

An Accidental Student

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As stated in my Goal Reflections and Future as a Learner essays, my own master's degree began somewhat accidentally; I didn't plan it, desire it, or even think I would complete it. Begun as a means to return to teaching full time, it was simply a requirement for me, and at times I doubted I would finish. At one time I decided definitely **not** to finish it! But taking it step-by-step, with hard work and sacrifice, I have reached the summit, and the view from the top is impressive!

When I began the Master of Arts in Education program through Michigan State University in July of 2010, I had been out of school for 27 years. I did not fit the profile of the typical student, I had neither friend nor mentor who had done what I was about to embark on, and I had real doubts that I was capable of doing the work. In addition, I thought studying for a degree online would be dry and impersonal, especially in a format that I found to be "unfriendly" due to my lack of experience with technology.

What I experienced was that the format was incredibly flexible, the work was challenging while also very interesting, and the technology became "friendly" as I became more familiar with it. The work was neither dry nor impersonal, as I found I was able to establish a sense of community within my small groups, working with students located around the globe. I discovered that with significant time and effort on my part, along with the encouragement of caring instructors, I was able to complete the work successfully.

There was a difference, however, working with students much younger than I; their work seemed to flow easily, while my brain often acted like a cold engine struggling to warm up. Initially my posted comments were more often based on my 27 years of teaching experience and 25 years being a mother, compared to the bookish answers they gave. I came to realize that my experience, supplemented with the theories and methods I was currently learning, would help me become the best teacher I possibly could be.

It's been quite a journey full of many surprises, teaching me more than I expected. For instance, my first class, TE861-C, Action Research in K-12 Science and Math Classrooms, encompassed largely that – action research. However, what I will remember from that class was reading Carol Dweck's *Mindset*. I was fascinated about the concept of a closed versus growth mindset. Which did I have? Which did my husband have? Did I think IQ was fixed in a student or could it change with increased effort? How would my students' mindsets affect how they learned?

I didn't realize that the manner in which I praised my students would affect their motivation, or that praise directed at results actually decreases motivation. My praise instead should be directed at their level of effort, embracing a growth mindset that believes 99% of success is due to hard work. I noted, "Great teachers believe in growth, talent, and intellect, and are fascinated by the process of learning." I realized this is me; I was fascinated by all of it. My instructor for that course, Adie Slaton, was very patient

and kind with me as I began my journey with some trepidation and fear. I was off to a great start.

The initial goal for enrolling in the MAED program was to renew my provisional teaching certificate. In addition, I was required to take TE 846, Accommodating Differences in Literary Learners. I began with the attitude of completing the class just to check a box; I did not expect to learn much that would apply to my position as a high school math teacher. Pleasantly surprised, I found it interesting to study the importance of reading skills across the curriculum. At the time that I took this class, I was teaching biology in addition to math. I knew that some of my students struggled with reading and comprehending the biology text. This course impressed upon me that background knowledge significantly increases reading comprehension, and that reading comprehension is necessary to increase a student's understanding of content. I began to directly teach decoding, vocabulary, and employed writing exercises to help my students achieve deeper understanding. I also learned that peer tutoring is a valuable method to improve student achievement, and shortly after this course I began a peer tutoring system in my school.

I learned about the CARES acronym, which helped me remember that if a student was having difficulty reading I could: change their environment, alter materials, revise teaching strategies, exchange task requirements, or substitute alternate learning or assessment tasks. I read, "The child is always right; if they do not succeed, then you have not yet found the correct method." This statement has had a profound effect on my practice. Now, instead of reacting to a student's struggle to understand as something lacking in them, I look to myself to find ways to differentiate my instruction. It is up to me to find the best ways to help each child learn.

I discovered in 2013 that in order to gain my professional certificate I would be required to take another reading course, TE 843 Secondary Reading Assessment and Instruction. Even though I was pleased by the amount of material in TE 846 that was directly applicable to my math teaching practice, it was with reluctance that I thought, "Another reading course?" Yet again, I found the course material stimulating, and was able to implement several methods and theories directly into my teaching.

