

Anna Collins
Capstone Course
Summer 2016

When One Teaches, Two Learn

After my first year of teaching I realized that I still had quite a bit to learn. Even though I was confident that Wayne State University's bachelors program had prepared me to be a solid teacher within an elementary classroom, that first year of teaching brought up gaps in my teaching that I felt needed to be filled in through further knowledge and experience. It was halfway through the school year when I realized that I had more learning that I was eager to do and I knew just where to turn to for the support and knowledge that I wanted. Having heard great things about Michigan State University's Master of Arts in Education program, I knew I was in great hands. The added bonus: it was offered completely online. As a former college commuter, this was music to my ears. As I began my first course in the summer of 2014, I quickly saw that Michigan State would guide me in my growth as an educator yet again, presenting opportunities online that I didn't realize existed.

There were some specific goals that I set out with when entering into this master's program. One of those goals was to strengthen my teaching of literacy in the elementary classroom. After teaching for a year, I realized just how important and overwhelming literacy instruction in the elementary classroom could be. I found myself seeking out opportunities to learn about the specifics of reading and writing and how to assess student progress. It was in my third course of the program where I began to have some of my needs as a literacy educator met through.

Within my first semester, I enrolled in **TE 842: Elementary Reading Assessment Instruction**. This course focused on the assessment and teaching of reading at the elementary school level. Throughout this course I continued to learn about the breakdown of teaching reading in the elementary level including comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, phonological awareness, letter-sound knowledge, word identification, and a reader's motivation. This course primarily used the two texts: *Comprehension and collaboration: Inquiry circles in action* by Harvey and Daniels and *Assessment for Reading Instruction* by Stahl and McKenna to help teach about both formal and informal reading assessment. It was the assessment piece of this course that I found to be most beneficial to my learning and teaching.

As I began exploring the readings and presentations for TE 842 about assessment, I realized that there were some changes that I wanted to make within my classroom that I think would help make the assessment of my students more organized and valuable. I was able to analyze two different fictional case studies and apply the knowledge and teaching practices from the course texts to prepare a way to instruct these types of learners. By **analyzing student data**, I became more familiar and confident in the types of assessments that are appropriate for young learners, specifically in the realm of reading.

Retelling is an important reading skill, especially in first grade. Because of this, I felt it was important for me to incorporate some suggestions into my own classroom routines. I focused on retelling in my paper for the course as well as mini-lessons in my own classroom. I created an anchor chart with my class as well as "act it out" movements for students to build a deeper

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understanding about the accurate and appropriate way to retell. This addresses the Common Core State Standard of identifying the key details in a text.

I also found importance and value in the idea of young learners completing charts, interpret diagrams, add illustrations, written responses or answer questions as suggested by McKenna and Stahl, (2009). When students are required to produce work after reading, they are clear of their expectation during a lesson and work towards the goal of a "finished product". The idea of first graders working *while* reading was a bit daunting for me - I doubted their ability to multitask in such a way. I was pleasantly surprised when I began implementing "frog fact recording" during our All About Frogs unit. Students used sticky notes to mark facts and record these facts into a collection so that they had a variety of information to use for their final written piece.

TE: 846 Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners

As I continued to focus on literacy and it's importance in early elementary, I enrolled in **TE 846: Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners**. This course was appealing to me as it addressed not only literacy, but also instructional practices to differentiate my instruction. TE 846 was designed to learn more about teaching the basics of reading. It taught me how to assess and create interventions for struggling literacy learners based on best practices in literacy and evidence-based interventions.

This course outlined specific skills that young students need in order to learn how to read. For example, skilled readers use efficient word reading, using multiple cuing systems to identify unknown words. They also have good metacognitive knowledge, using previewing, summarizing, questioning, and visualizing helping make sense of texts. These skilled readers have an extensive genre and world knowledge and have a strong motivation to be successful readers.

After reading and discussing about these strengths of skilled readers, I realized that these were the skills that my struggling readers needed in place in order to be successful. These struggling readers were the ones that I felt I most challenged in helping within my first year of teaching. I didn't understand all of the technicalities that went into phonological processing, accuracy and fluency, vocabulary knowledge, and self-monitoring. Once I had more understanding about these reading areas, I felt I was better able to identify and tackle these issues of some of my poor readers in my classroom.

