

Spartan Tradition

A Synthesis of My Time Spent as a Michigan State University Graduate Student
By Noel McDowell

It was 2011 and I decided that it was time to begin my Masters degree. I had secured a job and was ready for the next step in my life. I have never doubted that I would continue my education beyond my undergraduate degree. I enjoy learning, processing and coming to new understandings of the life and world around us. **I am a Spartan** and I was certain that I would continue to be a Spartan in my graduate studies. Michigan State requires graduate classes during the internship year of the teaching program. I had already earned credits toward a Masters degree and I wanted to utilize them towards my next step in education. Completing all of the paperwork and applications took time and patience; but the ends justify the means. The effort that I put into applying and obtaining this degree is worth it every time I use the information in my classroom and see a student succeed. My Masters Degree is a great accomplishment but seeing a student achieve is even greater and more rewarding.

Choosing A Major

When I decided to begin my Masters I debated which concentration area would benefit me and my future the most. At that time, my current position was all technology-based. I taught American Sign Language via live, interactive television to students both in front of me and in other schools around the county. Logically, choosing a "Technology in Education" concentration made the most sense. However, when I sat down and analyzed my true goals and aspirations in life I realized that job was only a stepping stone to what I really wanted to achieve. I wanted to work with Deaf students, I wanted to teach core subject areas and therefore I decided to pursue a Masters of Arts in Education with a concentration in Literacy Education. And with that, all of those goals have been met. I am now working in a Deaf Education program in Flint, I teach Math and English and in just a few short weeks I will possess the Masters degree that is most beneficial to me and my students now and in the future.

Literacy in Deaf Education

Literacy is oftentimes a struggle for students that are Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing. For these students, English is a second language. They grew up learning ASL and the correct grammatical structure for signing. All of that changes when they begin reading and writing. Vocabulary acquisition and understanding is very difficult because ASL will have one sign that can mean a variety of words. Students must learn to recognize and memorize words without the ability to 'sound it out' as we often tell their hearing peers. Deaf children have the same intelligence level as other students, but they are often seen as less because of their language difficulties. My goal is to raise that reading level, comprehension level, writing ability and show my students that they are capable and able to do or be anything that they want in life. The instructional tools and strategies that I have learned will assist my teaching but, more importantly, it will assist my students' learning.

Influential Courses

The classes that Michigan State offers towards obtaining the Masters degree are numerous and cover a wide-variety of information and material. I really appreciated the ability to choose classes that most resonated with me and my educational setting. I focused my classes on accommodations for literacy and assisting special education students both in self-contained classrooms and in inclusion settings. These were the topics that inspired me and I felt were most applicable to my desires and goals. The first class that truly inspired me was actually taken simultaneously with my internship. CEP 434: The Structure of English and American Sign Language was taught by Dr. Claudia Pagliaro. She was an inspirational teacher, one that I had multiple times during my undergraduate degree as well. Her true passion was the education of Deaf children and she passed that feeling along to her students. It was amazing how she interacted with young children and it gave me a view of how I wanted to be in the classroom. This particular class focused on American Sign Language and the grammatical structure of the language. One project had us recording a young child's speech and analyzing it for pronoun usage, subject-verb agreement etc. We were able to assess the child's language skills and struggles and determine how to work with the child to improve. We learned the appropriate ways to sign sentences and how to translate English to American Sign Language and vice versa. The class was the ultimate challenge as we diagrammed sentences in both ASL and English. In the moment, this class was difficult and oftentimes frustrating. However, as I have been teaching ASL and Deaf students, I have found this class to be one of the most useful and applicable. I have been able to more effectively teach how to sign and also improved my own sign language skills. I currently teach English and by having a deeper level of understanding of both languages, I am a more effective teacher of both languages and translating between the two. Mistakes that my students may make in English often tie back to the root of how they sign something and the misunderstanding in translation. The material that I learned in this class is not material I would directly teach to a Deaf child. However, I need to have an understanding at deeper level so that I may work on the surface with the students correctly.

