

The Art of Reflection

The action of reflecting throughout life is one that is typically highly encouraged. By reflecting, I mean analyzing one's own actions, being critical of all information being taken in and being presented out to others, and learning from those around you by observing their positive and negative aspects. When I applied for the Master of Arts in Education program (MAED) at Michigan State University, I was finishing up my junior year in undergrad and was feeling confident that based on the courses I was taking already I would be ready to enter my own classroom and tackle any challenge presented to me. I thought that with the right education and training, I would be ready to face some struggles my first year of teaching since I would have never actually done it before, but then after that I would just repeat what I did for all future years. Thinking back on that mentality makes me cringe because I could not have been more wrong. Throughout my entire experience working towards obtaining my master's degree, I have learned that teachers should always be growing, learning and, most importantly, reflecting on everything they are doing to ensure that they are providing their students with the best possible education and, therefore, the brightest future.

One course in particular that helped me understand that teachers need to be constantly reflecting and learning was EAD 850: Issues and Strategies in Multicultural Education. The course was focused on how the world as a whole has been slowly transitioning into many multicultural societies as opposed to having cultural segregation across the world. By understanding how the world is changing around us, we as teachers can better understand how issues of power, privilege, and oppression are ever present in and out of our classrooms. I took this class my senior year of undergrad while I was dual enrolled in undergrad and masters classes, and I must say this course really resonated with me. I was amazed at how strong of a role power, privilege, and oppression they play in all aspects of society, and often times in very subtle ways.

During the course, I was able to watch *12 Years a Slave* and analyze how multicultural education themes were present within the movie. This assignment made me see how a popular, Academy Award nominated movie, could have implications and connections to our current classrooms in the United States. I learned that everyone has social identities, some dominant and some subordinate, which shape who that person is. Those identities also play a factor in determining whether or not a person holds power, has privilege, or will experience oppression. I took this practice in analyzing power, privilege, and oppression and decided to continue to use that skill of analysis within my classroom to ensure that I am taking into account all social identities and working towards making my classroom as inclusive as possible.

Another assignment from that course that really changed the way that I view my job, and responsibility, as an educator was a critical book analysis. For this assignment, I analyzed the way that teachers present information to their students

in order to understand what it is that we are truly asking our students to learn. The main question that I was able to ponder was “are we as teachers trying to get our students to think and understand things the exact same way that we do or are we trying to teach our students to think for themselves and form their own understandings?” What a student experiences outside of school significantly impacts how he or she learns and understands within the school setting, and therefore needs to be taken into account by the teacher. If a teacher is trying to teach all students in the same way and is expecting that students will all learn and respond identically, then something is very wrong. Understanding that students are in school to grow and develop into their own unique persons, with different understandings and experiences, is fundamental to a teacher’s success.

A third assignment from EAD 850 that really opened my eyes to how important my job would be as an educator was a critical practice analysis. This assignment had me analyze the movie, *The Class*, and I ended up learning that if students feel as though their personality or culture may be diminished, altered, or misunderstood because of what they are learning or experiencing in school, they will be much less motivated to learn to their potential. This really made me think about the type of classroom that I wanted to have: an inclusive one where differences in students are celebrated and understood as opposed to ignored. I realized that I do not want to just teach all of my students in a singular way, but that I want to use what students bring to the classroom to help them make sense of the world around them the best that I can. Overall, this class really made me appreciate the importance of constantly reflecting on who my students are as people, as well as reflecting on the method and content of the information that I am presenting to them.

