

Renewed Reflections

While talking with a teacher friend recently, she told me about her experience working in an elite high school as a music instructor. She was disheartened to find that, while the school has beautiful facilities and adequate funding, the parents of her students constantly questioned her expertise, decisions, and judgement. She is not an inexperienced teacher; an accomplished musician herself, she has taught in both high school and higher education. However, she remembers with heartache her time teaching in an underfunded urban school where her love for the students and expertise in her craft were all she needed to be trusted and respected.

During this summer, I have communicated with the family of a student who had a difficult end to this last school year. Looking ahead, the mother admitted to concern about her daughter's readiness for the fall. I simply told her that we have some ideas and we will reach our goals together. Minutes after sending that email, a reply appeared. It said, "Thank you. I really truly mean it. I don't know where else we could find people like you and your colleagues who truly care and are willing to keep going until you get there." I was touched by her gratitude but then suddenly sad. Why should it be unusual for a parent to feel unconditional support from a school for her daughter?

I share these two reflections because I increasingly find myself considering the implications of such interactions. I recognize that my decision to teach in an independent school has afforded me an exceptionally fulfilling career thus far, teaching students who I love and working with colleagues that I respect in a school that feels more like a family than an educational institution. In this setting, teachers are granted the flexibility to develop their own curriculum within a strengths-based, experiential framework. And our students' families recognize the value of such versatility and latitude. However, when I think about the broader reality of education, I wish empowered teachers and trusting families were the norm.

When I undertook the challenge of the Master of Arts in Education (MAED) program from Michigan State University, I was looking for firmer footing in my teaching craft and a plan to navigate my path as an educator. While some teachers have a foundational love for a content area that grounds their teaching and helps their students love learning, I have never experienced such grounding in a particular subject. I do, however, love learning and I love helping my students find a love of learning. My expectation for the MAED was to develop a sense of deserved

confidence through enhanced pedagogical strategies, particularly those that leveraged the incredible affordances of technology as it applies to learning. As I now reflect on the whole of my MAED experience, I notice that my initial expectations have been met and have also been invigorated. It is no longer enough for me to feel confident and better equipped as an educator. As a result of the completion of this program, I now want to continue to participate in the broader dialogue about education and I want to contribute to the preservation of my experience as an educator and my students' experience as learners for as many teachers and students as possible. To this end, I will draw on my most important learning from the courses I engaged with in the MAED program.

Throughout this experience, I have noticed such a profound shift in how I think, analyze, and make decisions as an educator. I attribute this shift, of course, to the coursework I have completed. However, I must also attribute what I have learned and how I have changed to the experience of being a student of my MAED instructors. They have modeled for me the experience I want for my students and helped me to develop a habit of inquiry as an educator that is driven by what I have learned about being creative, design-minded, and intentional. There are three experiences as a MAED student that stand out to me as representative of this learning.

Creativity

In CEP 818, Creativity in Teaching and Learning, I learned that creative thinking is not a static talent, but rather a set of strategies that can be applied to any question, problem, or idea. This was a new mindset for me; I had previously shied away from creativity because I believed that I did not have any. In this course, we were instructed to select a topic of focus and then apply the strategies we learned from the text, [*Sparks of Genius: The 13 Thinking Tools of the World's Most Creative People*](#). I focused my topic on Peer Mentoring when I realized the potential improvements I could make to the Mentor Club I coordinate. For each of the creative thinking strategies in the text, students in this course selected an aspect of their topic and applied those thinking strategies to it. After engaging with the strategies, we would then reflect on what changed about our thinking and documented our new ideas or artifacts.

From my work in this course, I developed an awareness of the challenges for peer mentoring and related strategies for mitigating those challenges. I came to recognize that a significant challenge, one that is not often present in traditional

mentoring relationships, is the power balance of a mentoring relationship between peers. I also came to recognize the complexity of the relationships for not only the mentees, but for the mentors. Through the creative strategies I learned, I was able to develop new techniques for training my mentors, giving them greater input and control. I redesigned a traditional handbook by creating an interactive and collaborative Peer Mentoring Guide in which the peer mentoring strategies are gathered from the mentors and documented by the group for the benefit of everyone. I also discovered the benefit of involving more experienced mentors in training new mentors, honoring that their experience and proximity more than established their credibility as teachers.