Another class that was influential was TE 846: Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners. This class looked at a variety of approaches to instructing literacy and finding what works for each student. In this course, the final project was in-depth and spanned the length of the course. It involved analyzing a student (background, home life etc.), gaining a depth of understanding of their literacy level and then creating lessons to cater to their needs. This assignment helped me to understand how to create differentiated lesson plans and to teach to each child's zone of proximal development. We need to learn as much as we can about each student in order to know what they need and thus teach to them effectively. Throughout the semester we discussed a variety of reasons that students may struggle with literacy learning. Motivation, English Language Learners and true disorders were all discussed at great lengths. This information has proven to be extremely valuable in my current work setting.

TE 842: Elementary Reading Assessment and Instruction was a literacy focused class that taught me how to guide my instruction to the best of my ability. In this class we

were divided into small groups in which we participated in a book study. I studied a book entitled "Comprehension and Collaboration; Inquiry Circles in Action." The book discussed how to effectively use inquiry circles in the classroom and how to engage students in research projects that are student-led. This was beneficial to me because my class size is small (only 3 students in each class) and I enjoy having the students work together to learn, study and create projects. Another aspect of this class was the analysis of student data. We have learned how to give assessments and to make sure that we take notes on everything and jot down all that the student does. However, this class showed directly how to take that assessment and analyze it for future use. I learned how to identify the mistakes and why they were made. I learned how to determine the reading level of a child and create instructional strategies and methods to best assist the child. I appreciated the collaboration of the class because even with the same data that we were given, some of us had different instructional approaches or strategies that we thought that child may need. True to life, not all teachers agree with what is best for a child. However, we need to interpret the data and determine what we feel is best in that moment. No one is necessarily wrong, we simply need to give the child what they need to become successful in literacy and thus life.

In CEP 882: The Nature and Design of Compelling Experiences we have been working on creating compelling experiences and discussing how to make situations more compelling to others. This class involves photography and videography of personal experiences and the utilization of a class Facebook page. The bond we are able to make in that class is incredible. We see one another in videos, showing off what they enjoy or what they don't enjoy. We see one another's perspective of our own activities, photography and explanations. Each week we work in a different small-group but we are always able to see everyone's completed projects. It has brought us together as a group, working towards a deeper level of understanding of one another and thus the children in our classroom.

The last of my courses was one that called for reflection of everything that has accumulated throughout my Masters. The Capstone Portfolio course has been challenging because I was not as organized as I would have liked to be throughout the program. With a job change and moving, much of my materials and information has scattered making the accumulating of everything very difficult. However, it has given me time to delve back into my materials and remember some of my teaching from a few years ago. Strategies that I learned surface once again and make their way into my classroom. This class has brought back memories and thoughts and discussions from each of my previous class that can be used only to make my teaching improve. My portfolio is a project that I am proud of because it shows not only who I am but who I want to become. Essays discussing my goals and my future encourage me to continue to strive to be the best for myself and my students. I have come far in my three years of teaching and I am not ready to stop progressing now. Michigan State offered a wonderful program that fit my needs perfectly. I had mixed emotions in enrolling in an online Masters program. I thought it would be great because I could plan ahead and do the assignments on my own schedule. I was hesitant because I wondered if it would be completely impersonal; no direct contact and completely solitary. Both of these original

thoughts have been proven untrue. In a perfect world, I would have been able to complete assignments early in the week and felt that I was always on schedule and on top of things. However, life gets in the way sometimes! As I started my program I met someone and fell in love, I became an aunt, my sister graduated high school, I moved, I got a new job- life happened! I am better off because of all of those things but it absolutely made it difficult to put assignments on the top of my priority list on a weekly basis. But with the assignments that involved group work and discussions and meetings, I knew that I was depended and relied upon. I did not falter and I did not fall behind in my coursework and for that I will ever be proud of myself and my accomplishments. That brings me to my second thought; that the program may be impersonal and solitary. Honestly, I was impressed at the connections that I was able to form with other students and also the professors of the courses. The professors made themselves readily available for help and guidance and had a deep level of understanding for all of their students' questions and concerns. Working in small groups through discussion and projects helped me to form bonds with people that I only knew as other striving educators.

I would recommend Michigan State University to anyone interested in bettering themselves, their education and their teaching. As I conclude my time here, I know that I have strengthened and will strengthen my students as a result. I was a Spartan as an undergraduate student, I am a Spartan as a graduate student and I will be a Spartan for life. I have a classroom full of Spartan ideas and strategies and, of course, decor.