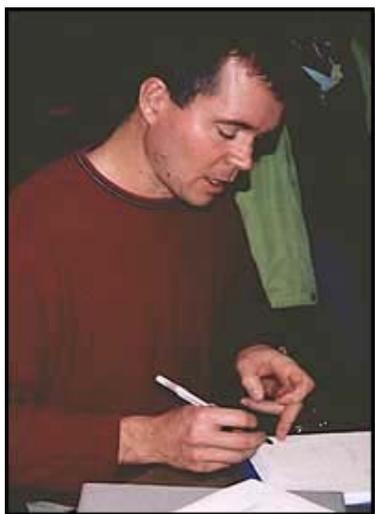# POINTS OF VIEW

Keven Kroehler *has worked as an advisor at MNCS since 1997. Previously, he taught high school math and science in Colorado. He graduated from Henderson High School in 1980.*

Barbara *is an eleventh grader at MNCS. She was home schooled through grade eight and attended ninth grade at a traditional public high school before entering MNCS.*

KEVEN KROEHLER

On the daily routines of MNCS staff

As a teacher here, I don't have a set daily schedule. Instead, how I spend my time mostly evolves from what students need. To an outsider, it can be hard to see the order; but for the kids, it's hugely structured. At MNCS, it is the students who are getting the work done. They must think and act like teachers and students simultaneously. They design their "coursework"—what questions they'll answer, what texts and other resources they'll use, how they will meet state standards, how much credit it merits—and then complete it. It's my job to anticipate and respond to what they need to get their work done. And more often than not, I do it on the spot, at the moment when they are stuck or excited, when they have a question or want me to look something over.

Staff here do offer mini-courses, but there's no prescribed schedule for doing so, no mini-course block in the school schedule—although it usually happens during the times set aside for project work. Typically, these staff-led courses reflect a special interest or respond to a need we see among students. For example, two afternoons a week for the next month I'm teaching a course on Excel, because there are currently several students working on projects who need to know how to make spreadsheets.

On helping students turn interests into projects

Some students burst with project ideas. Others need coaxing. I find that as I go around each day, checking in with my advisees and asking, "What are you working on?" ideas for a project proposal just creep out. A kid will say, "Well, I've been thinking about X, or

reading Y, or thinking about doing a project on Z." You learn to seize these moments, helping the student envision how to turn X or Y into a project proposal.

Pegging what students do in a project to their maturity as a learner—and then pushing them some more—can sometimes be a challenge. Say you have a student who wants to do a project involving the Simpsons. If they're a seventh grader and this is their first project, they may start by writing a report that includes pictures downloaded from the Internet. But then you'd press them on some additional questions: "Are the Simpsons contributing to tearing down the moral fabric of the country?" "What is and is not available on the Internet for research?" You push them to add depth to what might otherwise look like just a "dumb" project.

However, if the student is a third-year student with an interest in the Simpsons, their project might take the form of writing a half-hour script or creating their own short animation using characters from the Simpsons. Your expectations for them would be much higher.

Occasionally, a student's interest becomes all-consuming. There's a student here who four years ago started with "light wave"—a form of computer animation—and has followed it year after year. He has become so good at it that he's going to spend a full year in Orlando, Florida studying computer animation with Disney. There's an interesting twist to his story, though. When you hold up his work to our performance rubrics, he comes out on top. But when you hold it up to the [state] Profiles of Learning, the fact that he's been so single-minded means his work doesn't hit all of the required content areas—for example, in social science research or writing. So he will not be leaving with a diploma. But he'll leave Disney with a diploma that will make him one of the youngest "certified" computer animators in the country. [Note: This student did return to MNCS in December 2002 to complete his high school diploma.]

On making project planning a formal, team effort

Although meeting one of Minnesota's Profiles of Learning is certainly not the spark that lights all projects, let's take an example that uses this as a starting place. Say you have a student who needs to meet the profile involving civics. You are in a meeting with the student and his parents, and he lands on the idea of "doing something on the U.S. Constitution." For 20 minutes you might brainstorm, together, on what the student might "do" in relation to the Constitution. For example, he might re-write the Constitution in his own words or pick out pieces of the Constitution and see how his life would be different without it. Or he might write a new amendment, or key the Constitution to today's most important issues. When the meeting ends, the student leaves with, say, eight ideas.

