

# My Journey Towards Become a Well-Rounded Educator

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Three years after becoming a teacher, I was feeling more and more confident about being a teacher and felt like I could shed the label of a beginning teacher. Those few years of experience, combined with strategies from colleagues and much trial and error, had led me to make huge gains in all aspects of teaching. I was content with my classroom management, my ability to plan an effective lesson, motivate students, foster collaboration and assess students. I was happy with the way that I improved and was feeling very comfortable with my teaching, but this is a double edged sword. Much in the same way that we want students to operate right at the upper limits of their ability level, that same principle applies to teachers. The improvements that I had made in my effectiveness as a teacher meant that I need to raise my own standards, and in came my MAED program through Michigan State.

I had always planned on working for a Master's degree and when it came time to search for the program for me, I did not have to look very hard. I am very proud to have learned about teaching from the top education school in the country and there was little doubt in my mind that it was the best place for me to continue learning. When looking at the available programs from MSU, the MAED program immediately jumped out for two key reasons. First, it is completely online which was important because I knew that I might be moving down to Louisiana. As I began to look deeper, the most appealing part of the program was the set up. There was flexibility in the concentration area that I chose, but also room for me to take a wide array of courses that were all extremely relevant to me.

As I mentioned before, I wanted to continue to push myself and my teaching and the area of technology was a big part for me to improve on. I am very comfortable using and implementing technology into lessons, however often times I realized that it didn't really enhance student learning. Surely my teaching would improve greatly if I were able to use technology more effectively than I had been, so I chose it as my concentration area. At that point, I had also finished my second year of coaching soccer and had developed a strong passion for coaching. It provided me another way to connect with a small group of students, teach them about soccer and other life skills, and establish meaningful relationships with them in a different way than a teacher can. When I saw that I also had courses through the MAED program that focused on coaching, I was sold and knew immediately that this was the program for me.

Throughout the past year and a half, I have learned many things. I learned how to use specific resources and tools that have helped me immediately in the classroom, but more importantly I have learned skills to be able to continue improving, so that in three more years I do not get content and stop growing as a teacher. While every course has had a meaningful impact on my learning, a few in particular have really helped me reach my goals and equipped me to keep progressing.

One of the first courses that I took, over the summer of 2013, was CEP 816: Technology, Teaching and Learning Across the Curriculum. Right away this course helped me address the problem that I had been having with using technology effectively. I have grown up with technology and am pretty familiar with the many things that are available to be done online, but I was missing the connection with how to use the internet to enhance learning. When I was in high school, the technology we used

consisted of overhead projectors, graphing calculators, and maybe using the internet to research a particular topic. In the short time since I graduated, I hadn't realized that a fundamental shift had occurred on the internet and this had a profound impact on teaching with technology. The internet was no longer a vast encyclopedia of information, created only by people who were skilled in web design and writing code. Instead, we are now in an era of Web 2.0, where anyone with fast enough connection can now be a creator on the web, just think how easy it is to create a Facebook page. When used appropriately, social media like Facebook or Twitter can be great communication tools, but the educational ramifications are much deeper. I had known about many of the resources that we covered in this course, but for the first time I viewed them through an educational lens. It was easier than ever for students to create videos, blogs, websites, podcasts and collaborate with others through the use of wikis or communication tools. I finally saw that the potential of using technology and it aligned with all of the higher order thinking skills that teachers strive so hard to incorporate in their teaching.

In the spring of 2014, I continued down my technological journey by taking CEP 805: Learning Mathematics with Technology. Right away we discussed possible affordances that technology can have in a mathematics classroom, which echoed many of the things from the prior course. The primary benefits of this course were that it was specific to mathematics and I got to work very closely with two other MAED students who were teaching the same subjects as me. Somewhat inadvertently, I learned the power and importance of having other professionals collaborate with to solve problems, gain another perspective, or simply bounce ideas off of. I also gained the ability to

objectively evaluate resources and think about the benefits of using a particular piece of technology. For example, a tool such as Geogebra can be tailored for virtually any mathematical content, while allowing students the chance to interact, manipulate and explore some of the “what if...” questions that students have but might not ask. We also got a chance to look through the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) standards and evaluate tools for their effectiveness in the standards. NCTM emphasizes that all mathematics students, K-12, be able to understand patterns and relationships, symbolically represent mathematical situations, use mathematical models, and analyze change. For my final project, I compiled and evaluated many Algebra tools that fit into these categories and created a wiki to make them available to me and any other teachers interested.

