Holly Dahl
Synthesis Paper

Synthesis Essay- The Power of Education
By: Holly Dahl

The Beginning

After obtaining my Bachelor's Degree from Michigan State University and completing a full year
internship, I entered a competitive job market that was not hiring. I decided I needed to keep myself
busy by enrolling in MSU's Masters of Art in Education online program. At first, I was a little
apprehensive about online instruction, because I loved going to class and sitting face to face with my
peers and instructors to have "real" discussions and conversation, and wasn't sure if the online setting
would offer those experiences. However, through my first couple semesters, I realized the world of
online classes offered opportunities of discussions with classmates and the instructor. I also found the
instructors more accessible than most on-campus instructors since they often looked at their emails
throughout the day and would quickly respond to any question or concern I had. Whenever I told
people I was completing my masters online, they always asked how I liked it and if it was the same as
"normal" class. I always gave the program a glowing endorsement, because I feel it has been accessible,
convenient, but most importantly-insightful.

The MAED program has offered me a diverse education with a selection of courses that have benefitted
my needs as an educator. I have learned the significance of implementing current technology into my
own classroom, educating students about the dynamics of children's literature, and the importance of
looking deeper into understanding my students as individuals. Through the powerful program I have
been challenged to reflect on my understandings from the various courses, as well as constantly
challenging my teaching techniques and strategies.

Envision the Dream

During my first year of teaching, I remember my students were shocked to see I owned an ipod. They
explained how they didn't think teachers owned ipods or knew how to work them. This completely
boggled my mind, and then saddened me that they thought the very people who teach them the
importance of world events, mathematical theorems, and using the scientific method, did not know how
to use what is basic technology today! This motivated me to be the teacher who breaks the novice
technological mold my students envisioned all teachers to fit into, and I was going to make sure I used
the technological resources available as not only a tool to teach with, but as an interactive tool for my
students to use in their learning.

One of the first classes I took in the MAED program was CEP 816 Technology, Teaching, and Learning
across the Curriculum. This course opened my eyes to various tools found in the world of technology
and how I could use them in my classroom. This course did not teach us about expensive, cutting edge
technology that was unattainable in a classroom setting, but rather technology that was realistic and
easy to use in the classroom at a low cost (if at any cost). Most teachers are fearful of the unknown and
technology is no exception. However, educating ourselves about the various tools offered and available
through the internet is unlimited. It is vital that educators remain current on everyday technology as a
way to engage and motivate students in their learning. Through CEP 816 we discussed how technology
is everywhere in our interconnected world, whether it is through the convenience of using an e-reader

to relax into your summer novel, or accessing the internet on your smartphone, and how students need to be aware of these technologies and actually use them as a learning tool. Either way, we cannot escape the boundaries technology is pushing and overcoming, and we have to teach our students to use technology as a resource and tool in their everyday lives and learn how to independently access and research new technology.

 CEP 816 taught me the importance of learning and researching all forms of technology, to envision a dream for my classroom and to find ways to make it happen. Through researching all forms of technology, it is important to not limit ourselves to just websites or one type of website, but instead to use different media such as podcasting, social networking, and several others. The major assignment for the class was to create an "instructional dream" where we dreamed of a unit using some of the technology learned from the course and did not worry about the cost of the dream. At first, I thought this would be completely unrealistic, especially since a lot of my experiences had been in urban school districts that struggled with funding. However, I moved ahead with assignment and thought of what I would love for my students to really learn from my class. As a social studies teacher, I realized the important lesson I wanted my students to take away from my class was learning to work with diverse people and learn about new cultures with an open mind. I intended on having my students use Skype or other forms of social networking tools to communicate with other students from other countries and learn about different cultures, especially since they would be entering a global workforce that is extremely diverse and interconnected.

Some of the technological tools and resources I used in my instructional dream assignment were MooM (Museum of online Museums), Skype, and blogs. The course taught me how to research and possibly implement these different resources through online articles, discussions with classmates, and independent research. Other than the technological aspect of the course, we discussed the importance of students communicating and reflecting on their learning. Blogging and using a social network site is a great way to incorporate writing and communication with any classroom lesson. Most of our students use social networking sites or blogs, which makes it a comfortable medium for the students, but to use it in an educational way to communicate, discuss, and reflect on a classroom activity is very authentic. Looking back on the assignment I remembered my initial fear of it being unrealistic with the lack of funding in schools, however, I realized all of my technological resources and tools were items that were free, except for the only cost of actual computers for my students to work on, which would only be a matter of scheduling with the media center in any school. This assignment was not only fun and creative by allowing me the freedom to come up with any educational dream I had for my students, but allowed me to apply the tools and resources I learned from the course. I learned that educators need to have instructional dreams that incorporate the use of technology that is not out of reach, and how it is up to the educator to make that dream a reality in their classroom. The instructional dream I created is something that I could apply to my current classroom and has motivated me to continue searching for free resources available to educational practices that provide my students authentic experiences.

