

## **Rooted in Learning**

*Nicole Seymour*

When I first went to Michigan State University I had a teacher that completely changed my view of teaching and the definition of meaningful whole class-teacher interaction. In his classroom, students had a voice and we were encouraged to discuss ideas and think out-of-the-box. There were no stupid questions or viewpoints that were so out there they passed the point of actual probability in the stories we were reading, no, to him each idea we presented was like the first time he had ever heard of that theory. As an English major it was exhilarating. It was here that I decided that I wanted to go into teaching. I wanted one day to have a classroom where students would have a voice and feel they could be heard. One in which students were engaged and there was a magic in the air when discussing elements of reading and writing. I've worked most of my adult life in making that dream a reality, continuing on in my education and researching new concepts. Now with two bachelor degrees, my teaching certification, and near completion of my masters, I have people ask me, "What's next? Are you going to keep going to school or be done?" And even as I think about the mountain of debt I've accrued, I smile at these questions because as an educator I'm always reminding students about the value of education and to never stop learning. And I believe this to be true, wholeheartedly. Yet, it wasn't until I entered into the Masters of Education (**MAED**) program at Michigan State University that I began to see the reality of what it really means to be a lifelong learner and how important it is to continually connect with our learning roots. And while trying to search out what path I was going to cultivate in my continuing education, I looked towards the areas of reading, writing, and technology as a main focus. I chose these because they are what I believe to be the beginning seeds to any educational foundation. Now, as I reflect on my time spent within the MAED program I can see now how each of these areas of concentration opened up avenues of research and brought me to a professional learning community that would have never been possible had I hadn't made it a point to subscribe to my own set of beliefs and roots.

Within my first semester it was evident to me how important and right my choices were in choosing these concentration areas as a focus. As I settled into my very first class in my literacy concentration series, TE 838 (Children's Literature in Film) taught by Dr. Laura Apol, I began to see how important learning new techniques and ideas would be to my students. The course, which was rooted in looking at narrative books and their adaptations to film, was a perfect complement to the work I was doing for my sixth grade class. Through techniques and ideas covered in TE 838 I was able to bring about a whole new meaning in book-to-film adaptations and how elements such as lighting and camera angles were a director's way to visually convey an author's ideas that were previously only understood by way of text. During my time within this course, I also happened to be teaching the telenovela "Brian's Song". In previous years

students had read it as a play with round-robin type reading circles that would wear on them day after day, however, this particular year through the instruction and research I had done in my TE 838 course I was able to put together a lesson plan in which students were thinking about camera angles, acting out the parts, and engaging in what was really going on both inside and outside of the scenes. It was a completely new experience for the students in the sense that they were guiding what was going on in the classroom through movement, as well as experiencing the text as both an author and director. I know that had I not taken this course, or implemented the ideas gained from it, students in my classroom would not have had this opportunity and would have missed out on a truly unique learning experience. I had students lined up at my door before lunch was finished to sign up to read a part of the play each day. It was exhilarating!

This feeling was mirrored within the work done for my TE 846 (Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners) course that I had taken the following semester. In this course we looked at how to understand and address the problems many students face when struggling with literacy issues. Being a teacher in a rural and poverty stricken school district, many of my students were reading at a lower grade level and were struggling. They needed a personalized learning experience that was rooted in practices such as **Response to Intervention (RTI)** and guided reading. Through the elements of research added into TE 846 I was able to revamp many of my own practices and lesson plans to better suit the variety of learners within my classroom, as well as share ideas with department colleagues. One of the best pieces of instruction that came out of lessons learned in this course was having our department revamp intervention and our testing practices. Not only did we begin to implement more RTI opportunities within the classroom, we began to dig into previous assessments and look at ways to help aid our students in upcoming state standardized testing by working with them on practices such as online reading and research, as well as incorporating the use of graphic organizers to aid in comprehension. Due to this, I began to see student scores on assessments on an upswing due to using a variety of differentiated learning methods taught within TE 846. Based upon this success and encouragement, I began to search out other courses available in the MAED program that would provide the same impact in my classroom and add to my students overall learning experience. It was with this thinking that I started to gravitate towards the technology courses offered within the program.