To round out my technology concentration, during the summer of 2014 I took CEP 820: Teaching Students Online. Right now, all of the classes that I teach are traditional, face-to-face classes, but this class has forced me to think about all the pedagogical implications of teaching online. I mentioned above that in my first three years of teaching I had made gains in classroom management, assessing students, motivating students and fostering collaboration; this course allowed me to expand those improvements into the realm of online or hybrid teaching. For example, online classes (and also many face-to-face classes) have much less focus on memorizing information since the information is readily available on the web. The skills required of students would then be to analyze and synthesize the information to create new meaning. Therefore, a proper way to assess students could be to have them apply their knowledge to a different situation by creating something new. In order for me to apply

what I learned, I had to apply my own knowledge to create an online unit that I plan to use this upcoming school year. For this unit, I learned to plan opportunities for students to explore and manipulate the mathematics while collaborating with their peers. The assessment is also aligned with my learning objectives where students are required to apply their newfound knowledge of exponential functions to a real world scenario.

With these three courses I now feel confident that I am able to effectively incorporate technology into my teaching to actually enhance student learning, but there was another draw for the MAED program. In the fall of 2013, I took KIN 855: Psychosocial Bases of Coaching Athletes, which served as a great way to grow as a coach. Before I started coaching, I had been playing soccer at some level for roughly 20 years, so I was comfortable with the tactical aspects of coaching soccer but didn't realize everything else that goes into it. Just like teaching, simply knowing the subject is not nearly enough to be an effective teacher. During this course, I evaluated my strengths, weaknesses, and philosophy as a coach while also learning about many of the mental aspects that are required to accompany the tactical side of coaching. The experiences that I had coaching had shaped my beliefs so far, but I took it a step further in this course by creating a coaching philosophy to help guide all of the coaching decisions I make. I also had a chance to delve into issues that many players face, such as motivation and dealing with pressure, as well as how coaches might want to address it. For example, to ease the players who might struggle with staying motivated, I learned how goal setting, expectations, feedback and rewards play into the Self-Determination Theory and the effect that it has on motivation. KIN 855 was truly a course that helped me to become a more complete educator. Here I have been

prepared to help reach athletes and create a positive environment for them outside of the classroom.

As I write this essay, I would be remiss if I left out one more course, one that has been just as important as any other that I have taken. Since starting my program in the summer of 2013 and finishing it the summer of 2014, time for reflection has been difficult to come by. Each course built in time to reflect on the content of that particular course, but I didn't have much time to connect the themes from all of the courses in a deep, meaningful way until I began ED 870: Capstone Seminar. The only new information I learned was some of the basics of designing a web page. Part of the course was creating this portfolio, which is a valuable resource in itself, and am equipped to design websites for my class, for coaching and possibly for a personal page. While creating the website has been very helpful, the most beneficial aspect of the course was that there was finally time to reflect on all of the experiences that I have had as a whole.

Upon reflection of my four years of teaching combined with my MAED program, I keep coming back to two main themes that I have learned. I had believed it before, but have since strengthened my belief that learning is never complete. As a teacher, it is important to make sure that I keep up with best practices and stay receptive to new ideas that might help me be more effective. With the rate that technology is developed, it is easy to see the importance of continuing to evaluate old technology and try new technology in order for it to stay effective in the classroom. In addition to life-long learning, another common theme is the importance of decision making. Teachers are being asked to do more with less, so making sure that everything has a purpose is more

important than ever. This means incorporating technology not because it looks good, but maybe with the purpose of fostering collaboration. This means assessing students not by relying solely on standardized tests, but also through assessments that match my goals and allow students to demonstrate their knowledge in a different way. This means making pedagogical decisions not because of outside pressures, but always with the end goal of enhancing student learning in mind.