You are listening to, you've got this episode 331. Welcome to You've Got This, a weekly podcast for higher education professionals looking to increase their confidence and capacity for juggling the day-to-day demands of an academic life. I'm your host, Dr. Katie Linder. On this episode, I wanted to share a metaphor that came up when I was working with one of my coaching clients and it really, uh, resonated I think for me in terms of how I've seen things happen in my career.

And I think it also resonated for this coaching client. And I thought, you know, I bet this might resonate with other people as well, so, . First of all, let me tell you kind of some context of where this metaphor came from. Lately I have been doing digital jigsaw puzzles. I will of course, post the link to the puzzle app that I've been using.

I put it on my iPad Mini. You could easily do it on like a larger size iPad. Um, but it's called Magic Puzzles, and I've had this on my f. My iPad for years and recently I got back into doing it because I was thinking about, I've been watching other people do jigsaw puzzles on social media and especially over like the holidays, everybody was doing jigsaw puzzles and I don't really have a place in my house where I can just leave.

a jigsaw puzzle out on a table. And this may be the case for you too, if you have like pets or kids or you know, like all you have is a dining room table and you eat at the dining room table. Like this isn't always something you can do. And so I remembered that I had this puzzle app and I was like, well, let me, let me go back and, and do that because it's obviously not taking up room in my house.

and I invested $4 and 99 cents to remove the ads that were getting thrown at me as I was working on these puzzles, which I will say is an incredible investment in my mind to make, um, to remove the ads. But otherwise, this is a free app. So, um, willing to pay $5 to not get ads every, you know, Five minutes, uh, in the Z and what it allows you to do is pick various puzzles that you, um, put together and you can choose the amount of pieces.

So it goes all the way up to like a thousand pieces and you may have to pay like a premium fee to go higher. Um, but they have an option that is kind of like typical jigsaw puzzle pieces. And then they have an option that is what they call like radial puzzle pieces, which is basically puzzle pieces that are in, um, different, uh, different sizes and shapes than kind of what you would see in a traditional jigsaw.

the ultimate nerdy pastime, uh, because I listen to audiobooks and I do my little digital jigsaw puzzle, and it is actually just the perfect amount of engagement for my brain that feels, um, like. I'm, I'm engaged and I'm kind of interested, but I'm also getting to relax a little bit. So have been doing these digital jigsaw puzzles and where this came up in, in, what I was thinking about when I was working with this client was when you were doing one of these digital jigsaw puzzles, um, what is the thing that you typically do?

First in any jigsaw puzzle, you look for the edges and you try to put the edges of the puzzle together before you start to put other pieces together. And now that I've been doing these digital jigsaw puzzles for a while, what I end up doing is I do the edges and then if there's something that's like an obvious thing in the puzzle, like faces or a color, that's like very prominent.

I start to kind of pull those pieces out so that I can, I can work with like a smaller part of the puzzle that it's very clear what that part of the puzzle is going to be. So it could be like zebra stripes for example, or tiles of a floor. And you can like tell that this is what it is and you start to kind of group them together.

So it makes it easier for you to start to put these puzzle pieces together. and what I was talking about with my coaching client, uh, who's going through kind of a career transition as so many of my coaching clients are, and I have certainly been through them myself, is sometimes you can feel a little bit lost, like you're not quite sure what you're supposed to be doing.

You're not quite sure what the next job is or what the next challenge is or what the next uh, Title is, you know, that you're going for, and one of the things that we talked about in our session was finding the edges first. So if we think about, uh, any transition that we're making in life as a kind of puzzle, if we don't put the edges together first, it feels kind of chaotic.

It's just a bunch of random pieces. We don't know how they fit together. Let's say we haven't even seen the picture that we're supposed to be putting together. Like we, we don't know what's there, but the edges, when you start to put them around, it makes it easier to start to fill in what's happening. Um, and when you go through and do like finding all the edges, you go through and take a glance at all of the other pieces that are in play that, that are possible, and you can start to pull out things that, like all the red pieces or all those Ebro right pieces, you can start to kind of see how things group.

Now you might be thinking like, well, what is, what does Katie mean by the edges? Like, what? What does that actually mean? So to me, what this means is you can't really have a puzzle without edges. , but what's inside the puzzle could be, it's kind of unknown. Like we don't know what's going to go there. So it's kind of like the concept of big rocks.

If you've ever heard of this, like Stephen Covey, like, um, when you're putting like a big jar of rocks and pebbles, um, together, if you don't put the big rocks in first, they won't fit because you'll have sand and all these other things. But if you put the big rocks in first, then you can filter in all the other smaller things like stones and sand.

amongst the big rocks, and it allows you to make sure that the most important things that you care about get entered into the picture first. So this is one way to think about the edges. If there's certain things that you're like, I know this has to be part of my transition. So for example, let's talk about like job stuff.

