

Learning to Master the Art of Teaching

Picture this: In May of 2009, there was a young woman who had just completed a successful teacher internship in a suburb of Detroit, Michigan. Armed with an excellent transcript from the top-ranked College of Education in the country, a full-year internship, a stellar résumé and portfolio, and an outgoing, enthusiastic personality, she was confident that she would be one of the few hired for a full-time teaching position in one of the worst job markets the country, and especially Michigan, had seen in years. Reality check: Not even one interview that entire summer. She ended up being “doomed” to two years of substitute teaching because, even though she had interviews the next summer, her luck was no better for the following school year either.

Although this may seem like a devastating string of events, substitute teaching turned out to be an excellent learning experience, as I observed many educators’ teaching styles and gained experience in teaching all grades, K-8. Additionally, this relatively less busy time in my teaching career presented me with the opportunity to work on my Master’s degree from Michigan State University’s online Master of Arts in Education (MAED) program. The courses in this program have presented me with strategies and techniques to use both as a substitute teacher and in my current position as a middle school English teacher. The program has also given me the opportunity to reflect on my roles as a learner and teacher and how online learning can be a significant and powerful tool.

Throughout the MAED program, many of the courses have had a great impact on my teaching. ED 800 Concepts of Educational Inquiry focused mainly on two concepts: the history of various methods of teaching and learning and why they are effective, and the importance of reflecting on one’s teaching. One theory that has made its way into the education lexicon and has

become a well-respected teaching tool is Howard Gardner's concept of Multiple Intelligences. I often keep this theory in mind when planning lessons. For example, my musical and kinesthetic learners in sixth grade learned the "Preposition Song" during grammar lessons and created choreography to go along with it.

Knowing that my seventh graders were the rowdiest classes and that many of them were athletes and/or good actors, I created some kinesthetic and drama-based lessons throughout the year. These students wrote and acted out TV commercials to coincide with the public speaking unit I taught, and we followed it up with a red carpet awards ceremony. They also performed "Casey at the Bat" during our poetry unit.

I combined visual and kinesthetic learning while my eighth graders selected more colorful and specific verbs and adjectives for their writing. They "nibbled", "scarfed", and "chomped" on animal crackers while I added those and other terms they came up with to a class chart. They also "leaped", "crept", and "strutted" around the gym, and I added those words as well. Throughout the year, remembering multiple intelligences and other teaching methods, I tried to vary the types of activities I did with my students so that they were engaged and used different modes of learning.

In addition to teaching methods learned in ED 800, I also came to realize the importance of reflection. Several times throughout the year I've found myself reflecting on why a lesson didn't work well and immediately writing down different strategies to try for next year. When I taught a fiction writing unit to my seventh graders, for example, we read some fairy tales that had very clear beginnings, middles, and endings. We also discussed together what happened in each of those parts. Then, the students wrote their own stories. Many of their stories had beginnings with very little set up, good middles, and very abrupt endings. A common one was,

“And then I woke up and realized it was all a dream.” This was their way of getting out of their stories quickly and still giving it a somewhat believable ending. Reflecting on why I kept reading these “dream” stories, I realized that it was because the students had not had any practice writing endings of stories. Therefore, I decided that for next year, not only would we look at examples of entire stories, but that I would also teach individual lessons on beginnings, middles, and endings of stories so that students could get a better sense of the style of a typical narrative story.

Likewise, I made notes of lessons that did go well and why. One example of this is the Academy Awards ceremony I did with the seventh graders after they finished the public speaking unit. I decided to use this as a celebration of the hard work each group put into the commercials they wrote and performed. The day of the ceremony, I laid out a wide strip of red tarp from my door all the way to the other side of the room. I also made a sign and hung gold streamers in the doorway, welcoming them to the awards show. I used a fake microphone as I performed my emcee duties, and then we watched each commercial that I had recorded. Students cheered and banged on their desks after each video. Afterward they voted for their top choice in three categories, but they couldn’t vote for their own group’s commercial. While I tallied up the votes, each group wrote an acceptance speech in case they won. Lastly, when I announced the winners, I had them walk the red carpet to a majestic piece of John Williams music from my iPod, and then I handed them their dollar store trophies.

Once I recognized how engaged and excited my students were during this whole activity, I decided this would be an annual event. Reflecting on why this was such a great lesson, I realized that it was because students celebrated their work, embraced the classroom community

as they cheered for each other, and used their newly learned public speaking skills to write (and possibly deliver) their acceptance speeches.

