

Stepping Up: The Impact of my Graduate Program

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I'm not sure if teaching is ever a profession where you feel you have arrived at the top with no room left for improvement. However, when I think about where I am now as an educator to where I was three years ago when I began my Master of Arts in Education (MAED) program through Michigan State University (MSU), I do feel more confident in my practice and better equipped to help my students.

At the beginning of my MAED program, I was in my fourth year of teaching high school English and my second year of teaching in my current district, Pellston Public Schools. I felt like I was at a point in my teaching where I was past the jitters of a brand-new teacher and ready to get back to learning in order to take my practice to the next level. I chose the literacy concentration due to its relevance to my field and in hopes of becoming even stronger in my teaching. I knew that there was more I could be doing to support my students in their reading and writing, and I was excited to gain more knowledge and skills through my coursework. Since I first began the program, the years of experience I have gained in the classroom have certainly contributed to my increased confidence, but a significant reason for this growth is my graduate program. Through this program and the ten courses I have taken over the past three years, I have gained knowledge, skills, and resources that I know I can draw upon as my career progresses and have made me a better educator.

Most significantly, I now feel more prepared and compelled to step up as a leader in my school. I feel more comfortable sharing what I have learned in this program with my peers, and I have already begun to take up more leadership by volunteering to present at staff meetings and become a mentor teacher for a new staff member. I used to think that leadership in schools was for those who might be seeking an administrative position one day, but my master's program has shown me the value of teachers stepping up in both small and large ways in order to do what is best for students, and I am seeing more and more what my role could be as an educational leader. I am not a person who craves spotlight by nature, yet I know that it is vital for our students that educators speak up and share their learning with others. I teach in a small rural district in northern Michigan with high levels of poverty and low levels of diversity. More than ever before, I now recognize the responsibility I have to expose my students to new ideas that stretch their thinking, and this responsibility includes helping my fellow educators be able to do the same.

All of my courses in my MAED program impacted me one way or another, but when I look back, three courses really stand out. One course that left me with the urge to share my learning with my fellow educators was CEP 813: Electronic Assessment for Teaching and Learning. Assessment is a hot-button topic in the education world as the demand is high for data that can be used to determine where students are in relation to the learning goals. This course pushed my thinking on what assessment is and what it should look like while also reinforcing my own assessment practices. As discussed in my teaching philosophy, mastery learning has been a

key principle in my classroom for the past few years, and assessment is a significant part of the mastery learning cycle. In CEP 813, we learned about best practices in assessment, and I was relieved to learn that what I was doing in my classroom had solid research behind it, such as allowing my students to reassess on material after receiving feedback. I learned more about how to provide quality feedback and how putting a grade on an assignment often prevents students from learning more.. I now speak up about my assessment practices more at staff meetings and in lunchroom conversations with my coworkers, seeking to raise awareness about effective assessment practices.

CEP 813 challenged me to seriously question my classroom assessment practices using a rubric designed to gauge the effectiveness of any given assessment. This rubric was built and refined over the entire semester as I gained more knowledge about what makes a quality assessment. While some aspects of assessment may seem like common sense, such as the notion that the assessment should actually measure the desired learning, these are not always occurring when you look at actual practice. I explored several electronic means of assessing student learning, even developing an assessment using the popular online game Minecraft. Prior to this course and this particular assignment, I had general ideas about quality assessment developed through my own experience and the small amount of professional development and research I had done. By creating this rubric, I now have a tangible tool that I can feel confident in applying in my classroom to improve my students' learning. I have used this rubric to take a critical look at the assessments I create and use in my classroom. This rubric is also something I have shared with my mentee teacher to support her in developing quality assessments. In CEP 813, I learned that it can be an overwhelming and daunting process to integrate effective assessment into your instruction, but I can think of few areas of education more worthy of this effort.

