

Skills for a Sustainable Future

Synthesis Essay

Introduction

To adequately summarize my work in my Master of Arts in Education program seems to be an almost insurmountable task, as my program very broadly covered a wide range of topics. However, it is apparent that, at the conclusion of the program, my knowledge and understanding of several topics related to education has shifted significantly. Primarily, I have developed a greater sense of my understanding of the fundamentals of literacy and literacy education. My work in this program has had me delve into this topic repeatedly and has allowed me to develop a clearer idea of how the principles of literacy can be applied to teaching. Additionally, I have gained ground in the development of writing, both as an instructor of writing and as a writer myself. This program has allowed me to sharpen my skills as a writer and, in turn, given me a lens through which to view how my own writing skills and strategies can be imparted to my students. Finally, I have generally become more aware of several strategies for discerning the individual needs and desires of my students and learning how to best approach each individual student. In short, my work in this program has made me a more well-rounded educator.

Part 1: "What is Literacy?"

As an undergraduate student, I specifically recall being repeatedly asked the question: "what is literacy?" At that time, I remember finding it difficult to define the term using language specific enough to encompass all the elements that are required for a sufficient response. Then, during this program, I was again posed the same question on several different occasions and again being stumped at first by the question. However, my understanding of the concept of literacy was made more clear when I was able to apply it to the everyday work I do in my classroom. Certainly, the students I interact with on a daily basis each bring their own literacy skill set into my English classroom, but their personal literacy extends far beyond simply understanding the basic tenets of reading and writing.

Essentially, literacy is a broad term that encompasses a wide array of skills and sets of knowledge that people use to interact with the world around them. Why the question stymied me for so long was because I only was able to narrowly define it as an understanding of reading and writing. However, my work in this program has allowed me to significantly broaden my understanding of this vast topic. Particularly, I completed several projects which gave me the opportunity to work with students on an individual level to build skills for reading and writing and then to reflect on my findings. One project in particular that I completed in [TE 843: Secondary Reading Assessment and Instruction](#) allowed me to personally interview students to discern their various interests and skills. After this, I then planned a series of reading and writing activities that targeted these specific interests. As I reflected on this work, I noticed that students generally improved their reading fluency and writing skills when presented with high-

interest material. Thus, I realized that narrowly defining literacy as a working understanding of reading and writing does students a disservice, as it completely ignores the various abilities, talents, and interests that each student possesses.

Part 2: Writing, Rubrics, and Revision

In my experience, it's difficult to find an English or language arts teacher who says they're completely confident with the teaching of writing. Primarily, the reason for this is because teaching writing involves a careful attention to a myriad of different challenges and aspects. First, teachers must have a plan for presenting material and must ask themselves how they hope to structure their lessons to guide students through the various aspects of the writing process. Second, they must then guide students through the plan they have envisioned, giving time for full class instruction, individual conferencing, and peer collaboration. Finally, teachers must be cognizant of the feedback they are providing for students and how it can help them improve their writing skills and abilities. Failure to attend to any one of these three areas can result in a disjointed experience for students in which they may feel lost in the writing process and are unable to see clearly how to improve themselves. In essence, my graduate work has helped me take a step back and recognize how all three of these elements are inextricably linked, and has given me room to be able to develop my own plan for instruction writing. Additionally, I have been able to experiment with new methods and approaches to the teaching of writing, some of which I have grown to incorporate into my instruction. A few examples of projects that have helped me develop my abilities as a writing instructor include a project I completed in [TE 848: Writing Assessment and Instruction](#) in which I was asked to closely examine several formats for feedback on student writing, and a project in which I was prompted to hold individual conferences with students about their writing and then reflect on what I noticed.

The first project allowed me to see how the simple act of grading a student's paper has a variety of different messages associated with it, and how I as a teacher must be mindful of how I phrase my feedback in order to provide students with constructive and concrete ideas to improve their writing. The second project allowed me to further develop my ability to attend to the individual writing needs of each student. By isolating my instruction and later reflecting upon it, I was able to see the benefit of developing a personal connection with each student in which they felt comfortable to create a dialogue in order to get help improving their writing skills. This has strengthened my confidence as a writing teacher and has given me a greater understanding of the complexities and challenges that students face when developing their writing skills.

Additionally, my coursework has allowed me to hone my own skills as writer, which may at first seem peripheral to the larger picture of myself as a teacher but, in reality, is directly applicable to the work I do every day. Building my own personal skills as a writer has, in turn, allowed me to more effectively help my students hone their craft as writers. This might seem like a simple concept, but I had essentially fallen out of practice with writing after finishing my undergraduate degree and, as such, much personal writing skills were either remaining stagnant or deteriorating. Either way, my

work in this graduate program gave me the opportunity to both explore several facets of my own writing and gave me the freedom to stretch my thinking and push myself as a writer. Specifically, my coursework in [TE 848: Writing Assessment and Instruction](#) was crucial to my overall development as a writer, as it both allowed me to reflect on my practices as a teacher of writing and my skills as a lifelong writer.

Part 3: Learning About Learners

Finally, although I have been largely shaped by my individual experiences as a teacher in terms of interacting with students, this program has allowed me to dissect those experiences and to think critically about the skills and strategies I use to engage with students. There is not a day that goes by that I am not struck by something interesting that a student says or that I am caught off-guard by a comment or a question made by students. Students are complex beings, and when thirty plus complex beings are placed in a classroom, opportunities arise for widely varying and often unpredictable interactions.

As such, I have been able to utilize several courses throughout this program to help me think about how I engage students on an individual level while still being mindful of the class as a whole. Walking this line each day is certainly a burdensome task, and requires a relentless attention to detail, but several courses in this program have allowed me to take a step back and review my interactions with students to further develop my craft. In particular [TE 846: Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners](#) gave me the opportunity to work one-on-one with several students to discern their varying likes and interests, while paying special attention to their learning styles as well. The resources I was presented with in this course and their practical application to the classroom setting proved invaluable, especially after I had a chance to test them out “in the field”. Looking back, I can truly say that I have gathered a better, more precise set of tools for engaging and interacting with students, especially when issues like writing fluency and reading comprehension present individual challenges. Previously, I would rely on a few strategies to help students become more proficient. After this class (and other classes as well) I am armed with a wide range of skills and materials to help improve the learning experience for each individual student.

Conclusion

Tying these ideas together, it is abundantly clear that my work in this graduate program has been both expansive and finely tuned to my specific craft as an English educator. Broadly speaking, the work I have completed has allowed me to engage with a plethora of various challenges that teachers face on a daily basis and has allowed me to develop my skills and knowledge as an educator to meet the demands of the ever changing face of education. More specifically, the program has allowed me to closely examine several aspects of my craft, including my practice of engaging with students individually, as well as my individual craft of writing and assessment of student writing. At the conclusion of this program, I am left with an enriched skill set that will enable me to be a more confident, successful, and goal-oriented teacher in the years to come.