Since I minored in English and history during my undergraduate program, I decided to learn more about teaching math and science. Even though I am now teaching middle school English, TE 855 Teaching School Mathematics was invaluable to me at the time I took it. During this time, I had been hired as a long-term substitute in kindergarten for the first half of the school year. Part of the kindergarten day was spent in centers, which included a math center. TE 855 gave me insight into young children's understanding of number concepts, and as a result, I was able to create some very rich activities for my students to complete each day during centers time. This course also gave me an appreciation for how much thought and planning goes into making truly meaningful lessons because, even for learners as young as five, teachers still need to think about differentiation and activities that are engaging.

As part of the science and mathematics concentration in the program, I had the opportunity to take TE 831 Teaching Subject Matter with Technology. Not only did this course introduce me to some of the latest Internet technologies, but it also was a lot of fun to play around with some of those tools while creating engaging lessons for my own classes. Additionally, this course gave me the confidence to explore other technologies and programs on my own, which has been beneficial for my students. For example, this year I used a publishing website for my students to create children's books. They uploaded their stories and illustrations so that they could be published and sent to us.

While I taught third grade during a long term substitute position last year, I also incorporated technology into some of my lessons. During "March is Reading Month" the school embraced a Dr. Seuss theme. To go along with this, I had students write Dr. Seuss-like poetry.

Then I created a class blog and taught them how to create blog entries with their poetry.

Additionally, they learned how to comment on a blog entry. They were each assigned a partner and commented on each other's poetry. Some students enjoyed it so much that they asked me if they could comment on everyone's entries. Blogging has become a popular way of expressing thoughts, so my goal was to teach my third graders a practical skill in a fun and creative way.

Before taking TE 831, I would have been hesitant about testing the waters of some of the programs I have experimented with during and after the course, but now I have the confidence to plunge right in.

TE 846 Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners serves as the Michigan Department of Education's required reading instruction course for teachers to qualify for a Michigan Professional Teaching Certificate. This course offered teaching strategies in all areas of literacy, geared especially toward struggling and/or English as a Second Language (ESL) students. There was much focus on differentiation in order to meet students' needs. This course served me very well, as this year, during my first full year of teaching, I was able to develop strategies for my lower level writers. Most notably, I implemented a "Writing Boot Camp" once per week after school for students who really struggled in this area. We worked on basic sentence structure, clarity of writing, and punctuation and grammar. Every student who came on a regular basis made enormous strides in their writing throughout the year. In fact, one eighth grader went from about a second or third grade writing level to solid eighth grade writing by the end of the year. Thinking about TE 846 helped me identify which students needed accommodations and which teaching strategies would work best for them.

While the above courses prepared me to successfully address several technical aspects of my profession, I firmly believe that every teacher should be required to take a course on

classroom management since it is one of the most challenging parts of the career, especially for new teachers. CEP 883 Psychology of Classroom Discipline gave me tools for managing classroom behavior and encouraging student motivation. I use many of these learned techniques in my current classroom, including the enforcement of briefly stated, clear-cut rules, a positive reward system, posting weekly updates on my website for parents and students, and using parent volunteers. Another terrific aspect of this course was the close learning community I formed with my partners. Both of them had been teaching for several years, so they were able to offer me advice about classroom management as well.

Although the above techniques are all important, the most significant concept I learned from this course was that of the 3 C's: competence, contribution, and connection. First, one goal I set for myself at the beginning of the school year was that I would give students precise feedback on their writing in hopes that it would motivate them to make something better in each subsequent paper. In order to help them feel competent, I always gave them specific details about what I liked in their writing, followed by a suggestion for improvement. Students told me later in the year that my feedback was helpful because they knew what I was looking for.

Second, all year long my students contributed to our classroom. I wanted them to know that it was important to me that they take part in creating useful tools throughout the room since they would be using them. Therefore, throughout the year students volunteered to create bulletin boards based on what we were learning as well as posters of grammar concepts and writing strategies.

The last "C" is connection. Forming connections with my students is so important to me because I have found that it leads to trusting, caring relationships, which can increase student motivation. At the end of the year, I asked students to fill out an evaluation for English class.

The first part stated, “Name at least two things that helped you improve in English this year and why they were so helpful.” One student wrote, “When you worked with us one-on-one for our poems because it made us feel like you care.” Whether I peek over their shoulders to work with them on assignments, find out about their interests outside of school, sing with them on the bus during the eighth grade trip to Washington, D.C., or spray my hair pink so that I looked as crazy as they did on Field Day, taking advantage of these opportunities to connect with my students makes teaching, frankly, a lot of fun. More importantly, it shows my students that I truly care about them, and it fosters a mutual respect, so that students are more willing and motivated to learn and act appropriately. Another evaluation question asked, “If you could give next year’s class advice about what to expect for this class, what would you tell them?” One of my favorite answers stated, “I would tell them to be quiet because nice teachers deserve respect.” Needless to say, the 3 C’s have worked very well so far.

