

Graduate school has made a substantial impact on my life. For one thing, it has definitely impacted my debt to income ratio. I have since made peace with the fact that the multi-lettered object I have always coveted will be an MSU M.A. as opposed to a BMW; not as easy to show off, but infinitely easier on the monthly maintenance bills.

My graduate school journey has also challenged me to rethink my practices, beliefs and approaches to teaching and learning. Underneath this fiercely sarcastic exterior lies a reflective person who fills notebooks with notes on lessons, going over what I could have done better, how I could have made a lesson smoother, what did I do (or not do) that made the lesson implode, how do I better engage students? As is obvious, the reflections center on me doing the work and carrying the weight of the classroom. What I had never reflected on, never really considered however, was my students and how they could carry the weight of the classroom. What could they have done better? Why did they connect with in that lesson? Why did they not connect with the lesson? What do they need to be engaged? Even though I was reflecting –it was on my teaching not their learning, believing they were one in the same. Graduate school made me realize they are not.

There are so many hurdles set up in the education world today for students to overcome; they have to get the right numbers on the right tests, they have to take classes in subjects earlier than the previous generations, they have to be bigger, brighter and faster. They have to do all this, while navigating through an education world still operating using principals grounded in practices from the turn of the 19th century. Meanwhile, the job of educating these students has to be done by professionals who have college degrees yet who are under respected, overworked and held to accountability measures which are sometimes extreme and irrelevant to measuring true learning. So how to make the two merge into a workable classroom where the expectations of both worlds are met? *Concepts in Educational Inquiry* required that type of reflection by focusing you on examining why you are doing what you are doing. Once I began this reflection process, I found myself questioning the role of assessment in my classroom; what was I using it for? Why am I assessing them? What does it measure? In pondering these questions, I solidified my understandings and objectives; the practice (formative) is more important than the test (summative), the lessons need to be relevant to the real world and the grades should reflect understanding.

Previous to teaching, I made a career out of being able to do something no one else could, I created my position and I consistently recreated the position in order to adapt to changes in demand and needs. I was able to do this because I had the capability to use my creativity. One of the greatest discoveries I have made over the past year and half is that of Sir Ken Robinson, and his insistence that schools need to bring back the element of creativity. This creativity element had been the key component to what made Americans unique powerhouses in the world's economy. Now as we strive to hold our own with other countries, we are slowly "deluminating" the creativity spark which separated us from others.

Through his unassuming TED Talks, Robinson delineates the changes in education which are proving to be detrimental to students. With this concept of creativity in mind, I have structured assignments which allow students to harness their creativity, using it to display their mastery of a subject – this most notably with the independent reading assignments. I have also altered the way I instruct in my class as well. Moving away from lectures, I allow a listening activity of creating a word cloud to become a pre-reading activity or have students present collages based on their understanding of a concept. I am still not where I want to be with creativity in my classroom, but as with anything, it will take time to develop and create its own identity in my classroom.

My previous career success wasn't solely dependent on my creativity though, it also hinged on my technology skills. I can honestly attest to there not being a POS (point of sale) system, regardless of store or industry, which I cannot operate. The reason being, I have been exposed to enough of them where I can see the similarities in how they work and I can adjust accordingly. Students need to have this ability as well. They may be able to figure out the latest social media platform, but most of them can't figure out a PowerPoint.

When I began this grad journey, I was indignant that students were being denied technology in a world that runs on technology. The idea seemed ludicrous to me. A main part of why students aren't paying to attention to implemented classroom rules is because they are working counter to what students know and understand. It is reminiscent of the days when TV, then video, exploded into the mainstream and the general vehemence opposed to utilizing the new media as a vehicle to help students comprehend something. But being caught in up in indignity didn't allow me to see the potential down side to using technology in the classroom.

Technology, Teaching and Learning Across the Curriculum presented this issue from both sides. Technology isn't just about using it in the classroom; how to incorporate it is just as important because it needs to be relevant for the future. Yes, it's great fun to use technology, but who is showing them how to use it responsibly? Who is instructing them on how to question and disseminate the information they are finding? Who is prompting them to question the source and its information to determine if it is erroneous? Looking at technology from this vantage point I realized students shouldn't just be using technology to use technology or because it is newest thing, they should be learning something that will allow them to think more creatively and critically and be able to do what I was able to do- craft a position for themselves which does not yet exist. *Teaching School Subject Matter with Technology* then augmented what I was beginning to ascertain about technology. Here, I had to evaluate various technology, and then programs, for accessibility, ease of use and alignment with Common Core standards and my current curriculum. I had to examine and reflect on what, and why, a particular technology was suited to a lesson. This meant adjusting the way information was disseminated and assessed. It also meant relinquishing control of the classroom, and by extension the learning, to the students to see what they made of it; altering the classroom environment from "Just Goggle it" to using Padlet to critique methods of suspense Edgar Allen Poe uses in "The Pit and the Pendulum" and letting the students determine which examples were acceptable.

MSU has reminded me of what it is like to be a student as well. Understanding my student's struggles better, has increased my awareness of what I need to be doing in the classroom to make it easier for them to understand material and to give them a larger variety of ways to show mastery.

Writing Instruction and Assessment made me cognizant of how I write papers and complete assignments, which has helped me be a better teacher. I clearly remembered procrastinating when writing a paper in high school, but now I remember why – it was because I either didn't think I knew enough or because I was unsure what the assignment was requiring. To combat these things in my classroom, students are presented with similar information in various formats; a story, an article, a song. Additionally, I have created sheets designed to help students deliver quality feedback to their peers and now build time in specifically for the students to receive that feedback and time to revise whatever is not working in their papers.

Since I have developed a clearer understanding of the learning process thanks to *Electronic Portfolios*, I have redefined what is important in my classroom as well. Formative assessments have moved to the forefront in my classes since practice is where a student learns most. These formatives also have a new look as they are more structured, and diverse, to meet the needs of the students. Time is built into their schedules for in class revision of this formative work in order to ask for clarification or to provide additional practice to assist them in feeling comfortable with taking on the summative.

Building a viable website was something I never thought I would add to my repertoire of skills, yet the axiom "never say never" certainly applies here. The **Capstone Portfolio Course**, the penultimate graduate school experience, has challenged me on multiple levels. I have had to reflect on my goals, contemplate my future and bring together everything I have learned in the last year and a half. I have had to design pages, create layouts and delve into a creative realm in which I have found myself surprisingly adept.

Combined, these classes have accorded me the realization that the way to truly engage the students is to keep the learning grounded in "real life". Students work better when see the relevance of an assignment as it pertains to them and how they can use it later on. For instance, as part of preparing the students for reading *The Crucible*, I had them read articles defining and discussing witch hunts. These articles discussed such witch hunts as the Japanese internment camps, McCarthyism, the 9/11 and Boston bombings. Surprisingly, this unit was overwhelmingly popular with the students. Many reported not knowing what the term referred when we first began and how they did not realize this was something which kept repeating throughout history. As they made connections and realized implications, their discussions became filled with thoughtful commentary embedded with support both from the text and from current events, the Michael Brown case for instance, which were transpiring as we read. This type of learning, one not manufactured to fit the needs of a standardized test, is genuine and timeless. This genuine type of learning keeps them coming to class and involved because they are learning something, not just completing something for an irrelevant letter grade which means nothing outside of the walls of academia.

Michigan State's Graduate School has reignited a passion for teaching in me I believed had been legislated away. The program has also pushed me off the plateau of acceptance I had settled on and encouraged me to explore, to questions and to attempt. It has strengthened me both professionally and personally as only true learning can.