REPRESENTING THE IMPACTS OF DECISIONS AND ACTIONS

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High School Biology
My project represents a series of decisions and factors I took into account when deciding how to grade the work of a black student named Zaire. Zaire was an intelligent and driven student, who was working hard to overcome several significant obstacles, and earn a high school degree. When he entered my class, Zaire’s academic abilities and scientific literacy were below the level of his peers, and Zaire struggled to complete work that met standards. My project highlights some of the decisions I needed to make in regards to grading Zaire’s work, specifically whether to judge him on an individual scale, or whether to hold him to the same academic standards as the rest of the class. Three of the decisions I faced are depicted on the white strings, written in black lettering. For each of these three trade-offs, both sides had positives and negatives, meaning there was not necessarily a right or wrong way to act. My decisions varied on a day to day, and week to week basis, based on a number of factors, and this dynamic nature is represented by the fact that the strings can be pulled in either direction, symbolizing my actions leaning towards one side of the trade-off. As the strings are pulled, the sliding meters in the middle of the circle must be adjusted, describing how the action affects Zaire both emotionally and academically. The dynameism of these axes is also important in that it captures the constantly shifting emotional and academic state of Zaire, and recognizes how these are directly impacted by my actions as a teacher. Additionally, there are three red strings which represent trade-offs that were made in my interactions with Zaire. However, unlike on the white strings, there are better (green) and worse (red) decisions on the red strings, with one side having a demonstrably negative effect on Zaire. Also unlike the white strings, I did not recognize the choices on the red strings during my student teaching, and in all three cases I made the wrong choice, without even recognizing the harm my actions might be doing to Zaire. These strings are also dynamic, and can be pulled from the wrong choices to the better choices. Again when these strings are manipulated the center sliders must be adjusted representing how the decision will impact Zaire emotionally and academically.

The project allowed me to deconstruct my decisions and actions when working with Zaire, and helped me reflect on how my choices could have both positive and negative impacts on Zaire simultaneously. This deconstruction also enabled me to recognize the implicit biases behind my actions, and the assumptions I was making about Zaire as a student, and his potential. By physically representing the impacts of my decisions, I was better able to understand the repercussions of my actions, and the ways they might affect Zaire’s complex and multifaceted reality. This representation will also benefit me in the future as I decide on how to grade and interact with other students who may be academically behind. The representation reminds me of choices that must be made in order to effectively enable student learning, while also grounding me by signifying the importance of recognizing an honoring the assets all my students bring.

When working on my project, I leaned on several chapters from The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys (Moore, Michael, Penick-Parks, 2017) to help me reframe the way I was thinking about my actions, and Zaire as a student, specifically focusing on how my deficit view of him could (and was) negatively impacting his success both in and out of my class.