The student then fills out a project proposal form that builds on one or several of these ideas. I review and approve it (or suggest adjustments before approving it), the parents review and approve it, and then the student takes the completed proposal to the project planning team. The project planning team consists of two advisors, plus one or two other staff people, such as a teaching assistant. When one of my own advisees comes before the group, I'm their advocate, their interpreter to the rest of the team. I also negotiate in advance with my advisees how much credit I feel comfortable supporting, although students are free to make a pitch to the team for more credit than I feel comfortable giving.

Why formalize this process? The project proposal form and the presentation to the proposal team, however brief, create a contract between the student and the school and team. It defines the amount of credit the student hopes to earn and the scope of the work the student will undertake. It puts legitimacy into the project, and it brings other people in who may have suggestions for strengthening the student's plan. Plus it allows MNCS advisors to work together as a team.

On putting Minnesota's Profiles of Learning into practice

In most schools—not just in Minnesota but nationwide—the state standards speak to teachers. They set forth a tool or framework, at least in theory, by which teachers can (and should) organize their curriculum. They are mostly invisible, though, to the students. If you asked the students to describe or list the state standards, they'd probably give you a blank stare.

At MNCS, by contrast, students know the state Profiles of Learning almost by heart. Rather than being a tool that belongs to teachers, they belong to students here. Students keep them in mind as they plan their projects, highlighting in their project proposal which learning profiles their work will address. And when they finalize their projects, they must again refer to the profiles and show how their work meets a specific profile.

Also, in regular school, the learning profiles or standards apply to groups of kids in a class as opposed to individual learners. Here, they apply to individuals. Next to every project and project credit listed on a student's [MNCS] transcript is the learning profile or profiles the project addressed.

And in regular school, the profiles cannot cross disciplines, they cannot be used in an interdisciplinary fashion by faculty. For example, a business teacher can't sign off on a technical writing profile because they're not certified to do so. At MNCS, as a staff, we are eager to cross disciplines, to work and learn together. And we encourage students to connect disciplines, too.

Where MNCS falls short, we know, is in content coverage. Instead of using an American History textbook that covers America's founding up to the present, our students will research a particular era or event and try to bring it to life. Of course, we believe this produces learning of a higher quality, but not everyone would agree.

Where our students really come out ahead on the state profiles is in performance skills. These are a daily part of their project work, and it's what MNCS staff spend their time teaching. We lean on books, computer programs, videos, the Internet to help our students gather content, reserving the time of teachers and advisors for supporting students as they acquire and practice new skills.

On learning levels

MNCS has struggled with making distinctions among the levels of maturity and responsibility of our students, aware that there is a large difference between a seventh grader just entering the school and an eleventh or twelfth grader who may have been here for four years. And even within a grade or age group, there are students well on their way to being independent learners and others for whom motivation, organization,

responsibility remain a real reach. Both staff and students have debated for several years what's the best way to make and honor these distinctions, what's the best way to spur or reward students for productive, responsible behavior and discourage them from its opposite.

The crux of the ongoing debate is where do you start with kids. Do we start with trust and then when kids show they can't be trusted, sit on them and take away privileges? Or do we start by effectively not trusting them and making them earn privileges? Do we approach a kid after the first few weeks of school, when he hasn't produced, and say, "We've trusted you, but there's a problem. Maybe you need to put your headphones away." Or do we say that students begin MNCS with no headphone "privileges" but earn them as they produce?

Yet to be a successful advisor here, one has to trust kids. To be a successful student here, one has to respect others—the ultimate of all evils at MNCS is to disturb other students' learning. In the end, it's the working relationships we create here that provide the glue. What the learning levels provide, in which students move from level one (probationary) to four (contributing), is a clear statement of what MNCS expects of students as they mature as learners and the privileges and freedoms that come with that growth.

BARBARA

This interview took place in June 2002, the end of Barbara's first year at MNCS. Before coming to MNCS, she had been home schooled and then attended ninth grade at a traditional public high school.

On opening new doors

It didn't take me long to figure out, when I tried the regular public high school, that this was not for me. It took even less time, when I came to MNCS, to realize that this was the school for me. It was much closer to the independent learning style that I'd grown up with, plus it opened new doors unavailable with home schooling. There are the physical things I now have access to, like the computers, the darkroom, the science lab. But there's also the opportunity to bounce ideas off of other students. Here, if you have an idea, you can take it anywhere. All it takes is an idea—and if you don't have one, your advisor will help you find one.

The [Minnesota] Profiles of Learning say what subjects need to be studied. MNCS lets you decide how you want to study them, through different projects. At the same time that you are learning content, you are learning valuable life skills, like how to find and tap community experts, research skills, time management, and keeping on task.

