Student 1: Dear 13 year old self, I think everybody's happy that you started to grow out of your unhealthy obsession with dogs. Unfortunately, now you think you're a wizard.

Liesel: Welcome to the Magic Mountie Podcast. This is a podcast that's dedicated to helping faculty and other college employees as they try and navigate the challenging fabric of serving students, especially at Mt. San Antonio College, but everyone's welcome.

Liesel: Liesel here this week and we're bringing you a conversation I had with Hershel Greenberg, a professor in our English Department who is also helping to lead up the One Book, One Campus Initiative. We've tried it once before. We're trying it again here at Mt. Sac, it's an initiative to get us all to read the same book at the same time. Hershel is going to tell you a little bit about the book and some of the ways in which we as faculty can implement it in our classes and also in other facets of our lives. You'll also hear from a few of my students who are working with the book on a trial basis this semester, and also just a couple of clips from a session we did with faculty last year that became relevant in our interesting discussion. And if you listen to the end of the episode, you'll find out how to get a free copy of the book for yourself before we go away on break. Otherwise, you can find out more about One Book, One Campus at Spring Flex Day. Here's the episode. Hope you enjoy the interview.

Herschel Greenb: Hello, my name is Herschel Greenberg. I teach at the English department. I started in the fall of 2007. My specialty happens to be critical thinking. The book today we're going to look at is 'Hyperbole and a Half' by Allie Brosch. We're going to be using this as Mt. Sac's One Book, One Campus Program.

Liesel: So we're here today to talk about this idea of One Book, One Campus, and we didn't invent this. What is One Book, One Campus?

Herschel Greenb: One Book, One Campus is something that many colleges use to promote the shared interest in reading a book, forming a common bond around a topic that book offers, and getting students, faculty and staff involved with the love of reading.

Liesel: I've gotten a lot of emails about this as professional development coordinator over the years and I know we tried one a few years ago, but last spring we actually got a group of, I don't know, 16 or 18 people together from all over the campus, had a big meeting and found that there's just a lot of interest in this. And you knew about it from another campus. Where else have you participated in this?

Herschel Greenb: Chaffey college has a very well established One Book, One Campus Program. The book they're using this semester is Exit West and it's oftentimes distributed via email and well known that you are asked to use the book, not required but asked. And there's a lot of campus activities and it's very well established from day one. So entering the fall semester everyone knows what the book is, everyone knows there'll be a calendar of activities. And one of our goals is to do a very similar thing here at Mt. Sac, which is have a calendar of activities that students will know about and faculty and staff will know about as well.

Liesel: And we don't want to be behind Chaffey-

Herschel Greenb: No.

Liesel: Yeah.

Herschel Greenb: Yeah.

Liesel: At its core, the goals of this are, I would have to think to bring the campus together. Right?

Herschel Greenb: Correct.

Liesel: So we're a huge campus. I've heard anywhere up to 60,000 unduplicated students, thousands of staff and faculty and managers who work here. So trying to get us all on the same page is very hard. So this is like literally trying to get us on the same page.

Herschel Greenb: Correct, and we're doing ... It's a foundation ground building task to build this up here where every student wants to read the book and every faculty knows about it, is the hurdles that we're starting with the first time around.

Liesel: It seems like right now having everybody talking about the same topic and having common dialogue around a single topic is probably a pretty important thing from a societal standpoint too. I mean we've never been more divided and so all of us sitting down and having conversations about the same stories probably could do some work in that direction.

Herschel Greenb: Absolutely. During that meeting you referenced there are about 20 books that were suggested and during our dialog we realized that almost all the books had one thing in common is that depression affects students, staff and faculty to very high percentage. According to a Time Magazine article I read, I believe around 80% of all students in America, in college face some kind of depression. And colleges are spending a lot of money on new student orientation to bring mental first aid to their incoming students. And so with that in mind, our book, Hyperbole and a Half, has that common thread that affects everybody which is depression. And we are hoping that it opens dialogue and breaks taboos cross all demographics on campus.

