

### Four Years of Change

After my student teaching year, I always told people that the college of education process at universities is backwards. People should student teach FIRST, and then complete their undergraduate degree in education. I aimlessly learned all sorts of theories and educational practices during my undergraduate years, and when I graduated I felt I had this education thing down to a science. After all, the [Michigan State University College of Education program](#) is number one in the country, right? I was going to change lives, I would be everyone's favorite teacher, and my students would develop a desire to explore the world and read more as a result of my teaching. I even stood on a desk my first day of school as a teacher like Robin Williams in [Dead Poets Society](#). I did not realize I was in for rude awakening during my student teaching. It was mentally and physically exhausting, NOT all of my students chose me as their favorite teacher, I spent all of my time planning lessons in my classroom (including weekends), and not every student left with a stronger desire to explore social studies.

When I accepted my first teaching job at Bath Middle School teaching Language Arts, I knew I had to rethink my purpose, instruction, and the way I communicated with students so they would be more positively impacted by my teaching. When I decided to get my Master of Arts in Education (MAED) degree, several of my classes challenged my thinking about my approach to my career and responsibility as an educator. This is when I began to realize that universities had their education programs backwards. Of course, we must have some background knowledge before entering the classroom. However, I found the instruction in my master's program to be infinitely more meaningful than what I learned in my undergraduate program, and I believe this is mainly because I could readily apply the information I learned and the information made sense because I saw the topics we discussed on a daily basis. I decided to focus my degree on literacy because of my middle school language arts teaching position, which I have continued to hold throughout the four years I have been enrolled in my master's program. This was a brand new content area for me, and I figured extra support with instruction related to literacy could only help improve my chances of connecting with students and finding more purpose in my career.

I can honestly say after earning this degree through rigorous coursework I feel much more confident in teaching the reading and writing responsibilities of language arts, in managing behavior in the middle school classroom, and incorporating technology into my instruction to benefit students and parents. It's actually quite comical the difference a few years and a master's degree makes. I do not even want to think about my first year of teaching and how different my approach was in these three specific areas. I did not use one single online platform during my first year of teaching. Now, as a result of this program, I have multiple avenues for students and parents to access my curriculum and follow along with daily instruction. Before I began teaching, I assumed all students would behave because I naively thought my instruction would deter students from misbehaving. Now, I recognize that students come from many different backgrounds and socio-economic status households that misbehaving is often a perception I have and not a conscious decision many students make. In my first year of teaching, I was taken aback and impatient with the reading levels of my students. Reading had always been fun and simple for me, but I did not realize some students cringe at the idea of reading, and some will simply refuse to read aloud for fear of embarrassment around their peers. This program has taught me

ways to meet readers where they are at and help build their literacy levels and engagement with reading.

My first impactful course in my master's program was [CEP 841 - Classroom Management in the Inclusive Classroom](#). I did not know what I was in for when I entered teaching middle school. After my first year, I knew I needed to make drastic changes to my classroom management approach. I had students who literally could not write one sentence. There were multiple sixth graders that read at a low elementary level. Some students were so disrespectful that I would lay awake all night wondering how I could get them to learn and enjoy school. CEP 841 changed my vision about how students perceive school and provided me tools to build a positive community within the classroom. There was an excellent metaphor the instructor used to describe how we should approach our students; we should be like doctors. Hospitals do not treat all of their patients that same way; some patients need one-on-one care, some just need medicine, others need surgeries, and some patients only need to be checked in on from time to time. I began to realize my students had these same needs, and that I must approach them all as individuals if I wanted to give them the feedback and instruction they need to be victorious in school.

This class introduced me to [Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports \(PBIS\)](#) and [Response to Intervention \(RTI\)](#). As a result of this class, I now participate on both teams at Bath Middle School to provide students school-wide support both academically and behaviorally. I learned that many skills I assume students have today often are not taught in homes, and so they must explicitly be taught in schools. For instance, many of my students lack basic social skills and now I spent a lot of time in the beginning of the school year practicing and modeling how to work in groups, politely respond to someone, and to participate in a classroom. I remember one quote from this course, "Adolescence is a 365 day battle to not be embarrassed. Students say to themselves everyday, 'Please God. Don't let me be humiliated in front of my peers.'" ([Richard Lavoie](#)) I try to see my students through this lens and use their deficiencies as learning opportunities instead of humiliating them. This course also has helped me to be more patient and understanding with students with disabilities. Personally, I was always successful and proactive in school, so it is hard for me to imagine what it is like to be a student who does not perform well and is made fun of by their peers. This reflective course helped me to step outside of my comfort zone and understand the perspective of these students, and now I am a big advocate for these students and I work extremely hard to ensure their comfort at school.

