

# The Love to Learn and Gain Knowledge

By Jessica Cutler

I have always had a passion for learning and gaining knowledge, then sharing it with those around me. From a young age, I was curious and wanted to keep building knowledge. I planned on going to school to be an architect and design houses. As I continued on this path I turned more toward the art side of this field and studied interior design. I was not fulfilling my need to learn and grow like I had in high school, and previous learning. I was in classes that did not challenge me, nor did I feel like I wanted to use this knowledge to help those around me. I knew I was missing something. I had taken a coaching position and was able to share my knowledge of swimming with young swimmers. This helped me to make a decision to change my major for a second time. I quickly applied to the College of Education at Michigan State University and took all necessary entry tests to continue on my path in becoming an educator.

I took graduate level classes during my year of student teaching. These classes were beneficial in aiding my passion for learning and providing tools to grow as an educator. Fast forward to my first full year of teaching in my own classroom. I had a successful year of teaching, but knew I wanted more tools for my students and my need for personal learning and growth. I knew I wanted to continue my education at Michigan State University because I was familiar with how the courses were designed, and knew the program and course would challenge me. Michigan State University would provide me with opportunities to grow, and I decided to enroll to begin courses for Fall Semester 2016. I was excited to begin classes and continue to learn and grow. I made the decision to get my Master of Arts in Education (MAED) and focus on literacy. I focused on mathematics for my undergraduate degree and wanted to build more knowledge for the area of literacy. Throughout my first year of teaching, literacy was a high

focus in the classroom. The level of ability ranged from beginning of kindergarten to a fourth grade reading level within my classroom due to a high transient population. This was very challenging as an unexperienced teacher. I knew I needed tools to aid learning for all of these students in order to differentiate my lessons. When I enrolled and planned out my course list I wanted to enroll in courses that would challenge my prior knowledge and take a step outside of my comfort zone.

I have always enjoyed a challenge, especially in learning. EAD (Educational Administration) 850 Multicultural Education was a course that deeply challenged me. Prior to this course all I had been exposed to were experiences from my predominantly white high school, and courses at Michigan State University that were a majority of white women. I currently teach in a school where the population is very transient and students are from multiple backgrounds. I knew I wanted to take a course on multiculturalism to expose myself to a better understanding how multicultural issues affect students in the classroom. This course challenged my thinking in how power and privilege play a role in the classroom and the academic path of students. "Is everyone really equal?" by Sensoy and DiAngelo introduced concepts in social justice education. This text challenged me to think critically and place myself in various situations of privilege and power that I did not consider on a daily basis. Growing up I had never thought much about privilege because in the town I grew up in the majority was white and Dutch. There were class differences but that did not dictate privilege or power in the classroom as students.

As an undergraduate student I became exposed to various ethnicities, classes, religions, abilities, and nationalities. I was able to see how these identities affected students in a classroom setting. Sensoy and DiAngelo brought to light how privileged I am. The socialization of group

identities and which groups hold power as dominant groups challenged my thinking. I had a difficult time understanding how social identities place students above others. Discrimination of those based upon their identities is something I have always struggled with. I am in dominant groups based upon my race, nationality, religion, class, and abilities. I have never been in a position where I feel like I have earned those privileges. This course focused on the various prejudices and oppression of various group identities and helped me to learn more about the many different social groups. I was challenged to read texts and various media sources to analyze the privilege and power in different situations. I had a difficult time putting myself in other positions because I have grown up always viewing the world in the social groups I identify as.

Representation of social groups in media is a topic that challenged my prior experiences since I had little exposure to various social groups growing up. I started to recognize representations of various social groups in media. Media portrays those in higher educational settings as dominantly white males. Those portrayed as uneducated were social groups that are non-dominant, such as minority groups and disabled individuals. This course has made me more aware of the cultural background of my students and how their lives outside of the classroom do and will affect their academics. One of the any reasons I chose to be a teacher was to make a positive impact on students and encourage them to find a passion and continue their academics beyond high school. I gained tools of how to connect with my students on personal levels so they enjoy learning and find their own passion to continue their academics and strive to succeed.

