

The Road Taken

by Don Erickson

The road of life is fun, exciting, and, at times, terribly difficult. In reflecting on my own bumpy road of life the words of bestselling author, Harvey Mackay come to mind, "None of us got to where we are alone. Whether the assistance we received was obvious or subtle, acknowledging someone's help is a big part of understanding the importance of saying thank you." I most definitely would not be a few short weeks away from earning my graduate degree if it were not for the countless caring professors, thought-provoking peers, my family, and my friends. "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood/ And sorry I could not travel both/ And be one traveler, long I stood/ And looked down one as far as I could." Robert Frost talks mournfully about his "Road Not Taken", but I will enthusiastically address the stretch of my road I most assuredly took: earning my Master of Arts in Education from the greatest university in America!

Over the past year and a half I have taken two extended vacations, accepted a new teaching assignment (I moved from sixth grade to eighth grade), and eight short months ago my first child, the most perfect little girl, was born. Throughout that time much has changed in my life, but professionally one stands above the rest; the MAED program has rekindled my desire and passion for education. After moving back to Michigan after having taught for three years in South Carolina, I found myself in a situation where teachers were not properly valued. This experience had dulled my passion for my profession. I was losing the spark needed to perform at the highest level possible. Thankfully, the MAED program and all the skilled professors have relit this spark.

As I sat down nearly two years ago to begin researching different programs at different universities, one major factor was on my mind: a school and program that promoted innovative best practices in the field. Suffice it to say, Michigan State and the MAED program qualified. Early in my career I decided that assuming leadership roles (possibly even a building principal) was an important "next step" on my road of life. After taking nearly five years off of formal schooling I had forgotten how much I missed the stimulating interactions that this experience offers. With that said, as many people would be, I was nervous about diving headfirst back into this world. Would I be able to "hold my own" and offer to the program what I expected of it? Could I juggle working full time *and* attending school? This question only intensified after the birth of my daughter. Through it all, I was able to keep my "eyes on the prize" in order to achieve my goal of becoming the first member of my family to receive his/her

master's degree. The path was seemingly long and winding, but each stop along the way afforded valuable insight into my profession, my thoughts about my profession, and my own professional practices.

In the Spring 2013 semester I embarked on my boundless journey in the wonderful world that is graduate studies. In that first semester I was fortunate to begin with CEP 820: Teaching K-12 Students Online. In this course I created my own online course with little more than some ideas and support. I found the experience exciting, interesting, and terrifying all at the same time. This initial encounter with online learning (from the teacher's perspective) was valuable and considerably necessary. CEP 820 taught me something even more valuable than the ins and outs of creating a blended learning environment; I learned that to be an effective online teacher you must first model being a responsible online learner. After choosing Blackboard's CourseSites as my content management system (CMS), I created a course for my 8th grade American history students in order to maximize the effectiveness of the final assignment by connecting the online course to my own context. Each week I gained valuable insight into bringing my original class content into the digital world making an inviting experience for my students as well as learning about new platforms to broadcast my ideas. This course has been tweaked numerous times since Spring 2013; however, the main shell of the course has endured. My students have greatly enjoyed the affordances of the online course format.

EAD 824: Leading Teacher Learning was by far the most beneficial and practical course I took throughout my entire graduate career. Dr. Nancy Colflesh was a master at creating a friendly, open environment where all learners were given an opportunity to learn. Unfortunately, this is usually rare in our current education system (both K-12 and higher education) as there are so many factors that can influence any given course. Before EAD 824 and the tutelage of Dr. Colflesh, I used to think it was impossible to create an online course where the students felt as if they were a part of a learning community. I have had the privilege of taking many online courses, but never had I felt this close to my peers. We were all invested in the material, learning to be effective leaders, and each other. Due to this gratifying experience, I am now rethinking what it means to be an online learner; online students *can* learn with many of the same affordances in a brick-and-mortar classroom. During the Fall 2013 semester my beautiful little girl was born. Although it was a very stressful time, the birth of my child helped better frame important concepts being learned in EAD 824. Dr. Colflesh did an exceptional job guiding me on the path to understanding the importance of instructional leadership on both the teacher and the student. Among many other things, through Dr. Colflesh's tutelage, I assessed the culture for

professional learning in my school, I assessed my own ability to lead, I developed a spending plan to support the year-long plan for teaching learning, and I learned about leadership strategies and protocols.

