

Anything but Ordinary

My Extraordinary Voyage through the Master of Arts in Education Program at Michigan State University

By: Sarah Everett

Like so many, my first year of teaching was quite a learning experience. There were many challenges that I had to face and overcome. Some of these challenges were: teaching sixth graders in an urban setting, learning the reality of standardized testing, and getting acquainted with my new state of Maryland. It was difficult, but with the support and guidance of my principal, colleagues, friends, and family I persevered. It was mid-year of my second year of teaching when I began to think about myself as an educator and what steps that I could take to enhance my teaching craft. At this time I had a strong grasp of the expectations and procedures instilled at my school Robert R. Gray Elementary. I also was stable teaching fifth grade language arts, reading, science, and social studies. While I was still a “new teacher” I knew that there was much more for me to learn. After several conversations with my family, colleagues, and friends I decided that the best way to achieve this goal of bettering myself as an educator was to go back to school and get my masters degree.

After establishing this, the next major obstacle would be determining what university I would apply to. Having had moved 500 plus miles from my native state of Michigan to Maryland, I was quite unfamiliar with local colleges and the programs that they offered. I had gotten insight from many of my colleagues who had or were completing their masters to get their expert advice of local universities to investigate. Though I liked the idea of physically interacting with my classmates and instructors on-site, a part of me had always hoped to return to Michigan State University to complete my Master’s of Arts in Education degree. The issue with this though was completing my masters program online. Though I had many friends who had done this, I wasn’t sure if this was the best option for me. During my undergraduate years at MSU, I had taken one online class and it left a bad taste in my mouth about online learning. While I was very skeptical, in spring of 2010, when I was home during my spring break, I made a trip to Michigan State University to meet with John Olle, one of the advisors for the Master’s of Arts in Education program. I had wanted to meet because I wanted to get more information from someone who was very familiar with the masters program. I also was curious on how they bridge the gap to make online learning more meaningful for its students. John Olle was excellent through all of my questions and though the conversation only lasted about 30 minutes, I left his office feeling extremely confident in my

decision to apply to the Master of Arts in Education program at Michigan State University.

The last step in completing my application was determining what my concentration was going to be. While there was a plethora of concentration areas to choose from, I wanted to make sure that I chose one that would make me well rounded as an educator. Since my undergrad concentration area was language arts, it seemed only fitting to choose science and math for my master's concentration area. Especially with the gradual shift to the Common Core Curriculum, I wanted to know more about mathematics and science and how the new curriculum would evolve these content areas. Though I had used technology pretty regularly in my classroom, I also had hoped that concentrating in math and science would also expose me to new technologies, especially with the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) shift. After all was said and done, I applied and was accepted to the MAED program for fall 2010 admission. After being accepted, it was time to choose my courses. Because of wanting to make my experience through the MAED program as authentic and meaningful as possible, I made it a point to be very selective and careful of the courses that I chose. I wanted to find courses that both fulfilled my credit requirements and were also appealing to me as a learner.

Overall, I was pleased with my course load that I had chosen and was both eager and anxious to begin my classes. Though I had been given a lot of clarity about online learning, it was still very new to me. *Would I have opportunities to converse with my instructors and my classmates? If so, how? Will a portion of my grade be participation? Will I use Angel? How will I submit projects or papers?* These were just a few of the questions that were circling my brain as I anxiously waited for my first class to begin. As I began taking my first course though, I very quickly realized how far technology has come to ensure that online learners are ensured the best possible education, just like in a traditional classroom setting.

It is easy for me to say very truthfully that every course that I took throughout the MAED Program, whether it was required or not, was both eye opening and beneficial to me as an educator in some way. Though all courses provided me with some useful knowledge, there were four classes in particular that stood above the others. The first course that I took was TE861B - Inquiry, Nature of Science and Science Teaching. This course explored the world of scientific inquiry, both what it is, what it looks like in a classroom, and how this way of scientific teaching is beneficial for students. My instructor DawnMarie Ezzo had been a science teacher, so she was very knowledgeable on the subject and had a lot of great insight to share with the class. Throughout the course, we were provided with several articles that went into to great detail on scientific inquiry. We also had opportunities to

apply these concepts to real-world scenarios and to create investigations of our own to complete. One assignment that was completed in this course was our “Long-Term Investigation” Project, which can be found on my “Showcase page.” In this investigation, I worked with two classmates. We were asked to come up with a question that we then explored and tested. My group and I investigated bananas and what physical conditions either prevented or contributed to the molding of the fruit. This project was great because not only were we putting to context the concepts that had been addressed throughout the class, but we also were provided with an opportunity to work with our peers to further our understanding. Another positive factor of this course was that I became very familiar with Google Documents, as this was a main way of completing assignments with my group mates. Overall, the class helped me learn and apply what scientific inquiry is and why this way of teaching is vital for our students. It encourages students to ask questions and to complete investigations to answer them, which emphasizes accountability and engagement for our students to learn.

