

Where Teaching & Learning Come Together

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When I was in first grade I used to check out from the library every read-aloud that our teacher had read to us that week. Then, I would read them all aloud to my best friend and Great Dane, Tigre. (She liked *Henry and Mudge* the best, because they were the just like us.) I read each word carefully with inflection and fanned each page slowly across the room just as my teacher had, so that Tigre could see all the pictures while she lay attentively on her carpet square. When the books were too challenging for me to read on my own, I just made up the story based on the pictures and what I remembered from hearing my teacher read the story, but we never missed a book. Undoubtedly, I have known for a very long time that I wanted to be a teacher.

It wasn't until I graduated with my Bachelor's degree and obtained my first full-time teaching position that I fully realized how many challenges are involved in being a successful and truly effective teacher. It takes a lot of time, effort, love, knowledge, and very long days if you want to be the best teacher you can be. My personality is such that I always want to be the best version of myself and put my all into everything I do, so this wasn't a problem. However, there was another problem that soon arose, a problem that I wasn't completely sure how to address.

By the end of my second year teaching I felt that I both wanted to and was ready to start my Masters and further my education for the benefit of both myself and my students. The problem was that there were many new variables coming into play and I wasn't sure in which direction to go. First of all, though my Bachelor's degree was in Elementary Education with a double major in Language Arts and Social Studies, for the past two years I had currently been

teaching middle school Theater, Intro. to Computers, and Reading Curriculum Support. (I know what you're thinking, "Well that's quite a mix of subject areas!" You're right, but as a new teacher, you take what's offered to you and rise to the occasion. I have a background in music, theater, and dance, and absolutely loved that position despite the high number of unrelated preps.) Here's where the problem comes in. Upon making the decision to start my Masters, I was informed that the theater position I was in was going to be cut and, though I would not be laid off, I would be displaced to another position for which my degree deemed me "highly qualified."

So many thoughts ran through my head as I tried to sort through the information I was given. Should I still pursue my Masters, or should I wait? I don't have any idea what I'll even be teaching next year. It could be Kindergarten, 8th grade American History, 6th grade Language Arts. What area(s) should I focus my Masters on if I don't know what will be applicable to my current position? What if I'm not able to put the time and effort needed into obtaining my Masters? I don't want to start something if I'm not going to be able to put my all into it, and it seems like "my all" will be needed elsewhere, like to learn a new curriculum and create a whole new classroom environment at (most likely) a very different grade level.

After my brief internal "mini-meltdown" I took a deep breath, reminded myself that I can't control everything, nor can I know everything before it happens, and then I waited. I waited exactly one year. I used that year to learn my new position (which turned out to be 6th grade social studies), to plan and design a new classroom management system for my new classroom, to get to know my new teacher family, and most importantly to reflect on my goals in obtaining a Masters and to research the many options available to me for earning such a degree.

When I read about Michigan State's MAED (Master of Arts in Education) program, I was sold. I knew this was the perfect program for me. The flexibility of the coursework in the MAED allowed me to individualize my program by selecting from a number of elective classes that met my personal needs as an educator. For me, this meant that I could take a social studies class (since this subject area was still a little new to me), but I was also free to study classroom management as that is a personal passion of mine, *and* take elementary literacy courses so that I was up to date on the most current, best practices for teaching reading and writing at the elementary and middle levels should I ever move content areas or grade levels again in the future. This program was almost entirely designed around my personal needs as a professional educator, and the best part was it was all online. I could work from home late at night or in the morning. I could work from my classroom after school. I was a little apprehensive about the online component as I do not at all consider myself to be "tech-savvy." I know... I said earlier that I taught a middle school computer class, but that class was very basic. My students learned how to use Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Paint.net. I had no idea how online classes "worked," but this option did not involve me leaving early to drive to class. It did not take time away from my students, my classroom, or my new curriculum, so I was excited to try it!

One of the first courses I took in the MAED program was **Psychology of Classroom Discipline (CEP 883)**. Classroom management has always been a passion of mine. I believe a well-managed classroom where students feel safe, cared about, and valued as individuals is key in activating authentic student learning, so I couldn't think of a better place to start! I have been told that I have great classroom management techniques, but Prof. Mousouli taught me many more strategies to motivate students intrinsically rather than extrinsically, to plan ahead by implementing multiple strategies to eliminate possible problems and distractions in the

classroom *before* they occur rather than having to react to them after they have occurred. We also participated in numerous case studies of children with differing problems from ADHD, to no support at home, to no motivation to learn, etc. and practiced ways for strengthening teacher/student relationships, teacher/parent relationships, and student/student relationships. This was one of my favorite classes of the entire program. The things I've learned and the books of strategies I've obtained from this course will serve me long into my years of teaching. My favorite book was called *The Tough Kid Tool Box*. It had so many invaluable solutions to possible classroom problems.