This new knowledge was made evident as I completed my **Literacy Learner Project** with "Gabby". I worked with this first grader as she was a struggling reader who received daily reading support upon entering first grade. Gabby was an interesting student because of her background. Gabby lives in a household with a mother who recently became deaf and a father who was born in Italy and speaks little English. This project allowed me to understand how home life can impact a child's academic abilities and better understand their struggle. As I

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began to understand Gabby more, the goals and strategies I applied to Gabby were tailored to her personal strengths and areas for improvement. I was able to spend one-on-one time with Gabby and developed a positive rapport with her while working closely on her reading skills. While this course was directed towards literacy, I feel I had the added benefit of becoming a more personable teacher and more in-tune with my students.

After a few years of teaching under my belt, I still felt that reading and writing in first grade holds much academic focus. I have worked closely with individual students to better their reading skills, but I needed to a deeper look at the way I run my daily reading instruction. Fortunately, enrolling in **CEP 817: Learning Technology Through Design**, addressed reading workshop as a whole. This course took me outside of my comfort zone and gave me a different perspective on teaching. CEP 817 included the design of educational tools and software to create best-fit practices for my classroom.

The project for this course, "Problem of Practice" involved taking a closer look at an area in my instruction that I believe could be improved. I chose to focus on active engagement in reading workshop as an area in my teaching that I believed could be improved. To redesign my lessons, I analyzed, participated the "ideate" process, prototyped, and held discussions among colleagues. While I'm still only a few years into my teaching career, reflecting and observing is always a beneficial approach.

My **Problem of Practice** project was one that lasted the duration of this course, as each week's module focus built upon the previous module's theme. This course was very enlightening because I was able to see my classroom and lessons through my student's eyes – what was wrong with my reading workshop routines and expectations – and why this part of my daily routine wasn't functioning as best it could be. This focus in my daily instruction was a practice I hadn't done with such thought and analysis. Through the requirements of this assignment, I now put more effort into observing my students during the day in *all* areas of learning in order to understand if my lessons are working effectively. This is evident through the use of technology in other content areas to motivate students to learn and create. One example of this is when I took the same iPad app as used in my Problem of Practice for a science lesson. Students were actively engaged and independent in navigating through the iPad app.

Reading and writing work in tandem and I knew it would be beneficial to enroll myself in **TE 848: Writing Assessment Instruction (Writing in the Content Areas)**. This course focused on research about expository writing in first grade classroom, discussed the logic behind the expository (informational) genre focus, and included instructional practices to achieve skill mastery. I have experienced the transition of focus from fictional reading and writing in the first grade curriculum to more of an informational/nonfiction focus. This transition is one that had recognized as a bit of a challenge with young learners as many of the books they read and

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television shows they watch are all fictional or animated. I began this course by wanting to spend time learning about the cause for this switch in curriculum standards through research articles. This research provided me with a wealth of knowledge relating to expository writing and it's importance.

It became evident that these new set of expectations have developed for early exposure to reading practices including reading for information. This concept, admittedly, seemed a bit developmentally inappropriate for my six and seven year old students. First graders are beginning readers and are still working on mastering basic foundational skills: adding your name to your paper, capitals and periods, the correct letter formation for 'b' and 'd'. It was difficult for me to feel confident and, to be honest, *willing*, to try to implement such writing content in my first grade classroom. I struggled in trying to find a balance between helping and telling students what to include in their stories.

During this course my biggest burning question was "how do I get students to write *more* in their writing?" I discovered the answer to my question from many different concepts covered in this course. Most notably, the suggestion of pre/during/post reading activities such as think alouds, graphic organizers, mentor texts, the use of technology, "High 5!", and text feature walks gave students more opportunities to learn, thus writing more detail in their stories. My hope was that this course would lend a hand to the "All About" writing unit where students research frogs and write their own All About my Frog informational piece. Students have become more successful in this unit because I have adapted instructional practices I learned about in this course including text feature posters, graphic organizers, and using **technology**.

Throughout this program I have learned that I seek out opportunities to reflect and adjust my current teaching practices. As I learn and take in new pieces of knowledge from course work, peers, and teachers, I realize that I am a teacher willing and wanting to make improvements daily to my teaching. I am a teacher who wants her students to know that she too, is a lifelong learner. I will continue to reflect through professional development and collaboration with my colleagues. I proudly acknowledge that I am a self-motivated and determined learner who works hard to achieve my successes. My essay is titled, "When One Teaches, Two Learn", and can say whole-heartedly, and with experience, that is a true statement.