Liesel: And not only do a number of students experience depression, it's common among our staff and our faculty as well and I think societally, stress right now is at an all time high.

Herschel Greenb: Mm-hmm (affirmative) Absolutely.

Liesel: So, I think the timing of a book about this kind of subject is good, and also the way it approaches it. This is not a real serious book about depression.

Herschel Greenb: No, the book is laugh out loud, roll on the floor funny in one chapter, and then the next chapter it's a raw emotional look inside the mind of somebody dealing with depression. The book is a hybrid graphic novel and memoir. So a lot of Allie Brosch's images are very simplistic at first glance, but when she draws herself talking to herself about her depression, we are allowed inside to the mind of somebody who's dealing with this very real topic.

Liesel: It's beautiful too. It's really colorful. I know when I presented it to my students, they were like, "Ooh, what is that?" And they wanted to hold it and they were so excited. I have Performance of Literature class and we're using it this semester, sort of on a trial basis. And I handed the books out to them and, "Ooh." And they came back the next time and they said, "My friend wanted to know if you have any extras." I said, "No, but you can share it." They said, "Okay."

Herschel Greenb: If one was to hold it you would see each chapter as a different color and the English side of me wants to know what those colors mean and what they represent and there's something about how she built the physical side of the book that speaks to the levels of depression that she goes through.

Liesel: I think we can also advise everyone that the reading level is extremely accessible in the book, but there is some language in it. It's a mature book, right? It looks like a kids book, but it's not a kids book. There's some language in it and some discussion of sort of mature themes. In particular, some of the emotional experiences that she has, which I don't know if we might want to do a trigger warning or what the appropriate way is to let people know, but there could be some things that prompt a reader to need to take a pause.

Herschel Greenb: Yes, definitely there is some foul language in it, but she's not cursing at somebody. It's more of her personality coming through on the words in the page. And yes, there are definitely some themes that may require processing. That's why we want to build activities into the calendar where somebody who might encounter any of those triggers can go to a health center representative or a round table discussion brought to you by the mental health services. So we definitely want students to know that if there is something that speaks to them or has them have a reaction, positive or negative, there's a resource on campus to help them with that.

Liesel: So what are some of the different kinds of activities that happen when a campus adopts a book like this?

Herschel Greenb: Typically, we like to have guest speakers come to campus to talk about the topics. So in this case, we would like to get people who are experts in depression come to campus. Since Allie Brosch is also in some ways a graphic novelist, we'd love to get some female graphic novelists in the industry to come to campus, talk about their experiences. We'd like to have perhaps an art exhibit where students in the art department can create their own version of what depression looks like to them. We also have performance on campus, including speech communication classes and acting classes that might act out their version of what the book represents. We would love to have a Writer's Day Weekend Contest where students can submit essays and poems about the book and how it inspired them.

Herschel Greenb: We'd also like to have mental health days and mental health activities on campus to bring up this taboo topic of depression and what it's about, how to talk about it. One of the things the book does nicely is it opens the reader's eyes to somebody dealing with depression, but it also asks the reader, "How do I interact with somebody who has depression?" So it's really important to look at it from both points of view.

Liesel: You know what else my students identified too as we were reading it, is that it's also about inner dialogue, which if we even take it a step, extrapolate it a step beyond depression, just the idea of thinking about the role of inner thoughts and that self talk, that intra personal communication that happens inside our own head and how it serves to help us process what's going on around us, motivates us, but can also be discouraging and can work against us at times. And it seems like that's a real common issue for students also.

Herschel Greenb: Correct.

Liesel: That idea of how their inner thoughts apply to their ability to process academics and failure and test taking and those kinds of things.

Herschel Greenb: There are some great drawings in the book and one example would be where she says to herself, "Get off the couch." And then she's laying on the couch in a depressed state and she rationalizes with herself why she would rather be a bad person laying on the couch and than a good person to get off the couch. And that inner monologue you referred to, instead of saying, "Get up and do something", we could replace it with, "Do the math homework." Or, "Write the essay." And that inner monologue a student goes through to justify why they will or will not do the assignment is valuable and important to have a discussion about and how does one overcome any mental hurdles that are roadblocks brought upon by the self rather than by any exterior sources?

