

Analysis Leads to Paralysis: or does it?

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My first year of teaching coupled with what I had learned in my undergraduate experiences astounded me with all that I had learned. Knowing that I had more to learn, and would soon be beginning my Master's degree in only my second year of teaching, I was prepared to be as porous as possible and soak up all that I could. Three years later as I wrap-up my graduate coursework and think of taking what I knew then, and putting it together with the new knowledge I have gained throughout the MAED program, I am yet again astonished and humbled by the amount of new information I have attained. Perhaps Einstein said it best with his honest and witty quote, "Once you stop learning, you start dying." It is inevitably true that gaining understanding is a lifelong exploit.

Considering who I am as a learner and a teacher has been an ongoing reflective practice. Much of which can be attributed to the past 36 months and what I have learned in my master's program. With emphasis areas in Special Education and Literacy I feel more confident and better equipped when working with adolescents who have various learning and behavioral needs. I also feel that the online platform of which this master's program is based on is advantageous in and of itself. Online learning is the new way and perhaps the future way of seeking formal education. It also lends itself nicely to enhancing ones technological skills when it comes to working with web 2.0 resources, researching, and publishing on the web. The online capstone portfolio is a great way to display and publish to a vast audience what learners have come away with from a program such as this.

It was my third graduate course, CEP 842 Content Area Instruction for Students with Mild disabilities, under the instruction of Cynthia Okolo that I realized that I did not know everything in the world of special education. Having majored in Psychology with an emphasis in Special Education as an undergrad, and working as a resource room teacher teaching pull-out classes and co-teaching I thought I was well versed in the field. Although some of the content in this course affirmed what I was doing with my caseload students, I also realized there was so much more that I could be doing. This course offered strategies and resources for not only students with mild disabilities but for general education teachers and parents as well. Having gained this additional knowledge makes me more of a resource for all of the individuals that I work with, and not just the students.

This course also allowed for the opportunity to expand on the new knowledge that we had been given. One of the projects was to create a professional development opportunity in which we delivered best-practices for the inclusion of students with mild disabilities into the general education setting. This could not have been a better project to partake in due to my current teaching position. We also then had the opportunity to take all that we had learned in addressing the needs of various learners and re-write a unit we teach in our classrooms incorporating these strategies. It was valuable to look at what I was doing in my resource math class and see how I could make it even better and cater to the diversity of student needs.

I currently work in Grand Haven Area Public schools and our special education population continues to rise. We also take in several students from families who choose Grand Haven as their school of choice which is part of the contribution of our increasing numbers. Due to the large population of students with disabilities, this course continues to prove relevant in its importance and helping me to help others serve students. I continue to take this knowledge and work with other special education and general education teachers and how the Common Core State Standards are going to affect our students. I recently worked with another staff member on writing possible IEP goals and objectives so that they would be aligned to the Common Core Literacy and Mathematics Standards.

The following course that I took was TE 831, Teaching Subject Matter with Technology. This course could not have come at a better time. Our district had recently received a technology grant where each classroom was equipped with a smart board, document camera, and classroom set of voters. Despite being trained on how to operate the equipment and ideas for how to implement the technology into a lesson, it still seemed that something was missing. This something missing was TPACK framework which was introduced by Michigan State Instructor Akesha Horton and stands for Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge.

After learning of TPACK and the importance of how to tie in the technology to make the lesson relevant and more meaningful, it shed a new light for how I would be using the exciting new technology in my classroom. It was not just this framework that I would be using when writing lessons, but also the incorporation of free web 2.0s that we were able to explore and use while taking this course. Not only is this technology engaging for students but a lot of it also better caters to the needs of my students with mild disabilities, more so than the traditional way of teaching and learning.

Since taking this course I have implemented several more technology rich lessons. Two examples of these projects that I have since used in my classroom are creating a Glogster (virtual poster) to show how to solve multi-step algebraic equations and using the website, TodaysMeet, where students can take part in backchanneling (a teacher created virtual chatroom) while watching an educational video where students can ask questions and share feedback based on what they are viewing.

Technology is the buzzword. The overarching theme that I can take into my classroom is that students today are digital citizens growing up in a digital era. Just students having technology at their fingertips is not enough. Embedding good education, lessons, and using technology for the purpose of expanding their knowledge is what is truly necessary. TPACK is a framework that will not soon be forgotten as I continue to plan more engaging lessons which embrace the use of technology but for the betterment of the lesson and student learning of the content.

