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where messy mistakes become life lessons

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How to move on
from a blunder

O.O.P.S.

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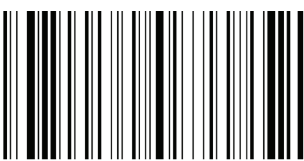
Admit One

The first step:
realizing you goofed

Swimming With Sharks

How one middle school
teacher learned
some important lessons

page 22



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SWIMMING WITH SHARKS

An exclusive interview with Sari Kopitnikoff about a project that didn't go as planned

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chool is a deep sea. A lot of learning goes on — and not just for the students. Last year, Sari Kopitnikoff, a 6th grade English Language Arts teacher, learned a few important lessons. Here's the story.

In the fall, all of the 6th graders were working on an invention unit for a few weeks. During Science and ELA, they researched and wrote about a famous invention or innovation that has impacted the world. Always a fan of creative projects, and wanting to push her students to think critically and creatively, Sari posed an extra challenge to her students: Come up with your own invention idea, and we'll stage a *Shark Tank* episode in our classroom. She told her students that, just like on the real TV show, there would be girls acting as Sharks who would listen to the invention pitches and challenge the inventors with follow-up questions and possible business proposals. The girls were very enthusiastic about the idea. The students came up with many innovative creations, but the overall *Shark Tank* project did not go as well as she hoped it would. We, at *Magazine of Mishaps*, sat down with Sari to hear about what went wrong, and what important lessons she learned along the way.

Magazine of Mishaps: So, Sari, tell me a little about the *Shark Tank* project.

Sari Kopitnikoff: Let's just say I had no idea what I was diving into. It started when I decided to add on an extension to the invention research paper. I wanted to give the girls a chance to be imaginative and create something new. So I introduced the *Shark Tank* idea.

MM: Were they familiar with the real *Shark Tank*, or did you explain it to them?

SK: Most of them knew the show already. I put on a sample clip in class to make sure they all understood the process. Anyway, the assignment was to come up with an original invention idea and a catchy

name for it, to create a sketch or model of the invention to display, and to prepare a short talk, explaining why the idea should be launched. The girls were very into it — and they excitedly kept bringing in their sketches and plans to show me their updates. They had time to work on it in class and at home. During one of our work periods, I asked a few early finishers to figure out some of the details for the project. They came up with a way to choose who would be the Sharks, which we implemented. Whoever wanted to be a Shark applied for the role, and we had a "Battle of the Sharks." Candidates were presented with current, existent inventions — such as the snack machine or the umbrella, and each candidate had to challenge or question the idea. Afterwards, the class secretly voted on the

winning Sharks.

We then spent a few days on presentations. I played a looping video of swimming sharks on the Smartboard. We made a little stage in the front of the classroom. We set up our classroom lighting to feel like a TV show. It felt so real. The energy was palpable, and the inventions were ingenious.

MM: Sounds just like *Shark Tank*. May I ask, what were you hoping to accomplish with this project?

SK: Truthfully, I had a three-part goal for the girls: to use creativity to come up with a clever concept, to develop public speaking skills and confidence in front of an audience, and to understand what goes into the invention-

making process. I also had an alternative extension to give an out to any student who was uncomfortable with the *Shark Tank* forum. The other option was: Write a short essay on the invention you appreciate most or an invention that you think should be invented. A couple of students took me up on it, but for the most part, the girls wanted to be on *Shark Tank*.

MM: Well, so far, this doesn't really seem like a mistake. What happened, and why are you the featured interview in our magazine this week?

SK: This was all a trial for me, and I didn't think through the whole thing carefully. When we actually started the presentations, my students became flustered when the Sharks asked them difficult follow-up questions. A few girls came into class all excited about their creative ideas, only to be shut down by financial questions posed by the Sharks. For example, a girl would show her automatic cake batter mixer, or her traveling school locker, and instead of oohing and aahing, and appreciating the talent and imagination that went into the invention, the Sharks challenged the inventors' investment details. The Sharks were actually doing such a great job imitating the real Sharks — they were so authentic. The girls just weren't ready for it. It turned out to be hurtful to some of the presenters. Some girls were more sensitive about it than others... In all honesty, every time I watch *Shark Tank*, I think about the fact that I'd never

be able to handle that sort of pressure. The firing of questions, the quick decisions... Yet, I put my students up for it.

MM: Wow. So then what did you do?

SK: At the end of all the presentations, as I like to do after big projects, I handed out an evaluation form to my students to check in with them. I asked them to write what went well, what they wish they could do over, and what advice they had if I would do this project the future.

Most of the girls expressed frustration with the Shark selection process and with the feedback they got from the Sharks. They didn't like that the Sharks were so focused on the business aspects instead of on the invention itself. Other girls were jealous of classmates who were given business offers. What was supposed to be an enjoyable process turned out to be a disappointment to many of my students. It left a bad taste in their mouths. Though many girls enjoyed *Shark Tank*, some of them felt deflated by the whole thing. And I'm responsible for that.

MM: I see. Well, here at MM, we want to show that we all make mistakes. Part of the learning process is to understand where you went wrong and how you would grow from this in the

future. What would you say is the lesson you took out of this?

SK: I love the question. First, as a personal lesson, I think it's important for me to take more time to process and plan big projects, especially when emotions and feelings may be on the line. If I would do it again — and I do think it is an excellent project idea with lots of room for creativity and critical thinking — I would give a limited set of question starters that the Sharks could ask, such as "Well, what about...?" or "Have you thought about...?" I would give students the options to work in partners or groups — which would make promoting and defending the invention so much easier. I

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would switch off the Sharks each round, giving a chance to everyone who so desired. Another thing I would do is come up with better alternative options for girls who are uncomfortable with being put on the spot this way — such as submitting a written proposal. This whole project has a lot of potential. It just has to be done right.

MM: This sounds great. Hopefully next time you can be featured in our sister magazine, *Stories of Success*.

SK: (Laughs.) Yes, that would be good. ■