

RACHEL LAFLER – SYNTHESIS ESSAY

Reflection synthesizing overall experience in MSU's MAED program. Identification and description of main takeaways. Evaluation of three most influential courses and their impact on professional practice.

Graduate school has been a transformative experience. Prior to completing Michigan State University's (MSU) Master of Arts in Education (MAED) program, I would have described myself as a teacher - an enthusiastic, motivating, and effective teacher, but a teacher nonetheless. Now, as my time in the MAED program comes to an end, I must say that I identify as being more than that. I am an educator. I know this shift could in part be due to the fact that I am not currently teaching, but maybe that's the point. Teacher is a job title, it's a position. Educator is a lifestyle, it goes beyond just teaching. Can people be both? Absolutely. But, are there some teachers who you may not necessarily consider educators? In my opinion, yes. At the moment, I am not teaching, but I am still an educator. In the future, I may or may not be employed as a classroom teacher, but I'm confident I will continue my career as an educator regardless. When I decided to pursue my master's degree, I was a bit of a crossroads in that I wasn't entirely sure what my future held. I taught for three years and absolutely loved it, but was interested in learning about other options beyond being a traditional teacher. I wanted to be in education, but maybe not in the classroom teaching. My time in this master's program has really pushed me to think about what it means to be an educator, and how I can fulfill my desire to educate in a variety of ways. For example, I gained experience with online learning platforms and expanded my knowledge regarding educational technology leadership. That said, no matter my future position, I'm confident that MSU's MAED program has prepared me to be a more effective educator by equipping me with the knowledge and experience necessary to make sound pedagogical decisions.

As I created this portfolio, I was challenged to analyze the ways in which my thinking and professional practice have changed by reflecting on my overall experience in this master's program. In doing so, I noticed that my takeaways could be categorized into three key themes: be reflective, be informed, and be intentional. I identified these themes after realizing these are fundamental elements of effective educators' practice. Accordingly, moving forward, I strive to be an educator whose decisions are grounded in the framework of being reflective, being informed, and being intentional.

To elaborate, one could argue that the first step to being an effective educator is to be reflective, as it's important to "know yourself." This is something often discussed in teacher preparation courses, as future teachers spend time reflecting on their beliefs regarding education and their experiences in the classroom. Reflection is also highly promoted in professional settings via professional growth/development plans and teacher evaluations. That said, it's often easy to become complacent, or comfortable, with your daily routine and ways of doing things, thereby pushing reflection aside. I believe many educators find it difficult to actually implement regular reflection into their practice. Looking back, in my times as a teacher, I reflected on my practice in a casual, not critical, way. During this MAED journey, I've not only been pushed to reflect on my beliefs and my practice, but I've also had to reflect on my own ability to reflect. As a result, my views regarding the importance of critical reflection have transformed. I truly believe that to be an effective educator, it's imperative that I critically evaluate my strengths/weaknesses and ways of doing things, and be open to change, if necessary. However, my growth goes beyond simply believing in, or understanding, the importance of reflection, as I'm also better prepared to actively engage in reflection and make it a core element of my practice. Ultimately, by being reflective, I can ensure that I'm being effective.

Additionally, educators must be informed, as it's important to "know your audience." To create a positive and productive learning environment, it's necessary for teachers to meet their students' needs, and if a teacher doesn't understand those needs, it would be quite difficult. In general, it's beneficial for educators to have a basic understanding of human development and fundamental human needs, as such principles should guide classroom management decisions. More specifically, it's important to be aware of individual student's needs and abilities, as such knowledge should inform instructional decisions. For example, teachers can effectively differentiate learning activities to facilitate student success and achievement. Although I understood this to an extent prior to graduate school, this experience opened my eyes to the importance of being informed in all facets of education. I'm also better equipped to successfully utilize such information. For example, I gained more knowledge of literacy instruction and how to work with students with varying abilities. I also gained experience creating professional development plans designed for school staff, rather than students. Although the audience was different, the importance of understanding

it remained. Overall, after completing this program, I'm much better prepared to meet the needs of my students in my future practice.

Furthermore, it's vital that educators "know their why," for it's then that they can be intentional with pedagogical decisions. Overall, being intentional is applicable to many elements of being an effective educator. For example, classroom management policies should be designed, and implemented, intentionally and with a specific purpose. To elaborate, if one envisions a learning environment that encourages inclusion and success, a system can be developed to promote such values. In addition, being intentional is also applicable to instructional decisions, as all learning activities should be meaningful. For example, teachers can facilitate student growth by intentionally planning lessons that incorporate formative assessments and feedback opportunities. Although I used formative assessments in the past, I can't say I always did so with intent. By being more proactive and intentional with such planning, I can create lessons that promote success and achievement. Lastly, it's imperative to be intentional with the integration of technology, for technology must be used in a meaningful way, not just for the sake of using technology. For example, simply having students take a test electronically doesn't make it better, but deliberately designing an electronic assessment "testing" the same content, could result in a more effective assessment. In the end, I strongly believe that this master's program has prepared me to be more effective by focusing on being reflective, informed, and intentional.