Another course that helped me understand the importance of constant reflection was ED 800: Concepts of Educational Inquiry. This course focused on understanding what it means to learn and to teach, but the part of the course that I will never forget was regarding teacher reflection. I had the opportunity in that course to read a book by Vivian Paley, an accomplished elementary teacher, called *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, which seemed to be a collection of self-reflections on her teaching career as she was approaching retirement. Within the book, she recounts many stories with various students and how each student and situation changed how she taught. She talked a lot about how no two years of her teaching were ever the same and how she used a tape recorder in her classroom to analyze class discussions and to document her own thoughts on each day. She would transcribe the recordings in a journal to reflect on later. I fell in love with this practice because it showed that she took her responsibility of constantly being aware of her students’ learning seriously and was always working on improving her own teaching for her students’ sake. I made the decision while reading that book, and writing a critique of it, that I wanted to constantly be adjusting my teaching practices to suit the current group of students that I would have. This art of reflecting on how teaching methods affect the learning of students and how each

new group of students each year will drastically affect the inner workings of the classroom really spoke to me and made me appreciate the practice of reflection.

ED 800 also gave me the chance to look at how teaching has changed drastically over the years to account for the changes in society. I learned a lot about how various educational theorists were always proposing new approaches to teaching, ranging from teaching by way of rote memorization to purely experience-based learning. Over history, how people have viewed classrooms and teaching has changed with the times. Today, there are so many ways that an individual can gain information that the classroom should account for that. During a time when information was scarce and more difficult to come by, learning information and storing it in the long-term memory was a critical part of school. Now, learning how to research and differentiate between truth and fiction is a critical part of school. Being able to go through and examine how people were constantly reflecting on the state of education and working towards adjusting it to meet the ever-changing needs of society made me truly understand that in anything you do, reflection and adjustment need to be occurring in order for success to be maintained. I knew at the end of ED 800 that my own journey of learning and growing as a teacher would never end.

A third course that will always stick out to me when thinking about how I came to appreciate and understand the importance of continuous growth and reflection is CEP 800: Psychology of Learning in School and Other Settings. This course focused on educating us about how people learn and the importance of connecting what is learned out of school to what is learned in school to give the in-school learning purpose. One assignment in particular that changed the way I viewed how I ran my own classroom was analyzing a clip from *The Big Bang Theory*. I looked at a clip where a character used positive reinforcement to change another character's behavior and I then connected it to how I can encourage positive behavior in my classroom without constantly issuing punishments. I had to reflect on how I handle discipline in my classroom, and how it is handled in my school as a whole, in order to decide whether or not the current approach would be the most beneficial for the students' psychology and development. I ended up finding a few areas where I was punishing unwanted behavior rather than using positive reinforcement to encourage good behavior, which is truly what young students learn more from. When I made the adjustments, I saw a huge difference in my classroom and I noticed that the number of behavior issues greatly decreased, which made the classroom function much more efficiently and made me feel happier since I wasn't issuing negative consequences as often. This showed me that just because I am comfortable doing one thing in the classroom doesn't necessarily mean that there isn't a better way to do it, thus increasing the importance of continuous reflection and personal growth.

The other way that CEP 800 helped me gain more of an appreciation for self-reflection was through the assignment of creating a lesson plan that emphasized inquiry-based learning and connections between in-school content and the real

world. Through the readings of the course, I learned that students are more likely to truly learn and remember information when they can connect it with something that matters to them or are able to see the benefit of learning the content. This really was not new information for me, but understanding how the brain takes in new information and determines what we remember and what we forget helped me better understand why encouraging students to make connections is so important. I was able to take my existing lesson plan for teaching the moon phases and improve it by adding in places for students to make real-world connections and really engage with the information beyond just reading about it. Then, I was able to teach my improved lesson to my students, and I instantly saw more students remember the phases from one day to the next than I had the previous year when I used my original lesson plan. I still made notes about what I would change for the following year and what I would add because I had truly learned the importance of continuous self-reflection and growth.

Looking back on the four years that I was learning and working towards earning my Master of Arts in Education degree, it amazes me just how much I have grown. However, the specifics about various educational theorists or details from hundreds of articles on the benefits of differentiation and educational issues found in today's classrooms are not what I will remember in thirty years when I think back on what I learned from my master's degree. I will remember how the program prepared me to lead a life of continuous learning and self-reflection, which in the end is much more beneficial because it opens the door to an immeasurable amount of information and improvement.