

Becoming a Professional Educator

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One day, after a particularly stressful day of teaching Kindergarten, I found myself **reflecting** at my desk and feeling like I chose the wrong profession. In my mind, I felt my class was “out of control” and that they weren’t making progress, and I was failing as an educator. I’ve always been a very reflective teacher and admittedly a little too hard on myself. I wanted to do better for my students. I felt immense pressure from our district "big wigs" to have all of my students reading at a certain level, counting to a certain number, and mastering several broad science topics all in a matter of months. I didn't feel like the methods I was using were effective enough for my students. I wanted to do better for myself. I started reading teacher blogs and websites about classroom management and effective instruction. I realized the answer to my problems was maybe I needed to build a stronger foundation to build upon. Perhaps I could benefit from an advanced degree. I knew with a young daughter and a full time job I didn't have time for a traditional classroom setting, so I researched online programs. I found Michigan State University's Master of Arts in Education program and was immediately excited about the program. I wanted to earn my **Master’s degree** to reach the next level as a professional educator. **I wanted to be a better teacher.**

Confidence

Over the past two years I have completed the majority of the coursework in the **Michigan State University Master of Arts in Education (MAED)** program. I’ve spent countless hours reading books about teaching philosophy and practice, creating online assignments (where half the time is spent with trial and error), creating and remixing the

curriculum; all in an effort to increase my skills as an educator. Needless to say - it's been a lot of work. But with the workload came immense change in my perspective on education. One change I have noticed in myself as an educator is an **increase in confidence**. I think deeper about instructional choices and spend more time thinking critically about the needs of my students. I value the information I gain about my students from the varying assessments I am now more qualified to give. I have learned methods to help me truly teaching for understanding rather than trite memorization. The MAED program has made me a better educator overall, a true 21st Century Educator, with the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of all of my students.

Assessment

During my MAED program at Michigan State University (MSU), I had the opportunity to dive deeply into topics that were truly interesting and beneficial to myself as an educator. I felt like a lot of what I learned during my time as an undergraduate was surface learning. As I started teaching Kindergarten in 2012, one area in which I felt underprepared was giving assessments. During my MAED program, I took CEP 804A with Dr. Carol Sue Englert, in which assessment was a major focus. During this course I learned to take and score a **running record**, create **formative** and **summative** assessments, **chart and monitor progress**, and use assessment data to drive instruction. All of these essential skills have helped me be a more informed educator when it comes to individual students' strengths and weaknesses. I have increased my skills in giving assessments, but I have also learned to pick and choose appropriate assessments for students. Beyond what my district requires for all students, there are several assessments that I have found to be beneficial in targeting specific skills for my students, including:

Words Their Way, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS), Early Reading Diagnostic Assessment (ERDA), and many others. There are many other online resources for helpful interventions as well, including interventions for word identification fluency, letter name and sound fluency, and decoding and recoding words. The way I search for assessments is different as a result of this course. Rather than using only what the district tells me to use, I have the experience and professional background to identify a student's weakness, searching appropriately online for tools and to administer assessments and interventions.

After taking CEP 804A, I have changed the way I group my students during literacy center rotations. I used to group students only by their reading levels, which created a group (or two) of underachieving students, some groups of core students and a group of higher achieving students. I learned in this course that pulling a group of students with the same reading level is okay, but when they're doing the other literacy centers it can be beneficial to group them **heterogeneously** to allow some **peer-to-peer learning**. I took myself out of my rotations completely and now I pull students to work on guided reading as well as other literacy skills. This means a student with a very high reading level may be pulled into the same group as a student with a very low reading level if they both need help on the same skill. As a result of Dr. Englert's course, **I am looking deeper at the needs of students and attacking their weaknesses more effectively.**