If you're like, well, I need to live in a certain geographical part of the country, that's an. Like that, that's like a known quantity that will help to shape the rest of the puzzle and like what it is that you're gonna do if you know that there's a certain like skill that you love to use and you like can't live without doing that skill.

Like for me, coaching is one of those skills. Like I love to coach and if I can't do it in my day job, I'm gonna try to do it outside of my day. Job. Coaching is an edge for me. It's something that's really important. Uh, edges could also be things like your professional values. What are the things that like you care about the most incorporating into your professional life?

Like what are the things that basically matter the most to you that need to be prioritized as you're like looking at job ads and like trying to figure out what it is you wanna do next? . Now, of course, as you go through this process of defining your edges, you also might start to see some things that are like kind of falling off your list.

Like there might be some things that's like, well, that's a nice to have, but it's like not something that I feel. is mandatory as I'm kind of like moving forward in this transition. And this is one of those things that kind of allows us to start to, um, take off some layers of things. Like if we wanna, I don't wanna like mix too many metaphors here, but if you think about like throughout your career, you're just like putting on layers of clothes because you're like gaining skills and, and you're figuring out like all these different things.

You're learning things along the way. , but you may decide at some point in your career that you don't need to keep all of that like it served you at one time, but it doesn't necessarily mean you need to do it right now in an active way. So for example, earlier in my career, I did a ton of grant writing, and this was something that I became like known for as somebody who did this well.

I know enough about grants now that it can kind of serve me in my job. I understand how they function. I understand how to be like a, a project manager for a grant and things like that, but I'm not actively grant writing in my current role. So it's not something that I feel like I need to, like, put that layer on, like that.

That's not an edge for me. Grant writing is not something that I feel like is a real edge, uh, piece that I need to make sure it stays in my portfolio. . Now, who knows, maybe later on in my career that will shift. But as you go through and think about these edges, you'll start to realize like there's some stuff that doesn't make the cut.

And what's really nice about this is it allows you to then prioritize based on what's going on in the edges, and you can start to fill in the rest of the puzzle in terms of your decision making as you move forward. now. I think one of the challenges, whenever we have a lot of opportunities in front of us, and this was the case, you know, for this client, incredibly talented person, so much skill in so many different areas, but that can feel overwhelming.

That can be like, I don't know what, what to do. And it, to me, it reminds me a lot of when, um, the last time my partner and I bought a car, and I know I've shared this metaphor before, but we narrowed down. Four things that we really cared about. We wanted it to be a hybrid car. He really cared about having, uh, l e d headlights.

I was like, okay, that's fine. We wanted to have dual climate control, and I honestly don't remember what the fourth thing was, but there was a fourth thing and, and when we narrowed that down, there were like five cars that, oh, we wanted it to have Apple car play. That was the fourth thing. And so when we put those things into like a search engine, like five cars popped out.

And so rather than looking at this world, Thousands of options of cars. We had five and we test drove those five and we picked the one that we picked and it was, we were good to go because we'd already kind of narrowed in our options. That's a really good example of we defined the edges of that puzzle.

We said these are the things that need to be kind of fitting around what exactly it is. We wanna make a decision. and it really narrowed in the choices and made it feel less overwhelming. So you can do this with pretty much anything, . You can do this with jobs, with careers, with cities that you wanna live in, with relationships you wanna have, with hobbies that you wanna invest in with, um, ways that you wanna engage with your family or your relationships.

Like there's all these different kinds of ways, I think, to put kind of the edges around the puzzle. And I think it works especially well if you're in a situation where you are feeling overwhelmed and you're feeling like you don't have enough boundary. to really help yourself figure it out. Now this is the kind of work, I think why I'm so drawn to this metaphor is this is the kind of work that coaching is.

You know, we are often putting edges around an issue or a challenge or a problem or a question for clients. We're trying to help them get clarity on what are the edges so they can start to figure out the rest of the puzzle. And so this metaphor was just so perfect because I've been working with puzzles and um, it spoke to this client as well.

I put it out there to say, what? What is a problem? A challenge, a question that you have in your mind right now where you need to define your edges. You need to look for your edge pieces first so that you can start to then kind of craft out what the rest of the picture is gonna look like. And the other piece I'll just say is sometimes when we try to find the edges and we can't even find the edges, sometimes this means that we don't have all the puzzle.

If you can't find the edges, you might not have all the puzzle pieces you need to really put the full picture together. And sometimes that's just life. We don't have all the pieces. We don't know all the things we need to know. But it does allow us to say, you know, okay, I've got half my edges and I need to work on finding my other half of my edges and, and sometimes that is alone.

Something that's really comforting to know, like, , I don't think I have all the puzzle pieces and what, what are some tasks or, or actions that I can take that would then help me to find the other puzzle pieces that I need to find in order to make the kind of decision that I want to make? So I would love to hear if this is a metaphor that resonates with you as well.

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