

Passion Located.

When I started on this journey to earn my Master of Arts in Education, it felt like something I just needed to get done. I knew my teaching certificate was coming up on expiration and I needed to complete my Masters. I didn't feel overly passionate about working on my Masters; I hoped I would take some worthwhile classes and I was happy with the concentration I chose, Technology & Learning, but it just felt like something I was checking off my list.

I took my time choosing my courses, wanting to make sure that I was in classes I could apply to my own classroom. If I was going to spend this additional time outside of my job as a teacher, it needed to be worth my while. To me, nothing is worse than being in a course that is specific to a job you already have and it not being realistic to use. I was so pleased when I found courses that stirred up the passion I was lacking. The focus on creativity, technology, as well as the educational issues our nation faces are all things I care deeply about, and they were things I got the chance to dig deeper into while working on my Masters.

The Racial Achievement Gap.

I spent the first years of my teaching career in one of the best experiences of my life. I taught middle school social studies in a downtown Detroit charter school. I still remember asking my mentor teacher when I learned about the school, "Do you think I can handle teaching in Detroit?", her response was "Detroit Public? Don't teach there, but a charter school, that might work." I interviewed, got the job and moved to the suburbs of Detroit. In my class of 135 middle schoolers, I could count the Caucasian students on one hand. The other kids were all African American. This was a setting that I was not quite used to, but it certainly didn't matter, I was there to teach, I didn't care who I was teaching. Of course, it isn't that easy, the culture was drastically different from what I grew up in, and mildly different from my internship in the Lansing School District. What I experienced was 7th graders who read at a 2nd grade level, students with home lives that would break anyone's heart, and behavior problems that would have stunned my teachers in high school. But I loved it.

After three years of teaching at this school, my future husband and I decided to move back to Grand Rapids and I was fortunate enough to land a job at one of the best districts in the area. This time, it was me who was shocked. The number of things I no longer had to worry about was incredible. But I felt, and still feel, a pang of guilt. I left a population of students who are at a great disadvantage due to the conditions of the education system, for a group of students who, don't get me wrong still have their issues but not on the same scale. Taking a Masters course on the racial achievement gap in the United States deepened that pang of guilt. Increasingly the state of education in this great nation is weakening, and a lot of is further widening the gap in racial achievement. While educators and government officials may be aware of the problem, enough isn't being done to fix the gap.

One of the fascinating concepts I learned through this course is the idea of a "historical gap". This "historical gap" is due to the history of African Americans in the United States, this gap hasn't just impacted the "debt" educationally, but economically and socially as well. Learning about this concept turned a lightbulb on for me, of course African Americans are put farther behind the starting line. This only makes things worse for them as they move forward in society.

The questions is, what can I do about that in my own classroom? I certainly cannot go back in time to try to fix it. I can, however, acknowledge that some of our minority students are facing this education gap. By acknowledging this debt, I accomplish two things. One, it allows me to take this fact into consideration when I am planning, modifying and differentiating my lessons. Two, it has the potential to open up conversations amongst myself and my colleagues regarding what we can do as teachers within our own school to combat this education debt. The bottom line is that it is a problem, and although I am just one teacher, I can make a difference in the racial achievement gap.

Creativity in Teaching.

Every evaluation I've received in the six years I have been teaching I have been asked what a goal of mine is in my teaching. My answer is always "I want to find more creative ways to teach the content." As I lesson plan for units, I always struggle to come up with new and different ways to deliver and assess the content. Often as teachers we get stuck in ruts with our lessons, doing the same things year after year, or even

unit after unit. When I saw the course titled “Creativity in Teaching”, I could only dream that it would be well worth my time.