Liesel: It strikes me that, that's a lot of the roadblocks our students face. Obviously they have a lot of barriers that are external, but we have talked a lot about trauma that students experience, financial stress, family issues, narcotics. I mean there's so many different kinds of things, but central to all of those is the effect that it has on students' emotional wellbeing.

Herschel Greenb: Absolutely.

Liesel: And things like their grit, their tenacity, their persistence to get through a course. But there are things that are invisible to us. Inner dialogue is invisible to us in many ways unless we give students the opportunity to voice it somehow. And I think that, that's one of the cool things about this book. In any class, it can give us an opportunity to say, "Hey, what are you thinking about right now?" Or, "Which of the ideas that are expressed in the book are things you think about?" How do you draw a parallel between the book in your own experience? And often students will talk about themselves more freely if it's through a text like this.

Herschel Greenb: Absolutely, and I agree. I think the book opens a dialogue into different versions of depression in society. We often think depression as being this severe clinical mental state, but in reality even forms of anxiety constitute a type of depression. And so when a student is suffering from the fears and anxieties of going into a classroom or writing a paper for a teacher, it becomes a hurdle that they have to overcome. And part of that roadblock is to talk about, "Well, if we can lower the fears and anxieties, will success go up?" In many expert studies, the number one reason students often fail a class isn't that the material is hard or that the individual isn't able to learn it, it's that they suffer from a fear and anxiety that is a form of depression and oftentimes can be very much a hurdle that can't be overcome. And so by having our dialogue about this that the book presents, students can start to see that those fears and anxieties can be lessened and success is possible.

Liesel: I was also thinking about ... I don't know who said that laughter is agreement, but it's a good quote. The fact that the book does elicit laughter and students can talk about it and we can talk about it and "Oh, that was funny." "That was funny to me too." It creates a shared agreement about an experience.

Herschel Greenb: Definitely. I relate to the book because I grew up with dogs. And her dogs, simple dog and helper dog are an important part of her life and a very important part of the story. So the dog scenes were hilarious and I had to stop reading to wipe my eyes because I was laughing so hard. Then the very next chapter we get this dark place that she's in and a lot of times that dark place is something that we think is unique to us. But as you said, we realized very quickly that it's a human experience rather than an individual experience. There's a scene in the book that reminded me of that, when you're talking about the dark place where she has a dead goldfish in her hand. All she really wants someone to do is to agree that there's a dead goldfish in her hand.

Herschel Greenb: Our natural inclination is to help solve the problem. Let's bring the fish back to life. Where can we bury it? Why is there a dead fish in your hand? Rather than simply saying, "I see. Yes, you are right. There's a dead fish in your hand." That scene in the book is very powerful to go into that dark place, but knowing that if we look at the book as a way for us to communicate to people with depression, sometimes all they need to hear is, "Yes, I understand." More than us solving a problem.

Liesel: Absolutely. You were very kind to come by and do a visit to actually one of my classes where we're playing around with the book this semester to sort of see what it's potential is. It's called Performance of Literature and it's a speech class in which students work with texts and they use the text to perform them, but they also develop arguments from the text and presenting original introductions and sort of use the text to make meaning of their own. And so tell me what you saw when you came to class that night.

Herschel Greenb: That experience was absolutely incredible. I thank you for letting me into your class and thank you to your students for welcoming me into your class. The students were asked to pick a chapter from the book and they either worked in a small team or individually. And they had to create a video. Most of them use their cell phone as the video device and they had to interpret a chapter from the book in a way that was unique to them. And I think you had a total of, I want to say 10 presentations, and every project was different and unique and fun and it allowed the audience, including myself to see the book in a different way. Each of your students brought their own thing to the table about how the book reached them, connected to them and how they would reinterpret that information into their own medium. So whereas the book is a book, your medium became the video and the camera and what it shows and what it reveals. And your students like Allie Brosch were raw and emotional and willing to put themselves out there.

