

More Than I Bargained For

Thoughts about my online master's program at MSU

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Embarking on my educational journey a year ago I had set goals that I wanted to accomplish. Having always set high standards for myself, I fully anticipated meeting these goals. You can read my thoughts on this in my goal reflection essay, *Always Learning*. While I expected to gain a depth of knowledge in my concentration area of literacy, I was surprised by how much I gained in areas outside of my concentration. Of all the courses that I took, four stand out as the most beneficial and will have the greatest impact on my future as an elementary teacher.

The first course that proved to be invaluable was not necessarily one that I had originally expected to gain so much from. While it was focused on literacy, my reasons for taking it were mainly for pleasure because I love reading. TE 849: Methods and Materials for Teaching Children's and Adolescent Literature taught me to think about literature in ways that I had never considered before. It was not until looking over my work and notes from the course that I truly realized how much this class will influence my future teaching. This course began with us thinking about what we enjoy about reading and what qualities made up a "good" piece of literature. After several dynamic conversations with peers, reading numerous books of differing genres, and in depth thinking about elements of literature, we were asked to reflect back on what we now thought about literature and put into a single paper. My literature position paper can be read on my showcase page.

TE 849 taught me to look deeply at the literary elements as well as purpose for reading a book when judging its quality. Responding to different genres of literature allowed me to grow in my understanding about what makes a good discussion. We spent a bit of time focusing on the roles that different members of a literature discussion could have and this helped me think about how to take my classroom book club discussions to the next level.

Probably the biggest learning moment in this class came during our unit on multicultural literature. I came to realize that my pre-conceived ideas about what multicultural literature was and the role it played in my classroom needed adjusting. A more detailed reflection can be read on my showcase page. We focused on Native American history, a topic that was not familiar to me. I found the structure of the unit, both in the content of texts read as well as the discussions that I was part of to be very helpful in my learning. This unit raised more questions for me in terms of how to define multicultural literature. Who gets included under the term? What stories get to be told and by who? How do you address the complex issues of truth and accurately portraying the lives of those who are underrepresented in today's culture? This unit also generated questions about the genre of historical fiction. How much truth needs to be included in order for a

book to qualify as historical fiction? Whose responsibility is it to tell the story? Who is responsible for checking up on the accuracy of the facts? Ultimately, I realized that while a formal definition might never be reached, it is up to the teacher to provide opportunities for their students to look critically at different types of text. We need to talk about the possible stereotypes that we might have and allow our students to discuss these issues.

It is because of this course that I feel the need to go through my classroom library and take a closer look at the books that I determine to be “historical fiction” as well as “multicultural”. I do not necessarily want to remove those that might be stereotypical, but perhaps use them as read alouds to spark conversation about this complex issue. I realized that it is my job to expose and empower my students to be more than passive readers and start to challenge and question the things they read. I want to take simple exposures and lessons about different cultures and help my kids develop a real appreciation and understanding for diversity. Then build on it to empower my students to take action to challenge the social norms that still exist today. This starts by helping the kids make connections to stories that are about cultures different and unfamiliar to themselves.

A course that surprised me was CEP 883: Psychology of Classroom Discipline. I had taken the course as an elective and being a relatively new teacher with only 3 years under my belt, I thought I might be able to get some useful information out of it. I can say that this class was so beneficial not only because of the knowledge I gained but in the way the course was structured. This course incorporated all different types of learning styles that it was impossible for anyone to *not* find the class useful. There were three components to each week. The first assignment, early on in the week, required us to connect the week’s topic to our lives-personal or professional. The second assignment was often a combination of readings and interactive collaboration with our peer group in the form of discussions. Often times we discussed relevant scenarios that could be applied in any of our classrooms. The third assignment involved reporting back to the whole class and responding further to what we discussed in our groups. I learned so much from both my small peer group as well as the entire class discussions.

While we focused on all aspects of student behavior and classroom management from building relationships to classroom organization to specific types of interventions, a few of the more meaningful learning moments for me were when we discussed student motivation. Learning that motivation is complicated was not something new to me, however getting time to think about the components that go into student desire to learn helped me to better understand many of my more challenging students. We talked about the equation $\text{Motivation} = \text{expectation} \times \text{value} \times \text{climate}$. This made so much sense to me and really helped me in my everyday classroom. Students need to realize that they are expected to do things or are capable of achieving success while also feeling that they are an important part of the classroom. The classroom itself should also be a safe place where students feel comfortable taking risks and making

mistakes. None of this was surprising or even new to me, but this class definitely helped reinforce this for me. When kids' needs are met, there is no need to act in any other way other than what is expected. This was an ah-ha statement for me. It is the basis of classroom management and the best thing I took away from this course.