Another beneficial course involving assessment was TE 861A: Teaching Science for Understanding with Professor Tamara Heck. I learned in this course that assessment can mean much more than a standardized bubble sheet. In this course I learned how to create assessments that would hold my students to **high standards**, but also give them an

opportunity to thrive in a way unique to themselves. I completed a formative assessment project in which I changed the way I assessed my students' understanding of the function of plant parts. I noticed during this unit how I was better able to assess preexisting knowledge and post instruction knowledge, but also that my students were able to see their own shift in understanding. During our last unit of the school year, my students started a **journaling assessment** where we used different colors of colored pencils to write about topics before and after instruction. This small change in instruction gave me a way to assess the students' prior knowledge without the arduous experience of administering a whole class pre-assessment as traditionally done in our curriculum. It was also beneficial for the students to be able to reflect on their prior knowledge and have a visual representation of how their understanding changed as a result of our study. The experiences I had during TE 861A were very powerful and definitely affected my teaching practice. I now approach assessment and lesson planning in a much more thoughtful and meaningful way. I use what the district asks me to use because it is important to respect the assessments chosen by our superiors, but I also create ways that are helpful to me as an educator to assess my students. The skills I learned in Dr. Englert and Ms. Heck's courses allowed me to use assessment to drive my instruction and to tailor my instruction to the needs of my students.

Technology

One major part of my Master of Arts in Education degree was TE 831: Teaching School Subject Matter with Technology, taught by Professor Jon M. Wargo. This course changed the way I think about educational technology. Before taking this course, I was the teacher using technology "for technology's sake" and basically just digitizing pencil

and paper work. With all of the affordances teachers have now to use the internet and other technological resources during instruction, it is simply not enough to put students on computers and call it technology integration. TE 831 influenced me to change a major part of my MAED program to focus more on technology. I learned how technology can be meaningfully and effectively used in every subject area. It was in TE 831 that I was first introduced to the **TPACK** -technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge-Framework. I learned that each component of the framework needs to be aligned to maximize student learning. As I've started to plan lessons with TPACK in mind, I can see how my teaching is much more effective. My students are more **engaged** in their work and my lessons are more **meaningful**. I am no longer digitizing traditional work, rather using appropriate technological resources in my lesson planning.

One example of how **TPACK has influenced my teaching** is a recent activity my students completed during summer school. I was working with a group of students who had not yet mastered all the letter names and sounds. Instead of sitting in front of them showing flashcards and having them repeat the names of letters, I used the **interactive white board** in our classroom and found a fun game for them to play. Instead of repeating flashcards, the students were given a specific letter and one minute to pop as many bubbles presenting that specific letter as they could. They were challenged to distinguish their letter from other letters in the alphabet in other bubbles. This game was great for the whole class because students worked together to find the bubbles and were so **excited and engaged** to find the letters in the bubbles. As a correct bubble came on the screen, all of the students shouted the letter name and the "popper" student had to pop the bubble. Using this technology integration made learning fun for my students, but also

appropriately taught them the names of many of the letters! After learning how to play the game as a whole group, the students were able to play individually play the game on our **Chrome books** turned into tablets.

After completing TE 831, I decided to pursue the **Educational Technology Graduate Certificate**. I wanted to earn this extra credential to showcase my skills in using technology in education. I completed the course requirements for this certificate and have started to use what I learned in these courses to help other teachers and connect more with my students' families. I have created new ways of **collaboration** among teachers through the use of Google Docs and have started a website to connect with my students' families. In the fall I plan to use my YouTube channel to post important videos about our current areas of instruction as well as to create an easily accessible digital newsletter to keep families informed. I hope to become a **technology coordinator** for my building next year, and have aspirations of advancing within my district into our technology department in the future. I am grateful for the experiences I had in the MAED program because it opened a new avenue for me professionally that I had not previously considered. I had no idea signing up for TE 831 would change my entire coursework plan as well as my future as an educator (but I'm so grateful that it did!)

Open Mind

Another major change in my perspective as an educator is a **newly opened mind** when considering different teaching methods and philosophies. I have to admit, there were times during my MAED program where I would begin a course and think, "What? They want me to do what?!" But, overtime, I realized the **value** in each course I took and how they all helped to shape me as an educator. I was experiencing the **inquiry-based**

education that I was reading about in all of my books. I was able to see first-hand how beneficial project-based learning can be because I experienced it in the MAED program. If someone had told me before I started my Master's degree program I'd be making pianos out of vegetables and learning to crochet, I would have laughed and probably thought the person was crazy. One of the most beneficial parts to the MAED program was the hands-on, real world learning that takes place during this degree program. I was doing assessments with my real students and building a **professional and thoughtful online presence**. I was changing the way I teach science and math and finding a new world of technology integration. I am incredibly grateful for all of the learning experiences I had during the MAED program and truly feel I have reached the next level as a professional educator.