

Synthesis Essay

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My journey to attaining a Master of Arts in Education Degree (MAED) began on a cold day in February 2011. With nervous excitement I sent off my application consisting of professional goals, several letters of recommendation, and a few other important documents speaking of my academic abilities and determination. I was just finishing up my second year of teaching secondary English and felt that I was finally ready to take on the challenge of juggling Master's coursework alongside teaching full-time. At this point, I knew the journey was going to be intellectually challenging, but I also knew it was essential to sate my desire for betterment. Two years and two career changes later, I can say that I've grown in monumental ways as an educator and as a person; through it all, my master's coursework has helped me navigate the obstacle laden path to creating a new professional identity.

I won't say the journey to attain my master's degree was always an easy one- it was rife with caffeine-induced late nights, red-rimmed blurry eyes, sighs of frustration, and puzzled expressions- but every ounce of effort has contributed to the professional I am now. My experiences in the MAED program have bolstered my courage by arming me with the latest evidence-based practices on how to successfully support my students. My courses have also challenged me to reconstruct my teaching philosophy by exposing me to a wide expanse of theories and methodologies. I've also managed to develop my writing skills, explore different forms of technology, research innovative practices, and so much more. Specifically, my professional identity has morphed to now include a much better aptitude for encouraging literacy growth in my students and embracing the possibility of returning to adult education.

It's pertinent to know that even though I was accepted into the MAED program in March 2011, I took a six month hiatus after being pink slipped from my job as a high school English instructor. During this hiatus, I accepted a new job as an instructional designer and was trying to find my footing in the world of adult education. Although I was mostly content with my new career, I decided that it was time to stop ignoring the polite inquiries of my academic counselor. On a fateful December morning, I swallowed my battered pride and signed up for my first master's course, TE 843-Secondary Reading and Assessment. Admittedly, I wasn't very enthused to begin this course. I was still nursing hurt feelings over my pink slip and was undecided whether I would ever return to the world of secondary education. Despite my initial cynicism and hesitation, this course managed to rekindle my passion for literacy and then some.

One of the most enlightening aspects of this course was the assigned readings. In particular I found myself immediately engaged with the text *Best Practices in Adolescent Literacy Instruction*. This text focused specifically on secondary educators and covered topics ranging from English Language Learners to adolescent motivational factors to digital media and beyond. I would devour the readings and then found

myself spouting off interesting facts and statistics to my husband during dinner conversation. The reading reminded me how passionate I was about literacy- specifically digital literacy.

Beyond the assigned readings, I also completed a series of three literacy projects. There was a literacy inquiry project, creation of a literacy-driven lesson plan, and finally the composition of a comprehensive unit with literacy at the heart. Each of my literacy projects focused on allowing students to think critically about digital literacy. While designing my final project, I was especially inspired by Wilber's chapter on digital literacy within *Best Practices in Adolescent Literacy Instruction*. Wilber (2008) aptly says, "Literacy teaching is all about teaching our students to understand the messages they get and create through a *variety of texts*" (p. 66). In my experiences as a high school English teacher, I had spent so much time exposing students to reading and writing through traditional print methods, that I had completely unrepresented digital literacy. I began to rethink my conception of literacy skills to include authoring and consuming digital literacy as being essential skills for my students.

For my final project, I took advantage of my new appreciation for digital literacy and designed a unit that was fully multimodal. The unit asked the students to combine linguistic, aural, visual and perhaps kinesthetic elements into one polished piece. The goal behind every assignment within my contrived unit was to force my students to understanding the complex relationship between all of these elements and how they can be seamlessly blended to create one cohesive piece. I envisioned that as students worked on this project using a variety of technologies and resources, they would build new literacy skills so that they would be able to easily adapt and gain skills in a rapidly changing world of technology.

Another course which was extremely influential in how I approach literacy was TE 846- Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners. This is a course required for every Michigan teacher applying for their provision certificate. Upon entering this course, I felt fairly confident in my skill level because of my background in English education; however, I quickly learned that I was quite inept when it came to helping my students diagnose literacy weaknesses.

The largest component of this course was completing a Literacy Learner Analysis. For the purposes of this project I selected one struggling literacy learner and over the course of five weeks worked on evaluating, diagnosing, and improving specific literacy weaknesses. My biggest challenge was figuring out how to assess my student's strengths and weaknesses. As a general education high school English teacher, I had become accustomed to having my student's abilities spelled out for me in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP). I never thought of how crippling this sort of dependence was until I was forced to evaluate my own student for this project. Although I felt woefully unprepared at the initial stages of assessment, I relied on the help of my instructor and colleagues and eventually gained a huge appreciation for the process of determining exactly what types of literacy weaknesses a student is experiencing.