Overall, MSU's MAED program pushed me to think about these concepts and my professional practice in a new way. Although I value each of the courses I took, three in particular stand out as being instrumental in my growth. The rest of this essay examines those courses and the ways in which they contributed to my understanding, and mastery, of the "three be's:" be reflective, be informed, and be intentional.

To begin, CEP 813: Electronic Assessment for Teaching and Learning broadened my horizons and forced me to critically reflect on the teacher I am and the educator I want to be. Prior to taking this course, my definition of "assessment" was quite one-dimensional, but I now see the tremendous potential, and impact, of assessments in education, and the steps that I need to take to ensure my assessments are effective. To begin, I learned about the foundations of assessment and how every assessment is based on a set of assumptions. Through this, I realized that it is critical for educators to be aware of such assumptions and take time to analyze these thoughts when developing assessments. In addition, I learned about the ways in which assessment and instruction are integrated, including formative assessments and feedback. Ultimately, assessments can, and should be, used as tools for learning, not just of learning. I have always been aware of formative assessments, and integrated them into instruction in a way, but I wasn't really intentional with it and I didn't always use it as an opportunity for student growth. I want to focus on implementing formative assessments with intent, and in a way that improves the learning experience. Furthermore, I analyzed the ways that digital tools can be used to enhance instruction and assessments. My eyes were opened to all the possibilities and I will strive to use more technology to increase student engagement and achievement, as well as make instruction and assessment effective. Overall, this course forced me to step outside of my comfort zone and challenged me to dig deeper and think more critically about myself and my practice. I reflected on myself as an educator, and focused on key areas to continue reflecting on in the future. I learned more about understanding my students and how to develop assessments in an informed way. Lastly, I gained a tremendous amount of knowledge and experience working with the integration of technology in a purposeful, meaningful, and intentional way.

To continue, in CEP 820: Teaching Students Online a whole new side of education was presented to me. Although I had taken online courses in the past, and MSU's MAED program is entirely online, I did not have any experience actually teaching online. In this course, I learned about the scope of online education and its prevalence in today's education system, as well as ways to integrate online learning into otherwise traditional settings. For example, many educators are flipping their classrooms, or at least flipping some of their lessons/units. This allows teachers to utilize face-to-face time in the classroom in a more effective way. I also gained a lot of experience working with various Learning Management Systems (LMS) and created my own online course module. This enabled me to not only learn about various aspects of teaching online, but actually apply my knowledge. In general, this course pushed me to reflect on myself as an educator by finding ways to transfer my teaching style and plans to an online platform. This enabled me to critically think about whether or not online teaching would be a good option for me in the future. I also gained an understanding of how becoming informed and getting to know your audience is different in an online setting; there are definitely pros and cons to online learning in this regard, and I am grateful to have been able to see this. Lastly, I realized that being intentional is even more vital in online education. I am one who is

able to “wing it” if needed and really be flexible when it comes to my teaching style on a daily basis. I was forced to abandon this and meticulously plan out each part of the lessons/assessments for my online course module. In the end, this course provided me with valuable knowledge and experience working with online education, and I feel much better prepared to explore this as a possible career option.

Lastly, CEP 815: Technology and Leadership provided me with the opportunity to explore a different realm of the education field. This course really opened my eyes to what it takes to be a leader in the educational technology field, as it requires much more than simply having knowledge of technology or being a good leader. Rather, educational technology leaders exist within the intersection of technology, education, and leadership, thus they need to be well-versed in all three domains. In this course, I learned a great deal about the effective integration of technology in education, and also about how to be a more effective leader, I was able to apply my knowledge in multiple ways, including the development of a vision statement and plan for action regarding technology's place in the education system. Overall, this course pushed me to reflect on my beliefs regarding educational technology, my ability to effectively integrate technology, and my potential to be an effective leader. I gained a greater appreciation for knowing your audience in that being an effective leader depends on understanding who you are trying to lead so you can develop a vision and plan that they will buy into. Lastly, I realized that being intentional is the single most important quality that an educator can have. To be successful as an educational technology leader, you must first develop your vision. Every single decision you make, and every action you take, should be in accordance with this vision and be working towards achieving it. In the end, this course provided me with immense knowledge and valuable experience that I can apply to my future professional practice, regardless of my position.

Overall, the fundamental elements of my teaching/education philosophy transformed due to my experience in MSU's MAED program. Although I can't say all of my beliefs and values are different, the ways in which I think about things, and the fundamental factors influencing my pedagogical decisions evolved. As I move forward, I'm confident I can achieve my goal of continuing my career as an effective educator by focusing on being reflective, being informed, and being intentional.