I created a proposal for the year-long plan for teacher learning and a budget and purchasing plan to be employed concurrently. My proposal for teacher learning focused on three main goals my school would reach by the end of the first year of implementation: (1) the school and teachers will actively and efficiently experiment with best practices in the field in an effort to support student achievement, (2) the expectations of teachers and administrators will be elevated, attainable, familiar, and understood by all stakeholders, (3) and all faculty members will be informed of the best practices having previously been taught by fellow colleagues in the building. The plan utilizes three learning designs: classroom walkthroughs, standards in practice, and critical friends groups. A classroom walk-through is meant to be a casual, “non-evaluative” experience where effective teacher observation occurs. Standards in practice, simply put, is the process in which teachers and administrators examine assignments previously taught with the focus of improving the assignment in the future. A critical friend group (CFG) is a small group of educators who meet regularly to have a “structured professional conversation.” The budget and purchasing plan I developed supported the proposal with a comprehensive list of materials needed to realize the three stated goals. Both of these assignments provided valuable insight into how I will both teach and learn in the future. I have created my own CFG in my local context and the group is flourishing. Twice monthly the social studies teachers in the building meet to create appropriate grade level major assessments and end of course exams, establish individual grade level pacing guides, and discuss and implement cross-curricular applications. After I complete my graduate studies, I intend on looking for online teaching positions as well as utilizing the multitude of artifacts, handouts, articles, lessons, etc. from EAD 824. I am so very thankful to have had this course.

The information I gleaned from TE 831: Teaching Subject Matter with Technology has proven to be very practical within my own classroom. Some of the topics discussed in TE 831 included, but are certainly not limited to: Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge Theory (TPACK), digital literacy, citizenship, and storytelling, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and the National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers (NETS*T). I especially enjoyed the "Tech Tools" posts. Each student was responsible for searching, finding, and discussing an online technology tool that would be effective within the classroom. This has been very useful in my context. TE 831 helped illustrate the importance

of professionals sharing knowledge to in turn become more effective. This experience helped me understand why I have yearned for more professional collaboration in my own school community. Truly wonderful things can be accomplished when teachers share best practices. In addition, I created a re-purposed lesson plan using a technology not initially designed for educational purposes. I chose a green screen app for Apple products and retrofitted an old lesson plan to implement this technology. This course will continue to impact the way I teach my future students as I find new innovative ways to re-purpose old lesson plans promoting more student engagement and understanding.

One of the final courses I took at Michigan State was EAD 801: Leadership & Organizational Development. The original course I had planned on taking as designed in my program planning form was unexpectedly unavailable during my final semester. After “shopping around” I thankfully found EAD 801. Like EAD 824, Leadership & Organizational Development renewed my vigor for effective online education as well as my belief that the instructor sets the tone (positive or negative) for the entire course. Dr. Debbie McFalone created a nurturing environment, handled challenges professionally and quickly, and modeled true effective leadership. EAD 801 provided strategies and protocols to assist all leaders for current and future foreseeable problems. Unlike most of my courses in the MAED program where most of my classmates were teachers, I appreciated the diversity this class brought: some of my peers were current principals and educational leaders, others were new to the education world but wished to lead someday, and still others were leaders in other organizations independent of education. As culminating assignments I created an exploration project (designed to afford me the opportunity to analyze and discuss teacher leadership through multiple interviews of current leaders) and a reflective narrative essay (designed to guide me in reflecting on the important learnings during the semester). Dr. McFalone is responsible for my current shifts in beliefs about my own teaching and learning. According to Daniel Goleman, “We should be teaching kids regularly over time in a systematic way self-awareness, self-management, empathy, and social skills.” Rather than simply continuing our current system of “drilling and killing” the content we should focus on other real-world lessons such as Goleman’s four domains for emotional intelligence listed above. Additionally, I used to think incremental and marginal solutions to our country’s education woes could repair the system, but now I think radical, innovative changes are needed in order to realize truly successful schools. I now believe we, as educators, should be having discussions about grouping children by age, living and dying by the test, and truly utilizing real-world applications.

Remembering Harvey Mackay's words, I close by saying "thank you!" Thank you for the immeasurable amounts of knowledge that will continue to guide and shape my professional career for years to come. Thank you for assisting me with shifting my views regarding online learning, teaching best practices, professional development opportunities, leadership qualities, etc. Thank you for the incredible opportunity to belong to an elite group of individuals who can proudly proclaim, "We are Spartans!" As I walk away, searching for the next path to take in life, I will cherish all that I have learned at Michigan State. I have become a more effective teacher and leader, and I will continue to employ the innovative concepts I have learned. Although I have come to the end of this road, I am ready, and more prepared, to turn down the next path to meet what lies ahead.