In addition to direct instruction of teaching strategies, the MAED program has emphasized my dual role as a learner and a teacher. I have always enjoyed learning and often get excited when I learn new facts about an interesting topic. However, before I decided I wanted to be a teacher, various people had asked me if I’d considered it as a career. This was around the time I had graduated from high school. Each time, I promptly replied, “No. Why would I want to be in school for the rest of my life?” At that point, I think I was pretty “schooled out”. The thought of only having to be in school for four more years seemed doable, but it was surely not bearable for the rest of my career. Yet, that relentless little thought kept coming back to me, and I began considering the reasons why I might enjoy teaching. What I realized was that I wasn’t condemning myself to being “stuck in school”, but that I would be able to share my love

of and enthusiasm for learning with my students. Now, that is one of the things I love about teaching.

Let me illustrate this with an example. One day, after doing several sentence diagrams on the board together, I said to my sixth graders, “Oh my gosh! We just diagrammed the most complicated sentence so far this year. I have to take a picture of it!” My enthusiasm rubbed off on them, and they readily agreed that this lesson learned warranted its own photo shoot.

Teaching will always be a never ending process of learning—learning through life experiences and travels, learning about new teaching techniques and best practices, collaborating with and learning from other teachers, keeping up with technology, and learning from my students about their needs. As a learner and a teacher, it is my duty to incorporate these elements into my classroom.

To elaborate on one of the above examples, I know that as a teacher-learner, I must learn from my students in order to be effective. If something is not working for them, I want to know so that I can figure out a different way to teach a particular lesson. Besides using assessments, I asked students to fill out evaluations a few times during the year, and I took their feedback into consideration. I also listened to them when they told me in person about lessons that were not helpful. For example, my students in all three grades made vocabulary flash cards to help them study new words. I required them to write the word on one side, and on the other side write the definition, synonyms and antonyms. Some sixth graders told me one day that writing the terms out was not really helping them, and they wanted to know if they could illustrate the word and add a caption instead. I did not have a problem with that, since I know some people learn better through pictures. They later told me they were glad that I was willing to listen to them and change things. In this case, I learned from my students about what worked best for them.

Part of being a life-long learner is keeping up with technology. In an age when a seemingly infinite amount of information is available to us at the click of a mouse, teachers must realize how significant and powerful technology can be in the world of education. My online courses provided me with teaching techniques and resources that are very applicable to my classroom.

When I first began the MAED program in the fall of 2009, my initial thought about the entire program being online was, “That’s cool (and convenient),” but other than that, I wasn’t sure what else to expect. I had taken one online course when I was an undergraduate, but if someone had told me several years before that I would be earning an entire degree online, I would have considered that nearly impossible, bearing in mind my fair amount of incompetence with technology before college. Yes, I had grown up with a decent amount of technology in my life, but I had never been one to experiment with it.

Perhaps the biggest influence the program has had on my education, in terms of being online, was the countless opportunities I had to experiment with the latest programs and Internet technologies for many of my courses. All of the courses were set up using interactive sites, such as wikis. Since beginning the MAED, I have become proficient in using programs such as Photo Story, creating websites, and using sites such as VoiceThread, Wordle, and Glogster. All of my courses also offered an abundance of supplemental resources that I can access if I want to teach a specific skill or experiment with a new technology with my students.

Another aspect of the MAED that I really enjoyed was the collaboration with other teachers. Often, part of our class participation involved working in groups, responding to classmates’ posts, and offering suggestions. I have worked with teachers of all ages, backgrounds, experience levels, and teachers of various grades and subjects. Collaborating with

and learning from them also relate to my dual role as a teacher and learner, as I constantly learned about strategies and lessons that worked well for these other teacher-learners.

The MAED program has provided me with priceless resources and information that have guided me through my first years of teaching (both as a substitute and a full-time teacher). While I am teaching, I will sometimes recognize a strategy I learned in one of my classes, but what I think is most interesting is that it took this written reflection to realize how much I actually apply the information I have learned. These strategies and techniques were presented in ways that made it easy to naturally incorporate them into my teaching. So, what would I say now to that young woman with the excellent transcript, a full-year internship, a stellar résumé and portfolio, and an outgoing, enthusiastic personality? I'd say that learning to master the art of teaching is a never ending journey because there is always more to learn, so it is important to take every type of teaching opportunity on the way to becoming a master teacher.