While realizing that student's needs need to be met before they can be successful in a classroom is easy and any teacher can tell you this is true (even if they have only taught for a short period), putting it in to practice is a bit harder. This is where the practical scenarios allowed me to test out behavior assessments, plans, conversations based on data, and other behavior monitoring tools came into play. This course allowed me to practice and get feedback from others who deal with the same issues. The tools that I left this class with will be ones that I can use almost daily in my classroom.

One of the most beneficial courses that I took was one that I almost didn't take. TE 831: Teaching School Subject Matter with Technology was a class that made me a bit nervous. I do not consider myself highly "tech savvy" and taking an entire course centered on the use of different technologies scared me. However, I am so glad that I didn't cave to that fear. As a teacher in today's world, it is important to understand the different tech tools that our students are spending their time using. I had hoped that I would walk away with a bit more knowledge about some of those tools. While I did learn about many new (and free!) tools to use in my classroom, I gained other valuable insights too. My final reflection can be listened to on voice thread by clicking on my picture (second down on the right column) here!

A big realization for me in TE 831 was the fact that learning new technology does not have to take hours. True, that the more a person uses the tool, the more they come to understand its possibilities, but there is something to be said by learning *with* your students. I no longer feel this strong need to spend hours trying to figure out a new technology before I use it in my classroom. The TPACK theory helped to solidify how technology should be represented in the classroom. TPACK stands for Technological, Pedagogical, and Content Knowledge. Through our course readings and activities, I realized how important it is to incorporate and intentionally plan for different types of technology in my classroom. TPACK helps to illustrate that technological knowledge is just as important as pedagogical and content knowledge for teachers and that they are all interconnected. No piece should be ignored.

In this course, students had opportunities to "play around" with a few different types of tech tools. Two of the assignments included trying out new tools and posting a response about what it is. The other assignments included creating a vodcast (which is a video version of a podcast), re-purposing a lesson plan to include technology, and a final voice thread reflection. Each of these assignments helped me dive into trying new things that I probably would have stayed away from because I thought they might take too much time to figure out. By doing the vodcast assignment, I realized how much more engaged my students would be watching a video that I made, rather than by

someone they did not know. This assignment took a bit of time to make, but was pretty fun. I can't wait to incorporate some of my student's voices or images into future vodcasts I make.

When thinking about the specific things I learned in TE 831, it is hard to keep it to a short list. Most of all, I realized that the power of using technology wisely in the classroom can have a tremendous effect on student motivation, engagement, and their overall learning (and it doesn't need to take hours of planning). When I say wisely, I mean to truly incorporate technology that will help the learning experience and not just be used for the sake of using technology. I also learned that digital citizenship is just as important to teach to the current group of digital natives. Many children know a lot about the technologies but do not necessarily know how to use them appropriately. I realized that it is at school where some of the kids will first learn about proper digital etiquette. If we as teachers do not talk about it, the kids might not ever learn it. TE 831 has really fueled my desire to want to incorporate new technologies into my classroom. I realize that my philosophy of education has to include the use of technology and now that area is much stronger.

Lastly, the capstone course, ED 870 has opened my eyes to so much in terms of my educational journey in the past year. Starting with the most obvious, this online portfolio. I was a bit apprehensive about creating a website, let alone one that included links to my work as well as other pages. I had very little experience in this area. As I began working, I realized that I had no clue how easy and fun it really was! As I wrap up this course, my last in the master's program, I am amazed at all I have accomplished. Creating the online portfolio helped me discover and recognize these learning moments that occurred throughout this process. I know am more confident in my web creation abilities and can't wait to re-vamp my classroom website! This portfolio helps to present me in a professional manner to my colleagues, present and future employers, family, and friends.

As I wrap up my reflection, I am thinking about the MAED program in general. I realize now that the structure of online classes worked very well for me. I was still able to get the personal connections and discussions while being able to work from home. I would definitely recommend online learning programs to anyone who needs the flexibility or lives a distance from where they are enrolled. I also want to touch on the courses that I didn't go into detail about. Many of these were centered around the foundations of literacy and the reading process. While I did learn a tremendous amount of knowledge from these classes, I was struck by how much I gained from the elective courses that I took that were outside my concentration area. The fact that my expectations for these courses were significantly different from what I experienced made them stand out as the most influential to me. I truly did get more than I had bargained for!