Reading as a Cultural Phenomenon

The MAED program requires a concentration within your masters, which I chose literacy, because I believe literacy is the foundation to all learning. Even though I will be teaching social studies, I understand the impact reading has on my students and how it can frustrate lower readers in their learning of other content areas. One of my literacy classes, TE 838 Children's Literature and Film, has had a major impact on my perspectives and influence on the way I view films inspired by children's literature. As an adult, I disliked watching movies based on books, because I was inevitably disappointed

by the differences between the book and film. However, this course taught me the importance and reasons behind those differences, along with the impact a book can have on a generation when it becomes a cultural phenomenon. These understandings have been beneficial to me as a teacher, because I am able to teach my students how interpretations and perceptions can vary the creation of a book to film. Also, my awareness of the cultural phenomenon of certain books or series has allowed me to energize my students about reading and literacy on a whole.

In the beginning of TE 838 an important topic that was discussed throughout the course was fidelity to the original. Through class discussions about differences between books and movies we were able to conclude that individual (filmmakers) interpretations and perceptions of books is what drives the differences in what is important to include about the plot or characters. As a teacher, I realized that if various interpretations can affect the movie making of a book, then it probably affects the learning process of my students. From the class discussion I learned the importance of book discussions with my students. However, it is imperative to have in-depth discussions about books that dig deeper than personal opinions and feelings about the character and plot, but to look at various literary elements, symbolism, mental images, and other factors when discussing books, and the influence it all has on each students' interpretation and perception of the story. TE 838 has been instrumental in helping me understand and practice the skills of explicitly teaching students to have literary discussions, so that they essentially become innate to the students when they are more independent readers and can thoroughly think through a captivating story from various angles.

After learning about fidelity to the original in discussing various books and films, another important aspect of the course was learning about the way a book becomes a cultural phenomenon. We used the *Harry Potter* series to study this concept. I will admit that I became a *Harry Potter* fan once I was in college and caved to peer pressure to read the series. As an adult, I initially thought the series was too childish for me—WRONG! I instantly mesmerized with the characters and plot and read the entire series in a matter of months in the middle of my internship. I refused to watch the movies that coincided with the series due to fear that the movies would not live up to my imagination and expectations from the books, until it was a requirement for TE 838 to compare the first book and the film in order to discuss the cultural phenomenon. I kept in mind our discussions from the beginning of the course of how it is a matter of interpretations between the book and the film. One of the assignments was to spend an hour researching the *Harry Potter* phenomenon. I was shocked to learn how the series had its own cultural following and world that I was unknown to me. This really opened my eyes to the way a book can grow to become a phenomenon within a generation and how it can be used to motivate students.

When learning about the *Harry Potter* series, we read several articles about the controversies over the series about religion, gender roles, and sexual orientation. Despite all of the controversies the series is one of the most popular in literature. I realized this when I taught fifth grade and several of my students were reading different parts of the series. This allowed me to use my experiences and love of the series as a way to connect with students and discuss the book. I found that I could energize, motivate, and engage my students in literature and reading. Many believe the series has sparked a new interest in reading for children, whether this is true or not, it is a good thing to have students in class who enjoy reading and having something in common with their peers and teacher. I found the series energized my less than enthusiastic readers when I suggested it as a good read and they quickly became engaged in the story. Also, I found that when reading other novels or short stories, my students would make text-to-text connections between *Harry Potter* and the story we were reading. They were able to make these connections independently without me forcing it upon them! I was elated to hear a student tell

me how the main character reminded him of a situation Harry Potter faced in *The Goblet of Fire* book, and how he connected Harry's reaction with the main character of the story. It served as a launching pad for great discussion during the specific reading lesson. TE 838 taught me to look at the cultural phenomenon as a way to engage students to read. The course taught me that it is important as a way to encourage reading, but that it cannot stop there, but as teachers we need to expose our students to other literature and genres once they become interested in reading. The Children's Literature and Film course not only helped me to become a better teacher of literacy by teaching my students about individual interpretations of novels and the importance of books as cultural phenomenon to encourage reading, but also as an individual who can appreciate the differences between books and films and can facilitate discussions about them.