Beyond learning innovative ways to assess a student's literacy abilities, I also gained a new understanding of how a student's home literacy habits impact their school performance. Some of the chapters within our textbook were influential in shaping how I approached parents and their role within their son or daughter's literacy habits. I learned that I could have an impact on my students' literacy outside of the classroom and that if they managed to form new literacy habits it could have a dramatic impact on their progress. Lastly, while it was always something important to me, I gained a new appreciation for harnessing student motivation in order to truly engage them with literacy.

Throughout my master's coursework, my philosophy on literacy was dramatically altered, but I also gained valuable knowledge about post-secondary leadership and learning as well. My first dabble into the world of post-secondary education came in the form of EAD 877- *Program Planning and Evaluation in Post-Secondary Education*. Although I had been an instructional designer for the state of Michigan for almost nine months now, this course served as my first explicit study of adult learning. This course truly took apart the process and methodologies behind program planning for adult learners- the before, during, and after stages. It was so influential in my thoughts on adult education that it also inspired me to change my primary concentration from "Literacy" to "Postsecondary Education and Leadership."

For the first few weeks of this course, we dove into the many different forms of adult learning experiences and how they were similar or different from primary or secondary education experiences. We discussed at length the common traits of adult learners and I made the realization that my adult learners had very different needs and learning styles than that of my previous high school students. We addressed the many warring responsibilities of an adult learner, the increased motivation they typically come with, the need for immediate use of their skills, in addition to many other attributes. Because of these differences, I had to rethink the way in which I designed my instructional modules.

Luckily, the coursework of EAD 877 helped to mold my new approach to program planning with in-depth readings, discussions, and research. Within the six weeks of this summer course, I began to truly understand the key elements of program design: building support; identifying goals; creating transfer of learning plans; submitting work for revision; implementation; and formulating suggestions for improvement through evaluation material. I gained a whole new respect for the complexity and hard work that effective adult learning programs necessitated.

In the end, I was able to take the concepts of this class and directly apply it to the courses I was designing for Michigan prosecuting attorneys at the time. I even gathered up the courage to engage my boss in a frank discussion on ways in which our program planning methods needed to change in order to be more effective. When he voiced that he was willing to let me experiment, I jumped at the opportunity to try out the seven step process we had discussed in class. I'm happy to report that I soon became one of the most highly reviewed instructional designers on my team after

implementation of the course's methodologies, despite being the youngest and newest member.

The last course that had a large impact on my skills and abilities is ED 870-*Capstone Seminar*. One of the most wonderful aspects of this course was that it enabled me to gain confidence in web design and online portfolios. Even though I've gained a deep respect for technology's place within the classroom, I'm definitely not the most technology savvy person. The main essence of this class, creating an online professional portfolio, gave me an opportunity to slowly but surely hone my web designing skills. Even though I knew very little about web site creation, formatting, and layout when I began, I came out of the course feeling exhilarated. My confidence has increased tri-fold and if I determined that if I achieve this sort of success, so can my students. I definitely plan to have my students create an online portfolio to showcase their learning this upcoming school year.

Another added benefit of this course was that it allowed time for reflection of my graduate experiences on both micro and macro levels. Through a series of three essays, I was allowed to look back at my courses with a critical eye in order to evaluate how I've grown and changed. While in the trenches of my graduate work, I spent most of my time moving from one assignment to the next and wasn't afforded much time for self-reflection. I sincerely appreciated that this course had built in time for goal revision, setting, and reflection. Sometimes I feel like I take for granted the importance of setting goals and the feeling of elation when you realize you've managed to not only meet but exceed those goals. It was important for me to reconnect with those original goals to appreciate how much I've changed as a person and a professional over the past two years. It's truly been an awe-inspiring journey.

I arrive at the end of this journey a changed person. Looking back to reflect on exactly how and why I've changed makes me realize how lucky I've been to have such a full educational experience. Although it's easy to quantify learning in terms of the numbers of pages I've read or the essays I've written, there is so much more to my graduate experience than those things. I've grown and gained in ways that can't be quantified. I've gained skills, wisdom, confidence, courage, peace and so much more. While the rest of my friends and colleagues often groan at the prospect of taking continuing education credits, I must say I look forward to my next opportunity. This experience has been so influential, I can't help but be excited at the potential for further growth through my next education journey, whenever it may be.