

## **The Teacher I Have Become**

*Thoughts on my master's experiences by Sarah Frazer*

When it was finally time for me to admit that I needed to begin working toward renewing my teaching certificate back in the fall of 2010, I was both filled with dread and nervous excitement. The dedicated, motivated teacher in me was excited to begin a new chapter in my educational career and to learn new ways to engage and inspire my students. The realistic, non-teacher part of me knew that beginning a master's program was a daunting task, and that it would mean a significant increase in my workload in the evenings and on the weekends. Thankfully, looking back on myself some two and a half years ago, I know that both parts of me were right; while earning my Master's degree has meant I have had to make some sacrifices in my personal life from time to time, it has also given me a much stronger foundation in best educational practices, from the forefront of the technology field to theories of improving student understanding grounded in years of research. I am now a more skilled practitioner, a more proficient teacher, and a more accomplished, enthusiastic life-long learner.

My work began in the spring term of 2011 with the introductory course each student in the Master of Arts in Education program must take: ED 800: Educational Inquiry. I remember my eagerness to begin this course, as well as the learning curve it took to get used to a program based entirely online. While the online program was my first choice for many reasons (the first of which was that it provided me with the flexibility to work at my own pace), I was unfamiliar with the course management system, as well as how to manage my time. ED 800 is an entirely student-paced class, meaning that the eight modules could be completed at any point throughout the semester, as long as they were all submitted by the course end date. This was definitely a struggle for me, and I can honestly say that above anything else, ED 800 provided me with a safe environment (as I was taking the class "independently") to get my feet back into the educational realm. Despite taking some time to get adjusted, I thoroughly enjoyed investigating the different theories and methods for participating in inquiry. My favorite was perhaps Howard Gardner, as his beliefs on psychology and learning resonated profoundly with my school's philosophies, which I have adopted into my own practice. Gardner believes that one curriculum does not suit all students, and that the goal of an education should be to create deep thinkers and problem solvers, who are both knowledgeable and passionate about world issues. As an educator, I believe in differentiation and student choice, and that there is no "one size fits all" pathway when it comes to life. With Gardner's ideals in my toolbox, I felt I had a stronger theory in what I believed I should provide to

my students, and with my first class completed, I also felt more prepared to tackle the structure and rigor of my next master's courses.

My next two courses were perhaps my favorites out of my entire program, as they asked me to step outside my comfort zone and equipped me with an arsenal of digital tools and resources to use in my classroom. I took both CEP 820: Teaching K-12 Students Online, and TE 831: Teaching Subject Matter With Technology in the summer of 2011. TE 831 focused on investigating several online technologies such as Wordle, Glogster, and VoiceThread, as well as the production of audio interviews and digital stories, while discussing how these technologies could be integrated into curriculum through the theory of TPACK (Technological, Pedagogical, and Content Knowledge). I learned the importance of only using digital tools in my classroom when they served a specific purpose, instead of just for the sake of being able to say that I used technology. I used many of these tools in my own classroom throughout the following year, and I always employed TPACK to ensure I was integrating technology appropriately and purposefully. I took this knowledge to the next level in CEP 820 when I was asked to construct an entire unit that could be accessed and completed by students online. This was an extremely intimidating assignment for me, even though I felt fairly confident with my technological abilities, I had never so much as created a website before, let alone an entire unit that followed and supported the National Educational Technology Standards (NETS). Despite my concerns, the course was paced extremely well and allowed me to first grasp the theories behind course management systems and online learning, and then put them into practice. I believe the online course I created on genetics and heredity encourages both collaboration and creativity from my students through authentic tasks that support many diverse learning styles, and I am extremely proud of my final product.

Over the following two terms, I took two science-heavy courses, CEP 806: Learning Science With Technology and TE 861A: Teaching Science for Understanding. CEP 806 challenged some of the ways I had previously viewed technology in a science classroom by allowing me to examine the benefits and disadvantages of online field trips, laboratory simulations, communicating with partners synchronously and asynchronously online, and the Internet when researching. While I enjoyed exploring the available online scientific tools, the major idea I took away from this class was that while technology provides educators with many "shortcuts," not all of them are necessarily as useful as others. It taught me to truly analyze each and every experience I provide my students with. TE 861 was more theoretical in nature, and reinforced many of my previously held beliefs on best practices in curriculum design. My

school routinely follows Wiggins and McTighe's Understanding By Design method for developing our thematic units, embedded with performance-based assessments of the content standards. Through TE 861 I honed my practice and came to the understanding that as an educator, I cannot teach meaning – I must facilitate my students' interaction with content through scenarios that provide them opportunities to create their own meaning.