This course sought to teach us what the tools of creativity are and then gave us the opportunity to apply that to a subject of our choosing. We were able to choose a subject from our own classrooms, and I zeroed in on my unit on the Holocaust, specifically understanding the Nazi buy-in. At first, I was scared, I told myself, “I’m not creative!” and I started to doubt my choice in signing up for this course. But with each module, we were introduced to a new cognitive tool used to think creatively, including synthesis, play, observe and modeling. We were asked to step outside of our comfort zones with each tool and create something focusing on that tool. For example, we learned about modeling, which is the presenting an idea in a new and different way. We were then asked to find a new way to model the topic of our choice. I created the image below. This can be used to demonstrate to students the different emotions and reactions the German people were experiencing leading up to Adolf Hitler’s reign.



Being forced out of my comfort zone led to the creation of several resources that I can use in my own classroom to help students re-imagine history. I want students to look at the facts and resources I present to them and see connections and emotions threaded throughout historical events. The things I created for this course will do just that, as well as perhaps create a moment for a student when everything just clicks for them, and they understand the course of history and how we have gotten to where we are today.

This has ultimately changed the way I practice teaching. I try to use these cognitive tools in not only creating lessons but even building up resources to include in those lessons. As a visual learner, I like to use images like the one above to get ideas and concepts across to my students. Now, instead of drawing ridiculous diagrams that are not artistic in any way, I am creating images with more creative intention. My students are better off because of what I learned in this course, and so am I.

Technology & Learning.

I chose technology and learning as my concentration for several reasons. Everyone in education sees the trend that is happening, more and more schools are going to 1:1 or to Bring Your Own Device (BYOD). So the idea of concentrating on how learning and technology can go hand in hand in a sincere way was intriguing to me. Additionally, I knew that focusing on technology and learning, it would probably lead to more creative ways of presenting information to my students.

When setting up my schedule before beginning my Masters, I chose to take Technology & Leadership and Teaching Students Online the following summer. By the time the summer came, my district announced that we would be going to BYOD the following school year. The timing for taking these courses could not have been better. While I wouldn’t be teaching students online directly, I knew that I would be pushing myself in the coming year to create an online presence as a teacher. Additionally, I wanted to be able to give something back to my school as they journeyed into a new phase.

In Teaching Students Online, I was taught how to put an effective, efficient online course using a Course Management Site (CMS) of my choice. I built an entire unit in a blended learning setting, meaning some things would be done within the classroom, while others would be done through the website. Again, I was doing something in a course that I could turn around and apply to my own classroom. At the end of the course, I had a website that I am still using and I have expanded my on-line presence for my students. This has benefited my students by providing a better way for them to access the resources and content used in my classroom. This allows them to review the content and take the time to further explore the content we focus on in class.

Through each module in Technology and Leadership, we were placed different situations that pushed us to consider the purpose of technology in the role of a leader. One week we were writing tweets to reflect specific leadership styles and their views on technology, the next week we were completing a case analysis, giving our opinions on how certain controversial decisions should be handled. The course allowed me consider the different effects BYOD might have on my classroom and on my school. But most importantly, the idea that will stick with me in my teaching is finding a sincere purpose for technology. There must be purpose in using technology in our classrooms. I find myself using the phrase “technology for technology’s sake” frequently when talking about integrating technology into the classroom. Technology shouldn’t be used just so you can say you are using it, it must be used with intention. Now I find myself striving to create meaningful ways for my students to interact with their technology. It might be using Google Earth to look at the historical data as we discuss a new region of the world in AP World History. Or it might be creating experiences for collaboration amongst peers. My thought process is much more intentional than it was in the past.

Overall, I found a way to mold the work I did in my Masters courses to fit in to my life as a teacher, making it pragmatic for me. I realize now that it wasn’t about finding things throughout my Masters that I suddenly became passionate about, it was about finding things throughout my Masters that I could apply to the passion I already possessed. I want to be the teacher who is connecting her students to the content in interesting ways that make them say “Wow, I didn’t think I’d like history, but now I do.” I want to be the teacher that makes a difference for students who constantly feel left behind, or out of place because they are a minority. I want to be the teacher that provides students with interesting tools and resources via technology. Through completing my Masters of Arts in Education, I’ve gained the knowledge and whereabouts to be the teacher I want to be.