Looking Deeper

During my student teaching I encountered a few situations that involved challenging students. I had to learn through experience and my colleagues how to handle these difficult events and scenarios, which served as my motivation to enroll into CEP 832 Educating Students with Challenging Behavior. During this time, I was substitute teaching in a couple suburban school districts where I lived and encountered challenging students. This made me realize that challenging behaviors is not an urban issue, but a universal educational issue that I would have to be trained to deal with in any setting and environment. There are going to be challenging students in every building no matter what the cultural make up is or the socio-economic status of the building, which is the reason why I decided to take CEP 832. This course offered a range of strategies through the teachings of Brophy and offered diverse techniques that were applicable in real classroom settings and conflicts.

One aspect of the course discussed the importance of knowing and understanding your students. At first, I thought I had a decent understanding of my students, but quickly realized that I had only scratched the surface. Through our readings and class discussions I quickly learned that I needed to look past the surface issues and needed to look deeper into what could be the root cause of the problems for why the student might be suffering socially or academically in school. During the course we were assigned to complete a case study on an individual student, which allowed me to challenge my assumptions of the student and their issues, reflect on my reactions and interventions throughout the experience, and apply what I learned from the course. This case study was central to what I learned from the course by helping me investigate deeper in understanding a student, and showing the student how I care about them as an individual. This was not an easy process and it required respect, patience, and trust in order to get the student to open up and allow the interventions to work. The strategies I learned from CEP 832 will help me with my relationship with future students to understand where the problem stems from in order to have a better understanding of how to help a student become more successful in the classroom. The case study also helped me recognize the significance of reflection, because I would realize an intervention wasn't working and I needed to go back and think of a different intervention. Without the reflection piece of what to change or keep doing if it was working, may not have led to the successful result of the student socializing back into the classroom. This class influenced my understanding of how different each student is and how each situation is going to be different. There is not just one right answer or magic solution, but rather a combination of strategies to use in order to benefit student. By looking past the surface and looking deeper to what causes a student to become a challenge in the classroom is vital to a successful learning environment for all students, which is what I learned from CEP 832.

Another major lesson I learned from CEP 832, was through the teachings of Brophy and his belief of socializing of students. Socializing of students means teaching students the expectations, habits, and routines that will allow them to control themselves in a given setting. In the beginning, I thought this simply met socializing students in the classroom to get along with each other; however, that was not the case. By explicitly teaching and modeling for students the expectations in the classroom, I was able to get other students to help one of my challenging students to understand how to act and behave in the classroom. It became a team effort of other faculty and my students to model exemplary behavior, especially when my challenging student was having a difficult day. Also, teaching the student the routines of the classroom and school was vital to him understanding the inappropriateness of his behavior at the time. At first he didn't care, but through various interventions and aid from the school psychologist, along with my implantation of the strategies learned from class, we were able to socialize him back into the classroom. Without the Brophy readings I would have been lost in terms of interventions to use and I feel they may not have been as effective as were the strategies I learned from Brophy. It made a major difference in the learning environment for all of the students in my classroom once the student settled in and become socialized back into the class.

Taking CEP 832 was an extremely beneficial course for me as an educator, because it taught me diverse strategies to use in any classroom setting, ways to implement the strategies without it taking extra time out of instruction, and the importance of building a strong relationship with my students based on trust and respect. I feel the latter lesson is something that I can carry with me throughout my professional career in working with diverse colleagues and students.

Closing a Chapter

As I am nearing the end of the MAED program, I realize that I am accomplishing one of my goals of creating an online portfolio as a place to exhibit my coursework, reflect on my past experiences, set new goals for the future, and a place to create a classroom website for my next teaching placement. The lessons I have learned from Michigan State University's MAED program will be with me throughout my career as an educator and have inspired me to continue my education by learning from my colleagues, attending conferences and professional development opportunities from my school district, and reflecting and challenging my current teaching techniques. I have learned how important it is to not settle in education and not to get too comfortable in the way you teach, because the education field is constantly changing and it is our responsibility to change with it.