

Learning to Fly:

A Synthesis of my Philosophical Journey through the Master of Arts in Education Program

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I still remember what I wore. A black, long-sleeved blouse, despite the late summer heat, and a pair of green corduroy cargo pants. I had never been so nervous in my life. It was the sort of panic that nearly stops all air from entering the lungs, and tosses one's lunch around like a ping pong ball before the Pick Six Lotto. Twenty-four pairs of eyes bored into my soul, and behind them, twenty-four brains waited in anticipation. *Could they tell?* Was it obvious to that first group of students that I was almost too petrified to speak? First-year college students often exhibit a dualistic stage of development (Perry, as cited in Nilson, 2010), so it was likely that many of those students looked beyond my silly cargo pants, perhaps even beyond my nerves, to view me as an authority figure. In their minds, they were poised to begin their first-ever university biology lab, where I would impart to them irrefutable facts about science.

I didn't feel like an authority figure. Twenty-four-years-old with nothing but a measly BA, I felt far too young and far too under-qualified for the job I was hired to do. But I pushed past the panic and I opened my mouth. I told them my name and seven years later, I still look out at twenty-four pairs of eyes from the same spot in the same lab where I stood that first day. A lot has changed in those seven years however, and my mindset as I began this fall semester was far different from the mindset with which I taught my first lab. In the beginning, good teaching to me was the clear and logical dissemination of concepts. I prepared for my own lab sessions by observing the incumbent lab instructor. I took notes from her pre-lab lectures and at home I rehearsed those same lectures. I matched her lectures with the PowerPoint presentations I created. Sometimes, I used her PowerPoints. My primary concern was surviving the pre-lab lecture. Of course, I knew what each lab activity entailed. I knew what the students were supposed to do and I could help them as I rotated around the room. During my first few semesters though, I rarely considered what the students were meant to gain from the lab

activities. My focus was on me, and ensuring that I didn't look like a bumbling fool during the pre-lab.

Today, I might argue not that I was a bumbling fool in those early years, but that I largely misunderstood teaching. As the years passed, however, a philosophy of sorts began to take shape in my mind. I began to recognize that students liked certain labs and disliked others. That there was always a wide degree of variability among students' conceptual understanding, their high school preparation, and their preferences for lab activities. I also noticed that while some students readily mastered concepts and skills, others failed to demonstrate growth, even by the end of a semester. My predecessor eventually moved with her family, and I was dubbed lead lab instructor by default. Suddenly, I felt a degree of ownership over the courses I was teaching, and I found myself making changes for the first time in three years. I turned to the course evaluations to read student assessment of their learning experiences. I replaced traditionally ineffective labs with different activities and I modified assignments. By this point, I had already determined that teaching would be integral to my career goals, so in the spring of 2013, I applied officially for the renewable position of First-Year Laboratory Instructor.

The teaching statement I submitted with my application materials articulated the shift from self-focus to student-focus already apparent in my understanding of teaching. It emphasized hands-on learning, competency in fundamental biological concepts, and effective scientific communication. All three are components of my practice that remain important. Still, I wished to further develop my understanding of teaching. The impetus to formally continue my education took the form of an unspoken caveat of my rehire. Essentially, if I was to keep teaching at Drew, I needed a Master's degree. I had applied and been accepted into Drew's Master of Arts in Teaching program, but that program presented a problem. It was specific to secondary education,

and although night classes were available, it required a full semester of student teaching at a high school. With full-time employment, a semester's leave was not a feasible option. At a colleague's suggestion, I began a search for online programs. I found myself intrigued with Michigan State University's Master of Arts in Education program. Not only was it highly ranked, but it offered me the potential to concentrate my studies in postsecondary learning. I began my MAED journey in the fall of 2013, and as I write this essay, it is hard to believe that I am just one semester short of completion. Despite the shift in my educational thinking already underway when I enrolled at MSU, it is through the MAED that I have truly developed a deeper understanding of my learners and solidified my educational philosophy.

My path through the MAED might have taken many forms, but I chose to begin with some courses in my Postsecondary Leadership concentration. EAD 861: Adult Learning, was the first course I took, and it proved to be an advantageous first choice. In EAD 861, we examined who adult learners are, their ways of knowing, their educational motivations, and their motivational deterrents. A persistent thread throughout the class, one which extended into additional courses I've taken, was the idea that adults continue their education with the expectation that new learning will be immediately applicable to their lives. EAD 861 was one of many courses throughout the MAED program that offered me excellent potential for applicability. We were given the opportunity to investigate a chosen population of adult learners. I work with college students of traditional age, and because they are not technically considered adult learners, I compared their learning to learning in adulthood. I found that many of my students likely align with a transitional phase of the life cycle recently termed "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2000). This life stage is categorized by instability, self-focus, and

exploration, as emerging adults are no longer dependents of their parents, but still have not adopted traditional adult roles (like employee, parent, or spouse) (Arnett, 2000).

Through my research, I found that despite their distinction from adults, college students' cognitive development and motivational deterrents to education appear to reflect adult learning theory. To successfully engage in learning, college students likely require support and encouragement to achieve higher levels of cognitive development. Growth and motivation may be sustained if students are given a sense of control over their learning. Further, instructors can combat withdrawal from learning by fostering mutual respect among class members and by creating a learning environment that values the learning perspectives and contributions of all students. Given the student focus my teaching philosophy had begun to develop through my experience working at Drew, I took this new perspective on my learners to heart. The understanding I gained in EAD 861 served as a launch point for my further development in subsequent courses.