I learned that in order for my students to become lifelong learners, and to think, act, and speak like mathematicians, they must develop disciplinary literacy. I did not realize the importance of teaching specific reading strategies regularly in my math classes to help them achieve this. Employing a new strategy I developed a reading guide for my Algebra II students, and asked them to complete it while reading their text. This activity was contingent on them carefully reading their text, which most did not normally do. When we discussed the answers to the guide, I was able to show them where particular facts were found in their textbook and how information is often represented, all unique to math textbooks. I continued throughout the rest of the year practicing strategies that helped them use their texts to find the information they needed to improve their math proficiency. These strategies are not inherent in our students; nationally 66% of graduating high school seniors do not have the reading skills necessary for college or

career. When I read this statistic in the course materials, I wanted to immediately call the faculty of my school together and explain the importance of teaching content area reading skills. It is shocking to me that there is such a deficiency in our country's educational system.

It would be difficult to decide on a favorite class in my program, but one that readily comes to mind is CEP 802, *Motivating Students*, taught by Dr. Evelyn Oka. I enjoyed focusing on the student as a person, their psychology, and the research behind motivational theories. I was highly motivated to learn how to help my students become motivated! I learned about self-determination theory, and how allowing my students to have a say in what they learn, and helping them to understand the value of a task, helps eliminate the standard question, "Why do we have to do this?" I became aware of how important self-efficacy is in a student, that they have to believe they can be successful, and that they need to experience success to build motivation and confidence to attempt more challenging tasks. I noted, "What a person *believes* will happen in the future, is more determining of their success than what *has* happened in the past." This challenged me to focus on developing positive attitudes in my students regularly. I began the practice of leading them in meta-cognitive reflections before tests; "Do you believe you can do well? Tell yourself you *will* do well!"

Most notable in this class was discovering why some students resort to cheating. As described in my Annotated Transcript and in my paper found in my Showcase, I was able to better understand a particular student's motivation for her dishonest behavior. Moreover, I was able to share my insights from this class with her other teachers and our administration. The explanations I offered, all backed by research, helped us to work positively and empathetically with this student and her family.

Most surprisingly to me has been my growth in the area of educational technology. Although my concentration areas include technology and learning, technology is not something that was of special interest to me, or for which I had a natural affinity. Despite this apprehension, I decided on this concentration because I knew it would benefit my practice.

The online format of the MAED program required me to learn about Google docs, wikis, Angel, and working with a new laptop instead of my desktop computer (which shouldn't seem so daunting, but indeed it was at the time). It was with some fear and self-doubt that I began each technology course, wondering, "What new technology will I have to learn this time? Will I be able to figure it out?" I had written the definition of "hyperlink" in my notes for ED 800, such was the level of my technological expertise. Other seemingly mysterious terms are now so familiar to me: Skype, twitter, Mozilla Firefox, Zotero, podcast, webinar, Piazza, and all things Google. I am grateful for instructors like Kevin Simpson who gave support and guidance in a non-judgmental manner, which allowed me discover new technology with confidence.

I now regularly use web-based math sites and the TI 83/84 in my classroom (which I learned how to use by Googling instructions.) At a faculty meeting a couple of years ago,

we discussed how best to write a document as a group. I suggested using Google docs as it would allow us all to add to the document and access it from many locations. I happened to be the only faculty member familiar with Google docs at the time, and hence, we did not use it. I had better luck suggesting its use to my student council members and we have found it to be an effective and efficient way to collaborate on documents and agendas.

I am currently working on my e-portfolio for this class, my first website, and I plan to use my new skills to design a website for my classes this fall. I am slated to develop and teach AP Calculus this fall, and have utilized the AP College Board website, researched open courseware through Harvard and MIT, and have found online videos created by calculus teachers that they use in a flipped classroom format. I have even found PDF copies of calculus textbooks online, and am considering using them in place of the traditional calculus textbook. (I will note, however, that many of my students have requested we use a traditional textbook, and I can empathize with them that reading material online can be challenging.)

It doesn't seem possible that 4 years ago I was unfamiliar with searching the web for anything more than maps or the weather. Even though I was reluctant to learn the new technology required in each class, I have become very familiar with and even dependent upon most of it (although I still don't tweet!). Learning and using technology is the area of greatest growth for me while in the program, and I know there is so much more for me to discover.

Throughout this journey I have made more sacrifices than I had expected, in some cases missing my children's activities or time with my family, all in order to complete my coursework. Yet when I reflect on what I have gained through the process, I am amazed. Even though I did not seek it on my own, I believe it would have been a serious disservice to my students *not* to have enrolled in the MAED program. I may have been an accidental student, but I am much wiser for the experience.

“It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters in the end.”-Ernest Hemingway