TE 846, Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners, taught by Jennifer Knight was another valuable course which has expanded my understanding of teaching literacy to struggling adolescent learners. In my undergraduate studies the literacy courses I took were more for beginning readers and challenges they face in embracing literacy. Having endorsements in EI (Emotional Impairments) and CI

(Cognitive Impairments) I was craving more strategies for how to support middle school aged students with Specific Learning Disabilities in Reading fluency and comprehension.

The state of Michigan also saw the importance of all educators being equipped with literacy education and strategies and thus made this course a requirement for those seeking a professional teaching certificate. The need for all teachers to be better prepared in accommodating differences in literacy learners also comes with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards which have literacy rich standards for all contents. I appreciated this course addressing the importance of decoding, fluency, and comprehension skills as well as teaching literacy strategies geared towards older students not just elementary aged students.

Most valuable in this course was the final project in which we were to work one-on-one with a student identified as having a reading disability. With parental permission, I was able to work with one of my caseload students who qualified for special education services as a student with a specific learning disability in basic reading skills. I was able to collect baseline data on the sorts of errors that he made, understand first hand from student and family interview the frustrations he faces, and then implement lessons that catered to his specific areas of weakness using strategies discussed in the course and from course readings. This project revealed to all participants that with the proper instruction, all students are capable of showing growth.

The push for literacy is not only valuable for students with disabilities but also English Language Learners. This summer in the midst of grad classes I was provided the opportunity to attend SIOP training. SIOP is Sheltered Instructional Observation Protocol and it is a model of how to deliver instruction so that it is comprehensible to those with poor language skills, particularly ELLs. What I learned at this training fit well with what I learned in TE 846 as the focus is on making literacy achievable for all. A key component of SIOP which I have found beneficial in supporting struggling adolescent learners is not only having a content objective but including language objectives as well so students understand how they will be reaching the content objective and which mode of communication they will be using to achieve it: reading, writing, listening or speaking. This all supports the importance of literacy from united fronts and supports me having chosen it as one of my emphasis areas.

The past three summers have been filled with grad classes. Although traveling with a laptop always in search of free Wi-Fi and turning down trips to the beach to work indoors on a project could be frustrating, I found myself not minding either as I was immersed in my most recent summer course, CEP 841, Classroom and Behavior Management in the Inclusive Classroom. This course was led by Troy Mariage and also taught by Alisha Brown, Nai-Cheng Kuo, and Mei Shen. When they say that the best has been saved for last, this held true as I felt so strongly about this course and feel that anyone involved in the field of education, or even parenting for that matter, should take this course.

This course was composed of weekly readings from two of the most applicable books I purchased throughout the program: *Authentic Classroom Management: Creating a Learning Community and Building Reflective Practice*, 3rd Edition by Barbara Larrivee, 2009 and *Teaching Self-Control Through Management and Discipline*, 2nd Edition by Tom V. Savage, 1999. These weekly readings led you to

reflect and analyze your current practices then followed up with best-practices and case studies of how they are communicated with students and in the classroom. We also watched several videos including videos from Rick Lavoie on better understanding the implications and feelings of students with special needs and these videos you will not soon forget.

In addition to the weekly readings and viewings we had several projects and discussion posts which centered on how to cater to the diverse demands that come with the needs of today's classrooms. Due to the complexity of the student make-ups I have in the resource room each year I was so appreciative of the strategies and presentation of weekly topics provided in this course. Indeed anyone who interacts with children, in any capacity, would benefit from all that is addressed as it will make you better prepared for preventing misbehavior and how to effectively deal with it when it occurs.

Analysis of all that I have accomplished and learned in all of my courses, not just the four mentioned, is phenomenal. In an era in teaching where analysis is the new status quo, it can be disheartening and discouraging at times but it is also a powerful tool to aid the modern teacher. The analysis of how to take what I have learned and couple it with what I already knew and making my teaching more effective has taken much thought but certainly has not led to paralysis. If anything as the dawn of graduation approaches and soon having my Master's degree in hand will only wet the appetite leaving me hungry for more in my quest for gaining an understanding of what it means to be a lifelong learner and master teacher.