The following spring, I enrolled in EAD 866: Teaching in Postsecondary Education. The semester began with an investigation into the characteristics of our learners, much of which coincided with what I'd learned in EAD 861. We then turned our attention to some of the best, literature-supported methods for college teaching. It was in this course that I finally grasped the importance of well-developed learning objectives. In my first years as a lab instructor, I actually felt as though it were silly to divulge learning objectives with students. I even struggled, myself, to understand the "big picture" of the labs I taught, as they were initially unfamiliar exercises designed by others. In EAD 866, however, I came to recognize that for a learning endeavor to be successful, goals and objectives must be in place from the beginning. If an instructor or facilitator is to guide student growth, learners' projected achievement should first be clear.

Instructional methods to assist students with content and skills development can then be determined.

Further, EAD 866 emphasized learning relevant to our instructional contexts and offered numerous opportunities to apply our learning in practice. I recreated the syllabus for my fall semester lab course and engaged in some much needed critical reflection about the learning outcomes for the course. I also implemented some important modifications to a three-week lab sequence in my spring semester lab course. These modifications drew from my learning in EAD 861, as well as some of the best practices for instruction examined in EAD 866. I used group contracts and team building tools in an effort to foster mutual respect among group members and enhance collaboration. To support cognitive development, I scaffolded students learning by breaking up the stages of experimental design across the three week sequence. I also provided students with clear learning expectations in the form of thoroughly considered rubrics. As EAD 866 concluded, I had finally realized the educational philosophy that I still hold constant today. Beyond developing competency in biological concepts, or a single emphasis on active learning, I now believe that student development, both cognitive and personal, must occur in an environment that promotes mutual trust and respect. The diverse learning perspectives and preferences of all students must be valued and encouraged.

I have taken a number of courses between EAD 866 and enrolling in the MAED capstone seminar this semester, all of which have contributed to my educational perspectives and teaching practice. Yet, one course I took this summer introduced me to a learning theory that essentially sums up, with practical implications, the philosophy I described above. CEP 840: Policies, Practices and Perspectives in Special Education examined the education of students with disabilities. As with nearly all of my previous courses, I was once again offered a flexible

learning environment. The instructors allowed me to tailor my focus to the context of my teaching, so I investigated methods to make learning accessible to college science students with disabilities. Universal Design for Learning, introduced early in this course, virtually climbed through the computer screen and switched on the light bulb above my head. The perceptions I'd come to develop through EAD 861, EAD 866, and other courses, my insistence now that education value the perspectives of all learners and offer students a sense of control over their learning, are essentially embodied in UDL. UDL is not only applicable to students with disabilities. Rather, it emphasizes accessibility for all students. *Present information in multiple formats* to address learners of varying learning perspectives. *Offer multiple means for engagement and demonstration of understanding* so that diverse learners are valued and are able to showcase their strengths. These principles reflect my philosophy almost exactly. UDL has now become for me a primary avenue for future educational development.

Since my introduction to UDL in CEP 840, I have eagerly begun to incorporate its principles into my teaching. To provide multiple presentations of information, I have harnessed some of the digital strategies and tools I investigated in courses like CEP 800: Learning in School and Other Settings and TE 831: Teaching School Subject Matter with Technology. Google Drive is now a staple in my lab, serving multiple purposes from course communication, to assignment submission, to peer review. I've even begun to create video tutorials to verbally explain assignment guidelines. Further, I've determined that inquiry-based methods for science education, emphasized heavily in TE 861B: Inquiry, and the Nature of Science, are largely consistent with UDL principles. Student-driven experimentation offers a multitude engagement possibilities and can provide learners with a sense of ownership over the investigation. Just recently, I implemented a new three-week, student-guided microbiology investigation into my

spring semester lab course. Despite my enthusiasm for UDL and my desire to mirror my teaching philosophy in practice, I recognize a need for further learning. My progress through the MAED program has ultimately taught me that learning has no end, and what is a teacher, if not also a learner?

As a college student, during an afternoon in lab, we watched a nature video. Perhaps *The Life of Birds*, or something similar. A white pigeon stood before a black backdrop. Suddenly, in that ultra-slow motion only a nature video can master, the pigeon launched backward into the air. The wings of that common city bird swirled in a majestic figure-eight until they'd generated sufficient lift. The bird tucked its feet, its body reoriented parallel to the ground, and it was off. The image of that pigeon is etched in my mind. That ten-second clip ignited my passion for ornithology and it is the reason so many bird photos grace this website. As I stood scanning all those eyes seven years ago, shaking in my corduroy cargo pants, I could not possibly foresee the turn my life had taken. But now, I recognize those few minutes as the unconscious beginning of a journey that has crafted the teacher I am today. I had launched myself backward into the unknown, and I flapped frantically until, through experience, I began to generate lift. As I near the end of my MAED program, I find that I am no longer frantic. My knowledge is sound and my philosophy stable. I am parallel with the earth beneath me. It is my learning that will keep me aloft, and with new learning, I will propel forward. What's left now, is to encourage others to join me in flight.

References

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