Another of my favorite, but definitely most challenging, courses was **Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners (TE 846)**. Learning to read is challenging enough for students as it is, but unfortunately reading is not an equal playing field, and it only gets more challenging with each increasing grade level. All children learn in different ways. Some are auditory learners, some visual learners, others are bodily-kinesthetic learners, or rather they learn by doing. Additionally, each student comes to school with their own individualized set of strengths and weaknesses. This is a lot to consider when teaching reading in the classroom. Let's also not forget that reading is an essential part of all subject areas, especially at the middle level. So, even as a 6th grade social studies teacher, I am (or should be) teaching reading skills in my classroom on a daily basis as they pertain to what we are working on in class. In this course, Professor Dongbo Zhang taught us of the many additional challenges to consider as to why a child may be having trouble with reading such as learning disabilities, English language barriers, or simply a lack of support at home to foster the necessary reading skills being taught. We also learned a number of strategies that can be easily implemented in the general education classroom to address and support the child in need. For me, the most challenging and beneficial project in

this course was the literacy case study I conducted with one of my special education social studies students. Over the course of a few weeks my student participated in reading assessments with me. After reviewing the assessments, I determined she was struggling the most in the areas of comprehension and fluency. We then worked together during lunches on instructional lessons I had created to target those two specific areas. At the end of our time together I reassessed her to see that her reading score had greatly improved! I am not only proud of the work I did in this course, but also the hard work and growth that my student accomplished!

I would have to say the most inspiring class I took was **Awards and Classics of Childrens' Literature (TE 836)**. From a very young age we are taught that the books with a “fancy gold or silver medal” on the cover are special and perhaps better than all the other books. This is simply not true. That is not to say that award winning books are not wonderful. It simply means that there are many equally wonderful books that have gone unrecognized, undiscovered, and are worth having on classroom shelves. Most importantly, I learned that childrens' literature does not simply mean “literature for young children.” Everyone loves to be read to, young and old alike, and there are many picture books and chapter books that can be implemented at the middle level and really add to and strengthen a student's understanding of the content area, time period being taught, etc. Laura Apol taught us that it is a mistake to think “there isn't time” in the curriculum to share a read aloud that pertains to the curriculum. Overall, the most important things I have taken away from this class are the realization to think for myself when choosing the books that are best for my students, and to see the value in sharing children's literature with students of all ages, not just the lower elementary students.

The course that I was most nervous about taking during the MAED program was **Electronic Portfolios (CEP 813)**. It was completely technology-based, and focused on helping

teachers to design and create a web-presence for themselves. I like incorporating technology in the classroom, but the idea of being personally evaluated on my technological skills is another story altogether. Still, I chose to take the course as a prerequisite for the culminating **Capstone Course (ED 870)**. I knew that I would need to develop an entire online professional portfolio for the culmination Capstone course of my MAED program, and I was worried that I would not have the necessary technological skills to do so. I felt this class would teach me those skills.

In the end, I was overwhelmed by how much I learned in this course! Professor Patrick Dickson was so helpful and supportive and I never felt silly for asking multiple questions or seeking additional support. I'm so proud to say that having completed the course, I now have a fully functioning **6th Grade Social Studies Classroom Website** with many additional features such as a homework calendar, video tour, and student work showcase. I am so proud of what I accomplished in CEP 813, and my confidence in the implementation of technology has grown immensely. Bringing those newly developed skills with me into the Capstone course has only aided me in developing what I feel is a stronger and more professional online portfolio that you see before you today.

My experience in the MAED program at MSU has exceeded my expectations to say the least. Customizing my program to fit my needs as an educator has allowed me to further my education in a number of different content areas relevant to my current and future teaching positions. Additionally, this program helped build my confidence in my technological abilities.

As the summer of 2014 comes to a close and I finish this, the final course of my Master's program, I find that I am left mostly with feelings of eagerness and excitement. As the 2014-15 school year quickly approaches it is time for my teaching and learning to come together as one.

I'm eager and excited to implement the many new classroom management strategies that I've learned, to introduce parents to our new classroom website during Curriculum Night in the fall, to arrange my daily schedule in a way that allows me to meet and mini-conference with my students throughout the week as a means of improving their individual content reading and writing skills, and to implement additional literature in the classroom that will strengthen my students' knowledge and understanding of the social studies content area. I feel well prepared and armed with the tools I need to improve my teaching as well as my students' learning, but this is not the end for me. I will continue to learn every day from my colleagues and administrators, from my students, and from additional courses I may take and professional development inservices that I will attend. There is always more to discover and learn, and if it will make me a better teacher, then I can't wait to learn it and share it with those around me.