In my second semester, I took the course TE818 – Teaching in Social Context. This was an elective course that I had chosen because I had found the course description to be very interesting and different from any class that I had taken. This course, without question, was a course that I found to be very enlightening. The instructor Kyle Greenwalt was extremely intelligent and open-minded to the perspectives of each of his students. Every two weeks, there would be a focus. Usually the focus was on a topic that was controversial or a heated issue in the educational world. We would read several articles about the topic and then write a reflection piece expressing our reactions, connections, and questions that we had on the matter. While the articles were posted on Angel, to document and share with our peers, we composed our reactions on our personal blog. I enjoyed this class for many reasons, but what I liked the most was that I was able to express my opinions and concerns about these topics without feeling attacked or told that my opinion was wrong. This course, though not apart of my math and science concentration, brought to light a lot of educational issues, which helped me create stances of my own.

In the fall of 2012, I took the course TE855- Teaching School Mathematics. This course investigated teaching current mathematics concepts, as opposed to the traditional ways that were taught. Instead of having students just explain “how” they reached an answer, the progressive stance of mathematics also emphasized the importance of students explaining the “why.” This was a focal point of the course, because if a student doesn’t understand the background of the concept, then it is difficult to build on concepts. Another major focus of the course was stressing to not teach math concepts in isolation, but rather show students how

they connect to each other; this will offer students a deeper understanding of math and show how it all relates to each other.

Unlike my previous courses, this class was hosted on Wikispaces. This was my first experience using this website. In contrast to Angel, Wikispaces was a very easy website to navigate through. We would have weekly readings and then write responses on our house page. Our group mates would then comment. This was the first class where I utilized Skype. Throughout the semester, I was able to Skype with my instructor Kevin Simpson. This was an excellent way of making my online experience more authentic because I was able to converse with my instructor. Kevin was very knowledgeable of his content focus and was great at replying to emails and answering any questions that we may have had. Aside from the weekly assignments, we had a semester long “Final Action Research Project” where we came up with a question somehow related to math content and investigated it throughout the semester. Kevin broke up the project segments, which made it less overwhelming. My focus question was *what impact does integrating literacy in mathematics play in students' overall comprehension and application?* On my “Showcase” page, you will see the Prezi presentation that I created highlighting my investigation. This project put to context all that we had addressed in the class. This also helped me practice integrating content areas, which will be a huge focus for the new Common Core Curriculum. Overall, this course was insightful and engaging.

In spring of 2013, I took TE831 – Teaching Subject Matter with Technology. This was by far the most resourceful class that I took during my masters program. This course focused on the TPACK Theory, which essentially expresses the importance of balancing content, technology, and pedagogy to achieve fruitful and meaningful learning. This class was applicable to any content that I teach and really opened my eyes to the surplus of technology that is available to use for instruction. During the semester, I also used Wikispaces, so because I was familiar with this website, it put me at ease. We had weekly readings and videos to watch each week. Usually these themes would focus on a type of technology. We would post our responses in our group and comment on group mates’ posts. I also used Skype and Google Hangout to communicate with both my instructor Erica Hamilton and my classmates. Erica was well versed in technology and often would email us to share new technologies that she had learned about. We did many projects throughout the semester. One major project was creating a vodcast, a video podcast. On my “Showcase” page, you will find the vodcast that I created entitled, “What is Poetry?”. Because of this project, I shared my vodcast with my principal. She was so impressed that she asked if I would share my work at our staff meeting and then lead a workshop on how to make vodcasts. The technologies that I learned about in this course made me very

eager to ensure that I was utilizing them to create an authentic learning environment for my students. In conclusion, TE831 benefitted both my students and I greatly.

It goes without saying that my experience in the Master's of Arts in Education Program at Michigan State University was anything but ordinary. Firstly, the instructors were knowledgeable of their content. They were excellent at providing us with information that was applicable to our teaching craft. Secondly, despite being in an online learning masters program, communication was constant and possible in a multitude of ways. Email, Skype, Google Hangout, and phone were just a few of the ways that I had access to bridge the distance gap. My advisor John Olle, from start to finish, was extremely helpful ensuring that all of my questions were answered and that I met the requirements to graduate by Summer 2013. Lastly, I have been able to successfully implement the content that was presented in my courses. My students and colleagues have greatly benefitted from my time at Michigan State University and I am satisfied with the education that the MAED program gave me. At the beginning of this voyage, I had hoped of bettering myself as an educator. Now two years later, there is no doubt in my mind that I have achieved this goal. Though my learning is far from over, I achieved a great deal in the MAED Program at Michigan State University and I can say whole-heartedly that my voyage was *extraordinary*.