Understanding that technology is playing a big part in our student's lives I felt that the course offerings and guidance of the Technology and Learning (CEP) coursework would help me bring about new forms of differentiated instruction into my classroom. This thought process led me to courses such as Electronic Assessment (CEP 813), Teaching and Learning Across the Curriculum (CEP 816), and Teaching Students Online (CEP 820). Each of these courses looked at elements of teaching students online, with ideas and methodologies that also melded into best practices within the classroom. They also laid the groundwork in building an online learning environment which took a thoughtful approach at learning online through a student's perspective.

The first course taken in this concentration series was CEP 820 (Teaching Students Online). This course proved to be the driving force for me to delve deeper into this learning arena. Here I was introduced to sites such as iNACOL (the International Association for K-12 Online Learning) where I learned about resources provided to educators who are teaching online. Through research such as this, along with guided instruction from my professors, I was able to

create an entire website with lesson plans for students that incorporated blended learning capabilities, online assessments, and differentiated learning capabilities. After this first CEP class, I became a leader in my department in the use of technology in the classroom. I began to create and share websites that revolved around lessons we were teaching in the classroom. The implementation of this was so important because it helped students work within a self-paced and independent format.

Through further classes taken in the CEP concentration, I was able to continue to explore using technology in the classroom. Classes such as CEP 813 (Electronic Assessment) and CEP 816 (Learning Across the Curriculum) afforded me the ability to be a part of a diverse professional learning community where my classmates and professors discussed fields of research and sites that gave me greater insight into working with students online. Due to this I was able to create lessons and learning opportunities for students that would transpose across the vast curriculum I was teaching. Projects such as building my own grammar lesson in the game Minecraft, to building tiered assessments in a virtual classroom space, engaged me in techniques and areas of assessment that would not only help improve my own teaching methods, but engage my students and help them build upon their higher order thinking skills.

Now, as I look back on this whole process and the areas I selected as my concentration, I can see fully how it has shaped and changed me as a professional educator. By pursuing my master's degree I have been able to reconnect to myself as a learner and have been brought back to my roots as to why I decided to get into the field of education. It was within this program that I have found the missing pieces to my own learning puzzle. Through the MAED program at Michigan State University I have not only been able to set and be an example of a lifetime learner for my students, but I have been able to continually cultivate and grow my practice as to best suit all of my students through engaging in the process of continued learning. This progression of learning has kept me from simply adapting to my surroundings and teaching based on methods I already was familiar with, to creating new ways in which to learn and reach out to my ever growing student population. It is with this that I have been able to recognize how the concentrations of the courses have shaped me as an educator. Not only did they require me to take on the role of a student, but I also given the opportunity to reach out and connect to a whole new learning community with ideas and thoughts on how we, as educators, progress in an ever changing world. From looking at literacy and the issues our youth face when trying to learn how to read and write, to creating a fully functional virtual learning experience for my students online, my experience with the MAED program has run the gamut of instilling best practices and providing me with a toolbox filled with instruments to continually tailor and craft a learning experience to meet the demands of my ever-changing student base. Now when students and parents walk into my room they can see technology at work and creative processes flowing based upon student artifacts hanging on the walls. They can see the collaboration and how each of these learning pieces are so vital to the process. While this wasn't missing before, what has been added University is that my instruction is more guided towards using new technologies and refining those student-based learning experiences to fit today's student based upon my due to my studies throughout the MAED program. I can see what a difference my coursework and the hands on practices I was given have changed my ways of thinking, teaching, and collaborating with students. In short, it's allowed me to continue to be rooted in learning and work side-by-side with students and colleagues to create lifetime learning experiences and platforms for the students to build upon and grow. In short, the whole process has rooted me in learning and given me the

seeds to continue to cultivate new educational opportunities for my now and future students and for that I am grateful.