Talking to Strangers by Malcolm Gladwell

Think you might want to read this book?
Talking to Strangers is different from talking to our friends and acquaintances. Using contemporary case studies, Gladwell challenges his readers to see where experts have made mistakes in communicating with strangers and how we can use those lessons to approach strangers with more humility, compassion, and kindness.

What would Socrates ask?
- How can we take environment and circumstances into consideration when talking to those we do not know?
- Why is it so important to create low-stress learning environments for students?
- What can teachers and administrators do to create certainty for students?
- What are the benefits and detriments to assuming that strangers are telling us the truth?
- How can we listen to others to understand them?
- How can we respond with sensitivity and kindness to strangers when "what you see" in terms of emotional expression does not match what is happening with that individual?
- How does the classroom/school environment impact student behavior?
- How can educators create environments and policies that are conducive to student learning?

Research
- A Harvard economist, three elite computer scientists, and a bail expert from Chicago gathered records from 554,689 defendants in New York City from 2008-2013. The team built a computer program that was given information about the defendant's age and criminal record and then had the program determine which defendants should be held before trial and which should be released. The computer program flagged well over half of the people in what they determined to be the "high-risk" group as those who should not be released prior to trial. When the human judges looked at the group, they released 48.5% of those the computer said should be detained. Judges often make decisions based on how they *feel* about the person they meet face-to-face in their courtroom rather than on the evidence in front of them surrounding that person's behavior.

Concepts
- Throughout much of human history, encounters have occurred between people who were familiar with each other. Since we are encountering more "strangers" in our lives, we need to be aware of our assumptions so that we are better able to understand them.
- It is difficult to tell if a stranger is lying to our faces mostly because **we default to truth**, or **assume that those who are talking to us are sincere and are telling us the truth**. This happened when Neville Chamberlain met with Adolph Hitler before Germany's annexation of Austria and assumed that Hitler would not conduct more invasions. Gladwell discusses the difficulty of the CIA detecting double agents like Aldrich Ames and Ana Montes, SEC regulators understanding something was wrong with Bernie Madoff's investment scheme, and parents and university administrators knowing that Jerry Sandusky and Larry Nasser were abusing their children and the children in their care. Many people looking at the Sandusky and Nassar cases could not understand why

parents would leave their children in the care of these men. Gladwell writes that "If every coach is assumed to be a pedophile, then no parent would let their child leave the house, and no sane person would ever volunteer to be a coach. We default to truth - even when that decision carries terrible risks - because we have no choice. Society cannot function otherwise. And in those rare instances where trust ends in betrayal, those victimized by default to truth deserve our sympathy, not our censure."

- Since we default to truth, we need to listen to whistleblowers, since they take great risks to share the information they have. They have loyalty to the truth and not the institutions that they work for or with.
- It is difficult to talk to strangers because we assume **transparency, the idea that people's behavior and demeanor - the way they represent themselves on the *outside* - provides an authentic and reliable window into what they feel on the *inside*. "**..When we don't know someone, or can't communicate with them, or don't have the time to understand them properly, we believe we can make sense of them through their behavior and demeanor." But transparency is a myth - something that has been cultivated by watching television where an actor's actions and facial expression match the emotion that they are working to communicate. When a liar acts like an honest person or an honest person acts like we expect a liar to act, we are flummoxed. Gladwell describes these people as *mismatched.* Bernie Madoff, Hitler, and Amanda Knox are mismatched. Gladwell uses Knox as a case study of a stranger whose emotional affect did not match the situation causing her to seem guilty of murdering her roommate.
- Gladwell contrasts fraternity parties in the US with the Camba, a community in Bolivia where drinking parties are a frequent part of the culture. In contrast to the disturbing behavior that seems to accompany fraternity parties, drinking does not have the same effect among the Camba. Alcohol should not be seen primarily as an agent of disinhibition, but rather an **agent of myopia**, that narrows our emotional and mental fields of vision making any interpretation of human behavior difficult.
- Behaviors are linked to very specific circumstances and conditions; circumstances and behaviors are **coupled**. The third major mistake we make with strangers is that we do not understand the *context* in which the stranger is operating.
  - After examining how we default to the truth, expect transparency, and are unaware of coupling, Gladwell examines the traffic stop that put Sandra Bland in jail. She was pulled over for failing to signal a lane change, but was taken into custody on felony assault charge and three days later found dead in her cell. Pulling motorists over for minor traffic violations is a hallmark of modern policing (*coupling*). Gladwell argues that the officer in charge, Brian Encinia, was trained to expect the worst in every car he approached, meaning that he did not *default to truth*. He believed in transparency, thinking that Bland's demeanor at the time was a reliable guide to her feelings and emotion; but, Bland was *mismatched.*

Quotes from the author
- "The death of Sandra Bland is what happens when a society does not know how to talk to strangers."
- "Today we are thrown into contact all the time with people whose assumptions, perspectives, and backgrounds are different from our own."
- "We feel we can easily see into the hearts of others based on the flimsiest of clues. We jump at the chance to judge strangers. We would never do that to ourselves, of course.

We are nuanced and complex and enigmatic. But the stranger is easy. If I can convince you of one thing...let it be this: Strangers are never easy."
- "Whatever it is we are trying to find out about the rangers in our midst is not robust. The 'truth' about Amanda Knox or Jerry Sandusky or Khalid Sheik Mohammed is not some hard and shiny object that can be extracted if only we dig deep enough and look hard enough. The thing we want to learn about the stranger is fragile. If we tread carelessly, it will crumple at our feet...we need to accept that the search to understand a stranger has read limits. We will never know the whole truth. We will have to be satisfied with something short of that. The right way to talk to strangers is with caution and humility."
- "When you confront the stranger, you have to ask yourself where and when you're confronting the stranger - because those two things powerfully influence your interpretation of who the stranger is."

Implement tomorrow?
- Be aware of "the illusion of asymmetric insight", or the conviction that we know others better than they know us. Cultivate patience and listen closely to others when they feel they are misunderstood or being treated unfairly.

Referenced books with the potential to impact leading and learning in education

Author(s) Last Name	Title
Timothy R. Levine	_Duped_
Lisa Feldman Barnett	_How Emotions are Made_

The applicability of this book to education is ….

Abstract ⟵————————✕————————⟶ Obvious