The summer of 2012 presented me with one of my most challenging courses, as it was outside of my content area and focused on a term-long literacy case study. TE 846C: Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners is a required course for all educators seeking to renew their teaching certificate, and I was among the first to take the course since this new requirement took affect. As a secondary science teacher, it was initially difficult to find a topic that was relevant to me, as all the examples we were given were based on teaching phonetics or learning the difference between a verb and a noun. Eventually, I realized that I am constantly providing students with literacy support in science, and even though it may not look the same as the efforts that take place in elementary literacy, it is still significant and measurable. Throughout the term, I worked with one of my middle school students, a struggling reader and writer, to develop her scientific literacy through a focus on vocabulary and study strategies. She ended up earning an A on her science final exam, and through the process I ended up learning how integral literacy-explicit instruction is in all contents and disciplines.

In selecting my courses for the next two terms, I was lucky enough to choose classes that built upon some of my previous learning in the program. First, CEP 816: Technology, Teaching, and Learning Across the Curriculum was an extension of TE 831 (Teaching Subject Matter with Technology) in that we surveyed a wide variety of digital tools and programs and their uses in the classroom. Through an exceptional resource (Will Richardson's *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*), I learned that social medias like Twitter and Facebook have their place in a school setting, as well as how to effectively incorporate webpages and blogs into classroom culture – something I plan on implementing this coming year by having my advisory students develop and cultivate online portfolios to document their middle school career. The second class I took that I felt refreshed my learning from other courses was CEP 800: Psychology of Learning in School and Other Settings. I revisited the theories of learning like cognitivism, conditioning, and social constructivism that I had been exposed to in my undergraduate program, this time exploring them in a much deeper sense. I also once

again had the chance to work with audio production and digital stories. I felt that this class in particular, gave me the opportunity and the time needed to learn the intricacies of the tools I will ask my students to use in my own classroom. Had it not been for these particular assignments, I may not have had the time required to develop an expertise with these tools so that I would feel comfortable working through the kinks with my students.

This brings me to my final two classes in my master's program, which I am currently enrolled in while writing this essay: TE 861: Action Research in Science and Mathematics Classrooms, and ED 870: Capstone Seminar. TE 861 has so far been similar to the required literacy course, TE 846C, in that it involves establishing a relevant topic and proposing methods for conducting my experimental study. The research question I have *almost* finalized is: *How Does Collaboration Through Project-Based Learning Impact Student Achievement in my Science Classroom?* Although I am only writing a formal proposal for my research study in TE 861, I look forward to collecting and analyzing my data this fall. ED 870 is perhaps the most influential factor in my selection of Michigan State's online master's program to earn my degree over other options. The creation of my online portfolio has given me the chance to reflect on my learning throughout my program, and to construct a living documentation on my career as an educator. I firmly believe that it puts me ahead of other teachers without an online portfolio, as it very clearly demonstrates my accomplishments, skills, and passion for teaching. Even though my product is not yet finalized (and perhaps the hope is that it never will be), I am extremely proud of how professional my page has turned out to be, and how well it exemplifies me as a teacher and a person.

When sitting down to begin writing this essay, I felt the same sense of dread and nervous excitement as I did some two years ago beginning my master's program. Of course, it is on a much smaller scale – but present nonetheless. While I was excited that this is one of the last essays I will write before earning my degree, I also thought it would be extremely challenging to respond to a prompt as expansive as “discuss all of your learning from your master's program, and synthesize what you have learned.” I now realize that the extent of my learning is not something that can be summed up in an essay or even in mere words. This essay is an excellent place to start, as is my showcase page from my online portfolio. But the true testament to my learning is who I have become in my classroom: a teacher who provides her students with relevant, authentic assessments grounded in best practices, who believes that purposeful technology is integral in creating the digital citizens of the next generation, who wants her students to make the world a better place than when they entered it, and ultimately, a teacher who has the skills and resources to make all of this possible.