The second course that helped me improve my teaching was [TE 836 - Awards and Classics of Children's Literature](#). Dr. Django Paris challenged my thinking and approach to teaching literature, and as a result of taking this course I bought several new books to place in my classroom, created a "suggested reading list" for middle school parents to take home that included award-winning novels, and purchased a class set of the graphic novel [American Born Chinese](#) to discuss stereotypes, bullying, and racism in schools. In this course, I was encouraged to read books from different marginalized groups - ranging from LGBTQ literature, stories about children with cerebral palsy, to novels written about African American youth. These sorts of books assisted in engaging students that do not feel connected to the curriculum I was teaching. I learned that kids are drawn to characters they can relate to, so giving students opportunities to be connected, confident, and engaged will help them stay motivated in class. The visual nature of

the graphic novel helped to engage students and allowed for students to deepen their comprehension with the assistance of pictures along with the text. I plan to regularly incorporate these sorts of novels into my instruction in the future.

In addition to TE 836, my [TE 846 Accommodating Difference in Literacy Learners](#) course helped me to deconstruct and identify weaknesses in literacy achievement for individual students, assess their capacity to read, write, and comprehend, and develop a plan to increase their literacy abilities. Through creating a comprehensive reading plan for a struggling reader, I found that introducing close reading strategies, providing a framework and scaffolds for writing instruction, and providing visual vocabulary instruction, was very helpful for young readers. I learned that many students are labeled as having a “learning disability” because they seem to struggle with reading in class. However, this course challenged me to change my approach and provide instruction that helps build readers’ confidence. Ironically, we often have a “teaching disability” rather than the student having a reading disability. Now, I use proper instruction that targets comprehension and higher order thinking skills that meets students at their zone of proximal development. I intentionally include inferences, determining the main idea, visualizing, predicting, defining unknown words, and making personal connections into all reading strategies in my class.

I was unsure how impactful an online education would be for my master’s degree, but the introductory course [ED 800 - Concepts of Educational Inquiry](#) quickly helped me realize how important the online format would be for me both as a learner and as an educator. I was very overwhelmed by the amount of hyperlinks and “extra” information that was included in the text. However, I quickly realized that much of my students’ daily reading comes from the online community, and an important skill for them is deciphering what is important for them to read versus information they do not need. I was experiencing online literacy in the same way my students do in school. This is something I never had to learn in middle school, but now it is of grave importance for adolescents. This course helped me realize that teaching literacy just five years ago is different from teaching it today, and teaching literacy today is significantly different than the practices students will use in the future. My school district made a big push the past three years for including Google accounts for all students, and now I have a one-to-one classroom with a full set of ChromeBooks. This has allowed me to [move much of my curriculum online](#). I learned in this course we should always be preparing students for what they will experience both now and in the future, and students will undoubtedly be continuing to use more and more technology in their education. Additionally, I have incorporated instruction on using credible sources, citing them appropriately, and navigating the web purposefully to meet the needs of their task. Since technology is, and will continue to be, a major focus of 21st century classrooms, I am happy that my students are ahead of the curve with these advanced resources and intentional instruction. In addition to teaching students, I also have adapted to ensure parents receive the communication they need at home. I have created a course website, I update my [Planbook](#) on a weekly basis, and I send home weekly resources via e-mail and [Remind](#) to make sure students and parents have all of the information they need to thrive in school. My students can readily access their Google Classroom page which provides helpful resources and dropboxes to keep assignments organized.

I am grateful for these experiences at MSU. I was on a quick descent to retiring from education after my first year of teaching. I learned there was much I was unprepared for in teaching. At times, I felt helpless to make the necessary changes to help my students succeed and to continue my career as an educator. However, this program has provided tangible resources to approach my teaching differently as it related to literacy achievement, managing a middle school classroom, and providing online instruction. I entered my teaching career naive and unaware of the challenges that truly face education and teachers all over the world. In an increasingly changing world, teachers must adapt their approach constantly to fit the learning styles of the students in front of them. My online master's program has allowed for me to be a reflective practitioner and find the gaps in my teaching, and has provided me resources to fill those gaps so students can flourish. I now have a brand new toolkit to share my passion for literacy, use technology in the classroom, and to form positive relationships with students while building a classroom environment that fosters respect. I feel prepared to be a leader both in my school and in my classroom. As I prepare to exit this master's program, I know this new set of fundamental interventions will allow me to confidently impact many more students than the first day I walked into my own classroom four years ago.