

The Shifting Motivation Beneath Lasting Learning Goals

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One Sunday night, during my first semester teaching, I sat surrounded by a mess of lab reports. It might have been 2 AM. Suddenly, I remembered I had to work the next day. I waited, expecting to be overcome by that weary feeling everyone understands. It is a feeling often accompanied by a sigh, and embodied by the phrase, “I don’t want to go to work tomorrow.” Yet, for the first time in any job I’d ever held, that feeling never came. In that moment, I realized that I truly loved to teach. It didn’t matter if I was grading papers at 2 AM, or that I would sleep only a few hours that night. I *looked forward* to work the next day. I had finally discovered my primary career path.

I still teach the introductory labs for the Biology Department at Drew University, as I did that first semester. In the beginning, I was an adjunct, covering the extra lab sections part-time. But when the lab instructor position opened full-time in 2013, I applied. It is difficult to hold a renewable position at a university with only a BA, so once I was hired full-time, I began to search for graduate programs accessible to working adults. Biology programs were my first thought, but I reconsidered. If I loved teaching so much, why not study it?

When I applied for the online Master of Arts in Education program through Michigan State in 2013, my primary goal was to improve my understanding of teaching. I had tutored before working at Drew, but my BA in Biology included no formal teacher training. Beyond the general goal of improved knowledge, I hoped to gain skills relevant to my position as a lab instructor working with college students. MSU’s program offered a concentration in postsecondary teaching and learning. It also allowed me to take courses that might address my student population and its increasing diversity. As a result, during my time in the program, I took classes on science teaching, postsecondary teaching, special education, teaching with technology, and next semester, I will take a course in multicultural education.

Now, in my penultimate semester, I find that my overarching goals have not changed substantially. I still strive to improve my understanding of teaching and learning and I still seek skills and methods to assist diverse groups of students. What has changed, however, is the motivation driving these goals. When I began classes through MSU, my teaching philosophy amounted to a jumble of feelings regarding respect for students, hands-on learning, and disciplinary knowledge. Through the MAED program, however, I feel I have begun to build the conceptual framework necessary to differentiate those feelings into concrete beliefs. I now recognize my desire to produce a learning environment free of threat, that enhances cognitive development through accessibility, diverse learning modes, and student control over learning processes. My beliefs, I realize now, are student-focused and derive from a nurturing perspective on education (Pratt, 1998).

This deepening of my educational philosophy has replaced my once self-focused motivation with a student-centered mentality. Examining learning and teaching in a post-secondary setting and investigating the needs of a diverse student body are goals consistent with my current philosophy. Yet I began the MAED program largely with myself in mind. I considered how achieving such goals would make me a better teacher. But teaching, as it seems to me now, is simply an extension of learning, and one which loses all meaning without primary consideration for the learners. I still strive to achieve the same learning goals that I set down on paper in 2013, but no longer for myself alone, or even for my love of teaching. Rather, it is for the the potential that learning brings for positive change in the life of a student that I strive.

References

Pratt, D.D. (1998). *Five perspectives on teaching in adult and higher education*. Malabar, FL:
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