerable. I can not think about and work on this, right now.</p>

Draw the vulnerability scale on the board for students. Ask students to think of a challenge that lies between a 1-3 vulnerability level on the scale for them.

- Model what this looks like with an example from your own life, such as “In this exercise today, I will be thinking about the absence of a girls’ football (soccer) team at our school. I feel sad and helpless about it, and this is a level 1 vulnerability level for me”.
- Give students 10 minutes to think and journal a few sentences for each of the prompts below. Note: Students can also work in small groups to respond to the questions.
 - *What is the community-based challenge I am thinking about?*
 - *Who are the different people that it affects, and how?*
 - *What feelings does it bring up for me? Why does it matter to me? What values of mine are being compromised?*
 - *What solutions have I considered so far, if any?*

NOTE: If students need support in identifying their values to answer the second last prompt, consider giving them this [list of values](#): art and literature; athletic ability; creativity, discovering, or inventing things to make a difference in the world; independence; kindness and generosity; living in the moment; membership in a social group (such as your community, racial group, or school club); music; my community; my moral principles; nature and the environment; relationships with friends and family; sense of humor; success in my career.

- Now that they have done this, ask them to put away their journals, and re-direct their attention to the next part of the session.

PART 3: REFLECTING ON A TRUE STORY AND EXPERIENCING AWE (20 MINUTES)

- Share with students this [video](#) about Panyee’s football heroes and their floating pitch (6:33).
 - Instruct students to consider how the young people in the story used their agency to transform the challenge into a meaningful pursuit.
 - In addition, invite them to notice what thoughts, feelings, or sensations come up for them as they watch the video.
- Once students have watched the story, ask them to reflect and share with a partner the following prompts for 6 minutes:

- *Awe is the sense of wonderment we experience when we witness something bigger than ourselves. Sometimes we feel goosebumps, or chills, or feel a sense of expansiveness. Was there a part of the story that evoked a sense of awe in you? If so, why that part? What other feelings came up for you? Why do you think witnessing a group of people overcome obstacles leaves us feeling these emotions?*
(Note that all students may not be equally moved by the story, and that that is okay. You could simply highlight the responses that were the most authentic expressions of awe experienced).
- *What was the obstacle or challenge for the young people in the story? How did they feel about it? Why did it matter to them? What value of theirs was being compromised?*
- *At what point in the story did they begin to use their agency, in other words, work to change the situation through their influence and actions? How did this help them re-align with their values?*
- *What do you think they felt about themselves and about the solution by the end of the story?*

PART 4: TRANSFORMING THE CHALLENGE INTO A MEANINGFUL PURSUIT (15 MINUTES)

- Next, ask students to return to their journal exercise, and reflect and respond to the following questions:
 - *Think about the challenge you wrote about earlier in the session in your journal. What is another way you could view this challenge that helps you regain a sense of agency, in other words, work towards changing the situation through your influence and actions?*
 - *What actions could you take towards addressing the challenge? What might be possible for the community if you took those actions? How might you do this in a way that doesn't look down on any community members, but inspires them, as well?*
 - *How would you feel if you actually acted on these ideas? How would it help you re-align with your values?*
 - *Is your response different now than it was before we watched the story of the Panyee football heroes? If yes, what might have led to a change in your response?*

PART 5: CLOSURE (8 MINUTES)

- If this exercise was done individually, invite students to share their responses in small groups. Encourage students to listen to each other with intention and without judgment, further inspiring them to adopt a mindset of self-efficacy, agency, and optimism towards addressing challenges, and transforming them into meaningful pursuits.
- If this exercise was done in small groups, invite groups to share their responses with the whole class, if they feel comfortable doing so.

OPTIONAL EXTENSION

- Invite students and/or small groups to make an action plan to carry out their ideas. As they do so, provide opportunities for them to share their progress, obstacles they encounter, and ideas for overcoming those obstacles.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did students respond to the practice?
- Are they left with a new lens through which to relate to challenges in their communities?
- Do you notice a difference in how students respond to challenges, in general?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Helping students recognize their agency in leading community change has been found to be a critical factor in motivating them to do so. Indeed, [researchers](#) in the Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo where violent conflict is prevalent conducted a series of training sessions for youth that used a strengths-based approach for peacebuilding and social change, and found that shifting young people’s mindset from what “we need” to “what we already have” was most meaningful for participants in helping them recognize their agency, enabling them to lead community change.

Additionally, research during the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that an experience of awe, such as reminiscing times when medical workers kept helping patients even when faced with a threat to their own health, enhanced participants’ feeling of connection to others and their inclination to donate blood (an indicator of prosociality).

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Many students are passionate about making their communities and world a better place—but in order to make a difference, they need to perceive themselves as capable of doing so. Indeed, [researchers](#) have found that how young people handle obstacles when pursuing certain tasks is determined by whether or not they *believe* they can change things.

Exposing students to true stories of people overcoming obstacles can help develop this belief in themselves. Science has found that [stories](#) trigger neurochemical processes that not only help students make sense of the world, but also increase real-life empathic skills. Thus, hearing stories of others transforming their fear, isolation, and pain into hope, solidarity, and action can help students develop optimism and agency, which can then be used to transform challenges into meaningful pursuits.

Uplifting stories of others making a difference in the world may also trigger a sense of awe in students, which researchers have found increases students’ [prosocial behavior](#) and [connection to broader humanity](#).