Another course that has left a significant impact on me is CEP 802: Developing Positive Attitudes Toward Learning. When I went into teaching, one of my own high school teachers advised me, "The students who are the hardest to love often need to be loved the most." I try to remember this when I feel frustrated by a student's behavior, and I got the opportunity to gain even more insight into my more challenging students through my work in this course. I realized that what may appear to be a lack of motivation may actually be something else, such as a skill deficit. Furthermore, two students who present similarly in class may require different types of interventions. One student may benefit more from increasing the perceived value of the assignments while another may benefit more from strengthening the teacher-student relationship. The timing of CEP 802 could not have been more perfect; I was struggling with an eleventh grade English class that included many students who openly expressed a dislike and disinterest in our class. I desperately wanted to improve their attitudes toward learning, and CEP 802 was the perfect setting to work on this.

I cannot say that there was a magical, dramatic transformation in my students throughout the semester, but the work I did learning about motivational theories, assessments of motivation, and interventions, I certainly added tools to my toolbox. I chose one of my most challenging

students of my career thus far to use for a case study in CEP 802. Every attempt to improve this student's attitude toward learning had been met with failure and he exhibited high levels of learned helplessness, which our course readings informed us is one of the attitudes most resistant to change. Nevertheless, I decided to do my best to learn what I could do to help this student and ultimately applied a cognitive approach focusing on improving the teacher-student relationship, helping the student set goals, and increasing the task value. The student and I made it through the school year, he ended up graduating from high school, and greeted me with a smile the last time I saw him. It may not have been much, but it certainly was growth for this young man largely thanks to my learning in CEP 802. Now, when I have those students who need to be loved the most, as my former teacher would say, I approach them with more of an open mind, open heart, and a collection of invaluable resources gained in this course.

A third course that shifted my thinking was TE 849: Methods and Materials for Teaching Children's and Adolescent Literature. I have always sought to incorporate modern young adult literature into my high school English classroom by building a large classroom library and making silent free reading time an integral part of my practice. The whole-class novels I taught were nearly all classics. While I still value exposing my students to these classic novels, TE 849 helped me rethink the role that young adult literature has in my teaching. For each unit, we had a choice of two books that related to a given theme, so I was able to select novels that interested me and that I had not read before. All of the books I read, such as Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* and Benjamin Alire Saenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, have since made their way into my classroom library and have become favorites of my students. Although I have not yet made the jump to teaching a modern young adult novel as a whole-class text, TE 849 introduced me to quality literature that I would like to integrate more directly into my classroom.

Another impact TE 849 had on me was stretching me to work outside my comfort zone and consider alternative assessment formats than traditional essays. For my final project, I was tasked with creating a visual representation of one of our class novels. I chose Neal Shusterman's book *Challenger Deep*, which explored mental health in a way I had never encountered before. I created a collage with words and images I found that connected to the novel, and the creation of this project helped me think about the novel and its themes more deeply. I am typically a person who prefers written assignments and shies away from more out-of-the-box projects, but I know that my students' learning styles may be vastly different from my own. This project reminded me of the importance of encouraging students to work outside their comfort zones and of offering more diverse assessment opportunities.

Together, these three courses represent the many ways my graduate program has changed me as an educator and as a person. In courses like CEP 813, I was able to gain knowledge and develop materials that had a direct impact on important aspects of my teaching practice such as assessment. Courses like CEP 802 helped me to rethink my preconceived notions on my more challenging students and equipped me with the tools to increase their learning, engagement, and

motivation. Finally, through courses like TE 849, I had the opportunity to read quality, thought-provoking adolescent literature that I could introduce my students to. Due to the entirely online format of the MAED program, I also strengthened my technology skills and feel much more adept at incorporating technology into my teaching. I wrote essays, developed materials, and created projects throughout my graduate program that stretched my thinking and reminded me of the importance of helping my students do the same. Balancing my professional, scholarly, and personal lives was challenging, but this process has undoubtedly made me stronger and a better educator.

Although this particular chapter of my education may be closing, I am certain that much learning remains in my future. Through professional development, further courses, and my own research, I plan to be an educator who never stops learning and striving to improve her practice. I hope to continue to seek leadership roles within my school and greater educational community, and I am grateful to MSU's MAED program for the growth I have experienced in my confidence and learning. I may never reach the point of feeling like there is nothing more I can do to improve my practice, but I don't really think that's the point. How can we expect students to learn if we stop learning ourselves? I may be a teacher, but that doesn't mean I will never stop being a learner.