Student 1: The things I'm naturally inclined to do and think are not the same as the things I'd love to believe I would do and think. I'm greedy and conceited and I feel like I deserve to be impressed with myself.

Student 2: As soon as we left the shelter, we knew immediately that things may not go well. This dog was pretty strong to the point where it looked like it was vibrating. We uncovered a major clue about the helper dogs plan when we tried to introduce her to the simple dog. The simple dog has a lot of weird qualities that make her seem undog like. She's more like a sea cucumber with legs.

Student 3: I'm someone who would throw sand at children. I know this because I've had to resist doing it and that means it's naturally what I'd be doing if I wasn't resisting it. I'd also shove everyone and shout at people who wouldn't let me be doing exactly what I want.

Student 4: Let me answer some of your questions. Do you still like dogs? Yes, but not as much as you do. I mean, I like dogs to a healthy extent. What is your favorite dog? I don't know. This may come as a surprise, but dogs are not your primary focus in life. Do you have a job training dogs? No. I can't even train my own dogs, let alone other people's dogs. What is your favorite food? Nachos. Which is fortunate because you're poor and it's very inexpensive to get nachos and they're actually really good.

Liesel: I think they did a nice job and I mean I wish we had more time and more resources, but I think it's a good example of how something as simple as having them transpose the book into a different medium have them draw their own version, make a video, write a poem, create a blog post, write a tweet for each chapter. I mean it just helps them to translate it in that way. It makes them think about what it means, pull something out of it to re-tell it to someone else. So what's your big vision for what faculty can do to help move this to the next step?

Herschel Greenb: My goal for faculty is to want to use it in the classroom and to build potential curriculum around it. Depression is something that is universal to both students, faculty and staff. So I think even a math class would benefit from reading this book on the first day or the first week because it would open the dialogue to the fear and anxiety that math causes students. But it would also work in an animal science class or a geology class for example, where students are doing field work and they don't know what they're going to encounter. And a lot of times the topic of depression can also help discuss coping mechanisms when one's on the field or one is in a room with other people. So I really hope teachers find unique ways, ways that I've never thought of to use the book.

Liesel: I like that idea for a math class too, or any class where you have potential anxiety about the students. Like on the first day for instance, I mean the effective part of learning is huge. And just to say to students, "Hey, just write down on your syllabus or on a piece of paper how you're feeling right now. Let's, let's give words to that. Let's name your current emotional state. And then what's your desired emotional state? What would make you feel ... What do you want to feel about this?" And then just have a conversation about that, and I think that could be really helpful. Or to have students write them on post-its and put them on the board and so they can read other people's. And then have somebody group them and realize that everybody has some similar shared feelings and experiences that they have. And also for instructors too, I think to be willing to voice their inner dialogue sometimes. I know that sometimes as a teacher early in my career especially, I wanted to be perfect.

Herschel Greenb: When I first started teaching, I thought I had to be the one that ruled with an iron fist and come across as being the one that you should be afraid of because I wanted students to know that if they're going to take my class, this is a serious thing we're doing. This is college. I realized that was playing directly into the fear and anxiety students have, and I very quickly realized that's not what I wanted to do. So a lot of times in my class, the first day is not a syllabus discussion, it's a, "What are your fears and anxieties of being a student and taking an English class for the first time?" And what can we put on the board as a shared experience? And then can I take care of some of those fears and anxieties and lower that level, so when you leave here, you leave feeling better than when you walked in?

Herschel Greenb: And what it does, it also allows me the instructor, to come across as human because I can share my experiences. So I can say without a problem that when I was in college and undergrad I also had to visit a psychologist. And we sometimes think that teachers are perfect, but we're not. We were students once, we had to go through the same things that students go through now. And it lets that barrier come down to say, "Well that teacher is perfect and we're not." And this way it could open that dialogue and again, as you said, make us feel more human and reachable to students.