In addition to the improvements to the Mentor Club, my learning in this course informed my practice of teaching creative thinking strategies to my students and incorporating the practice of creative thinking into how I expect my students to learn. I also created an interactive infographic to help other teachers incorporate creative thinking into their practice and teaching. I will continue to develop resources for both students and teachers to learn creative thinking strategies.

Design

In the course CEP 817, Learning Technology Through Design, I learned how to apply a design thinking model to affect change. This course was organized using the Stanford d.School [Design Thinking Bootleg](#), which offers five components of design thinking: Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test. In each mode, there is a variety of strategies to use as you apply design thinking to a problem. After selecting a problem in my own practice, I applied design thinking to eventually propose a solution. My problem of practice was the school day schedule during one part of our school year.

First, I interviewed students, administrators, staff, and faculty to learn how they felt about the problem. Then, I considered all of the aspects and perspectives to create a specific definition of the problem. I then generated ideas about how to solve the problem. Next, I used those ideas to create several prototypes of solutions. Finally, I tested one of the prototypes (a reinvented daily schedule) with a group of my colleagues. I was really excited when the prototype was implemented during the 2017-2018 school year.

My learning from this course has two important implications for my own practice. First, it represents, for me, a really thorough, efficient, and responsible

model for solving problems. This has changed how I approach planning and problem solving in both my personal and professional endeavors. The second implication of design thinking is for my students. Just as I now understand how important it is for my students to learn creative thinking strategies, I want to incorporate design thinking into their practice. The modes of design thinking provide a systematic structure for students to think, make decisions, and problem solve both creatively and intentionally.

Intentionality

In CEP 820, Teaching Students Online, the overarching content was focused on best practices in online instruction. The most relevant of this information for my own teaching was on flipped learning, which asks teachers to consider how best to use their time with students in person. Contrary to a traditional model of education, in which the teacher directly transmits the information to students through lecture or similar means, flipped learning suggests that students can use their time in class to engage in the higher levels of thinking and application of the information. With fact-to-face time activity prioritized as such, teachers can leverage technology tools to aid students' learning of the information.

The selection of the technology tools requires a high level of intentional awareness on the part of the teacher to determine the best way to represent the information. In some cases, teachers may choose to pre-record lecture, presentations, or other materials for the students to view as "homework". In other cases, teachers may provide access to digital media (text, videos, images, interactive programs) for students to engage with on their own. Teachers may also take advantage of the affordances of digital tools to assess students' learning. For example, when students produce writing in an application such as Google Docs, teachers can observe how a student's writing changes over time and in response to feedback by using the [Doc's version history](#). Leveraging this opportunity can alter a teacher's assessment practices, alleviating more traditional evaluation techniques in favor of more iterative, formative, and authentic means of assessing student learning.

My learning from this course has reinforced my learning from other MAED courses and helped me assess my own practices in terms of how I develop outcomes for my student's learning and the assessment practices I engage to observe, provide feedback, promote iterative improvement, facilitate students' self-assessment, and inform my instructional practices. I have implemented two

distinct changes to my instructional practices to this end. First, I have decided to incorporate digital student portfolios with a practice of self-reflection to assess students' progress over time and increase the students' awareness of their learning and growth. Second, I will incorporate aspects of flipped learning into my teaching. With this model, students can engage with digital resources independently, preserving our face-to-face time for application of the resources, group engagement, and individualized conferencing focused on their goals and progress. Implementing my learning from this course will both enhance my assessment practices, leverage the best possible use of my class time with my students, and provide them with relevant practice in using online digital learning tools.

I think again about my friend who is not seen for the educator she is in the school where she teaches. And I want to embrace every parent who feels as though their child is not seen. I cannot waste a moment of the opportunity I have been granted to be an independent school educator. Thus, I am excited to have accepted a new role as Academic Coordinator for the 2018-2019 school year at The Leelanau School. In this role, I will draw on what I now know about being creative and intentional as I learn new skills and encounter new experiences along my path as an educator. The MAED from Michigan State University has helped me consider my role in education with much bigger eyes and a pounding heart that is ready to help teachers, families, and students see the potential in their education. Drawing on my learning from the MAED, I will be creative, intentional, and reflective as I discover ways to constantly better my practice as a teacher and inspire the preservation of all that I love about empowered, joyful learning for my colleagues, my students, and their families.