For most students at MNCS, it takes them about a year to get it all down: designing projects, working with advisors, getting organized, motivated, and keeping time logs. It involves a lot of trial and error and a lot of keeping your eyes open to possibilities. When

I first walked into MNCS, I didn't really know what I wanted to work on, but I had an idea about researching careers in veterinary medicine. Well, I never finished my veterinary medicine project, but it was a starting point. It showed me what I did not want to do, which is as valuable as learning what does interest you.

As I became bored with my vet project, I began to find all these other groups in school that seemed so much more interesting, like building a super-mileage car, or the orchard project. One of the great things about MNCS is that kids not only do their individual projects, but they also can start a group project. Take debate. It was started by one of the students. He interested other students, like myself, and then together we set our own rules, time schedule, the level of research we'd commit to for our debates, the time expectations for students. We met once a week. It was the students who set it all up.

On self-reliant learning

I was poking around in the science lab and came across a closet that had been set up at one point as a photography darkroom. I decided I wanted to learn to develop film. So I proposed it as a project, then I would lock myself in the darkroom for hours on end.

I had no problem learning how to develop film, but making pictures from the negatives was another story. My first photos were completely dark. I said to myself, "Okay, something is very wrong." I started eliminating things: the camera (it worked fine), the film (it was fine, too), the chemicals (all newly mixed). I dug out books about developing film and kept going over the steps. I went back into the darkroom, took a close look at the enlarger, saw a dial on the lens that I hadn't noticed before, and suddenly, I realized what was wrong. I had to adjust the aperture! This solved, I started to experiment with different aperture values to test their effect on my pictures.

Would it have been easier to go ask someone knowledgeable for help? Sure. But part of learning is learning how to make use of the resources at your fingertips—books, the Internet. For me, this is what being a self-reliant learner is about. So I figured it out on my own, from trial and error. I learned more from making mistakes and correcting them, relying on my own skills at problem solving, than I ever would have if someone had held my hand and led me through the "proper" steps, one by one.

I also learned from this project about setting my own standards for quality. There was another MNCS student who'd given me a hand the first day, getting things organized in the darkroom. She had done some photo developing herself. One day, she joined me in the darkroom and printed up a picture of her own. She thought it looked fine, but I thought it was too dark. It was good enough for her, but not for me.

On advisors

My first advisor and I just didn't hit it off. He was always on my case about deadlines and credits, he kept saying I was behind. But I had confidence in myself. The more he pressured me, the more I didn't want to do the work. I guess you'd call it a typical teen reaction.

This is what I'd tell all advisors: "You need to know the student as a person before you can help them as a student." A good advisor helps you take an idea and shape it into something do-able.
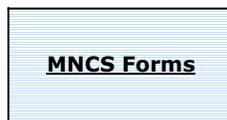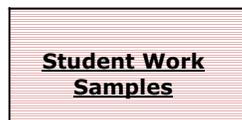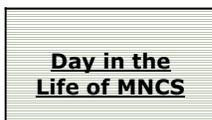
On quality vs. quantity

If done well, [time logs] can really help you keep track of the time you spend on each project. But it's important to understand that, in the end, it's the quality of what you produce that matters and not the hours you put in. Often when students do their project proposals, their guess as to how much credit they should get for it proves wrong. Take the project I did on the Romanoffs. I put in for a quarter-credit and figured I'd spend roughly 25 hours on it. Well, I ended up putting in 53 hours. But more, they turned out to be 53 really good hours. When finalizing the project, I only asked for a half-credit, but the proposal team gave me three-quarters of a credit because I had learned so much.

I once heard of a student here who spent several hundred hours on a volcano project, but the result was that nothing had been learned and all the review team gave her was one-quarter credit—for typing! So she redid it, this time putting herself in the position of a panda living on the volcano and creating a wonderful story about what life was like for the panda and what happened to him as the volcano erupted. The project came to life—and she earned a full credit for her work.

On Minnesota Profiles of Learning

They are in the back of our minds as students at MNCS, but I sure don't worry about them. I would never create a project just to meet a state profile. Rather, I pick a project in which I'm really interested, then adjust it, if need be, to match the profiles. For example, with my photography project, I wanted to do research on the science and chemistry behind it, how the different chemicals interact and how the projector actually works, hopefully addressing some of the science standards. But it was wanting to get good at film developing that drove my research, not the state profiles in science.

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