Liesel: We did an exercise at the new faculty seminar last year where teachers made videos and told the story of their worst academic failure and then how they overcame that and implicit in that is, "I became a teacher." They were really fun, quite revealing. The math teacher talking about struggling in math for instance, and also talking about some personal challenges that they had. They were wonderful and they were welcome videos to play on their canvas pages before the start of the semester.

Teacher 1: I wanted to tell you a story about my personal failure when I was a student at Cal State Northridge and I was majoring in Liberal Studies, which is a major where you want to be a teacher. I failed a math class two times because it was just so hard for me and the only way that I was able to pass that class was to go to tutoring every single day and just to work really, really hard. The third time I was finally able to pass the class and so I just want to encourage you to not give up on your dreams and to keep working hard and I invite you to come to my class and I can't wait to meet you.

Teacher 2: I have a lot of failure in life and so I had to go through a lot of challenges to get through where I am right now. I came from Vietnam when I was 16. When we came here our family only had $4 after paying the rent and facing challenge to be the first one to go to school and nobody show up at your graduation. You have to push yourself through and get to where I am now. I think everybody can do it. And I invite you to come to my class and to come and see a story. And I have a lot to share with you if you'd like to hear.

Liesel: I do want to mentioned two more things. One of the things I want to talk about is that this book is also intended to create communication between faculty and managers and staff as well. So while we do want to have dialogues with our students, there's also another function that this serves on campus. You want to talk about that a little bit?

Herschel Greenb: Yeah. The whole entire idea is that the book is designed to be a campus wide initiative, not just a student initiative. And as we've established, instructors and the faculty and staff are human and therefore deal with very real things both in the classroom, in the department and at home, and so opening the dialogue between each other and this idea that depression exists and anxiety exists. For example, multiple measures that the school is going through is a thing that absolutely creates anxiety amongst faculty and staff.

Liesel: Change.

Herschel Greenb: Change is hard sometimes and when you feel as if you have no say in how the change is implemented, the end result can be something that we might call depression and so absolutely, I really want to make sure that faculty and staff know that the book is for them as much as for students and maybe spark a dialogue in a department meeting or in a meeting with faculty and staff mixed together.

Liesel: And so I'll note that our managers will be using the book at their management retreat and I think our classified staff will also be incorporating this into one of their trainings or events. So that's really cool.

Herschel Greenb: That's great to hear. I really want to hear their reactions and I'm looking forward to having some future workshops where everyone come together and share what they're doing with the book. I'm just one person. I can't imagine how many other ways thre are to use a book that I'm not thinking of and I think that'd be a great way to start to build this in terms of a longterm vision that other books in the future will spark just as much dialogue on campus and just as much curriculum and discussion between people.

Liesel: Well, this has been a great conversation.

Herschel Greenb: Yes, I agree.

Liesel: It's a great book and you'll be able to hear more about it at Spring Flex Day. And Herschel is also doing some professional development workshops. We are launching it in earnest this program in the spring and it will be continuing into next academic year. So you've got a long time to get engaged, and if you're one of the people listening to the podcast, we also have a limited number of free copies of the book. If you come into POD and you tell them you heard about the book on the Magic Mountie Podcast, the kind people at our front desk in building six, room 140 will give you a free copy so that you can enjoy it and read all about the dogs and everything else that we've been talking about today.

Herschel Greenb: Exactly. I thank everybody, I really hope you enjoy the book and I look forward to hearing reactions.

Liesel: Yes. Email Herschel at hgreenberg ... Is that right?

Herschel Greenb: Yeah. It's H-G-R-E-E-N-B-E-R-G@mtsac.edu.

Liesel: Perfect. Thanks again for listening to this episode. We look forward to seeing you and reading with you.

Herschel Greenb: Thanks everybody. Enjoy.

Liesel: Hey, thanks so much for joining us for the Magic Mountie podcast. We love your likes, we love your shares and we love your comments, so please engage with our community. Download from wherever you love to get your podcasts, iTunes, Google, RateMyProfessor, we're there. And we want you to be back with us next week. Remember, any opinions that are expressed in this podcast do not necessarily represent the Mount San Antonio College or any of its agents. We'll see you next time.