I had the opportunity to take an elective outside of my literacy focus. I knew I wanted to challenge myself in an area I had some exposure to but had never been exposed to in an educational setting. I grew up swimming competitively, and began coaching once I completed my swim career in college. To build my knowledge in this area I enrolled in KIN (Kinesiology)

856 Physical Bases of Coaching for an elective. This course focused on anatomy and how to best serve an athlete for their muscular and physiological attributes. Before beginning my Physical Bases of Coaching course I was excited to learn better tools and techniques for coaching. I quickly realized my lack of anatomy background would be a challenge. This was the first graduate course I felt like I had been “thrown to a pool of hungry sharks”. I was in a course where most students were Kinesiology majors who had backgrounds in anatomy. I not only had to keep up with the content of how to use muscles and how muscle motions affected swimming, I had to teach myself the major muscles and axis of the human body. I knew some from previously swimming, but not confidently. As the course progressed we learned mechanics, physiology, sport performance, and many other topics. I had the opportunity to build a program for distance swimmers and evaluate how it would benefit an athlete for muscular and physiological attributes. This course challenged me to think in terms of anatomy and movements.

This course required more effort and studying than I had ever had to spend in other courses. Math and literacy concepts come easier to me and it is easy for me to find explanations for those subject areas. Physical Bases of Coaching required more memory of the muscles and their functions. The process of ATP was something I recalled from biology, but applying it to muscular functions brought new challenges. Dr. Moreno provided various academic articles for each unit, and I often looked for other resources to find as much information as I could. By the end of the course I was more confident with my new knowledge and was very pleased with how well my program design and rationale ended up. This course has helped me in my coaching techniques and how to properly train my swimmers. I will be able to apply this learned knowledge to all ages and level of athletes. This course has also affected my life as a teacher when my students participate in recess and physical education and obtain small injuries. I have a

knowledge of muscles they may have injured and can send them to the school nurse with a better idea of the injury she needs to focus on.

Another course that challenged me was TE (Teacher Education) 842 Elementary Reading Assessment Instruction. This was the first literacy course I enrolled in when I began taking classes after my first year of teaching. I had taken literacy courses as a part of my undergraduate program, but it had been about three years since that course. Dr. Tortelli used the text “Assessment for Reading Instruction” by Michael C. McKenna and Katherine A. Dougherty Stahl for the course. I had used this textbook in a previous course but was not familiar with the content when I first opened the book. This course focused on the multiple pieces of literacy: fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, word recognition and spelling, and strategic knowledge. This course challenged me to not only learn how all of these components affect literacy, but to apply them in interventions for students. I was able to use prior knowledge of informal reading inventories and measures of oral reading, and built a deeper understanding of why those assessments are used and how to appropriately score those assessments. The challenge then became applying all of this new knowledge and giving a student appropriate interventions based on their assessment data. Dr. Tortelli gave us assessment data for two students that we needed to determine interventions for.

I felt this course had prepared me to analyze the data appropriately and give students effective interventions to improve their literacy deficits. I was able to determine spelling stages of each student and determine whether or not they were functioning within their grade level expectations. This course has aided me on a daily basis in creating and reflecting on lesson plans. I use tools gained from this course weekly and apply the knowledge I gained to benefit my students' learning.

The courses I enrolled in challenged me in many ways. I was challenged to incorporate tools and determine literacy levels of students. I was also challenged in the way I thought. The multicultural education course I had the opportunity to take helped me to understand so many different concepts that I had been naïve to. I placed myself in various positions of privilege and power. The coaching course I took gave me more knowledge in the area of the physical body and how to work with athletes. Throughout my graduate program I was challenged to think beyond myself and my surroundings. I had the opportunity to study various positions of privilege and determine how academics are affected by these positions. My teaching has become more expressive and differentiated toward students' needs. I have become more aware of how to approach teaching students from various backgrounds who have challenging lives outside of school. I have grown to understand how each student comes from a background that provides its own challenges in the classroom.

The courses, tools, and experiences I gained throughout my graduate program challenged me and helped me to grow. I continued my passion for learning and gained valuable knowledge to improve my teaching and challenged me as a student. The courses I have gained have given me confidence in my teaching and has encouraged me to continue searching for more tools and resources to be an effective teacher and grow as a lifelong learner.

### Resources

McKenna, M. C., & Stahl, S. A. (2015). *Assessment for reading instruction* (3rd ed.). New York:

Guilford Press.

Sensoy, O., & DiAngelo, R. J. (2012). *Is everyone really equal?: an introduction to key concepts in social justice education*. New York: Teachers College Press.