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Synthesis

I've spent most of my college career thinking I was on a wildly different trajectory than my classmate. As an undergrad, I started in a science heavy major and eventually ended up in the writing program. Starting out, I couldn't help but think how different I was from my classmates—I was used to sitting in massive lectures about configurational isomers, not 20-person classes dissecting the past participle. Surely I couldn't relate to these students?

I very quickly learned that my writing degree would be exactly what I catered it to be. Despite having a science background, (with the help from some incredible professors) I could mold each and every course and assignment to fit my unique academic and professional goals. There were students in my classes with business backgrounds, art backgrounds, technology backgrounds, you name it. All of us were able to get exactly what we needed out of the same course. Though I initially felt like such an outcast in my program, it was clear my classmates and I could all succeed no matter what our desired path was.

Entering the MAED, I couldn't help but immediately feel the same sense of exclusion I felt during my undergrad. I'm not a classroom teacher. I don't have a teaching certificate. I don't have a degree in anything education related, nor do I understand most common teaching jargon—what are the Next Generation Science Standards? What is Ambitious Science Teaching? Being an informal outreach educator, I felt like a very little fish in a very big pond. Despite having succeeded in my undergrad as an “outcast,” I still felt like I was out of my league in my master's. Naturally, again with the help of some amazing faculty and classmates, I learned the exact same thing I had learned in my undergrad: this degree could and would be exactly what I wanted and needed it to be. After a clumsy start and realizing that I would have to put in some extra effort to play catch up on those foundational education concepts I was lacking, I caught my stride in my master's and set new, ever-evolving goals for myself as an educator. As I navigated my way through all the unfamiliar, several courses were absolutely quintessential to my success.

In my first semester of the program, I took a course called Engaging Diverse Students and Families (EAD 822). While this was admittedly one of the most challenging courses I would take during the entirety of my program, I believe wholeheartedly that it had the greatest impact on me not only as an educator, but as a person in general. The coursework was structured around addressing inequities in the education system, challenging our own personal biases, acknowledging our own privileges, and working to create solutions to create a more accessible learning community for students of different backgrounds, beliefs, and cultures. As a white female from an affluent area, I admit that I had very little idea that some of these issues even existed. For example, one of our final assignments was to write a letter explaining why School of Choice promotes segregation. What's wrong with choosing what school you want your kids to go to? Where's the harm in that? Initially, my thoughts and opinions were conflicting with the purpose of the assignment. However, researching the program and looking deeper into the actual real life consequences of it, my viewpoint completely changed. I learned more about the

way that schools are funded, and how altering the headcounts of certain schools give some students access to much better resources and teachers than other do. Growing up in a very well-off school system, I was oblivious to the fact that this was even an issue. I thought some schools were just “nicer” than others. It just goes to show how much can go unnoticed when problems don’t directly affect you. I’m grateful I took this course so early in my master’s because it set the tone for how I would approach each course afterwards. It is also especially reflected in my professional work today. I can’t count the number of times I have said to a child at the zoo “you can look up a video of this animal on YouTube” and have been met with “my family doesn’t have a computer because we can’t afford one.” I am constantly making sure I’m aware of inequities in my communities and being sensitive and accommodating towards them. While this course challenged me deeply to do so, Engaging Diverse Students and Families allowed me to better educate and advocate for those communities I care for so deeply.

I’ve realized that the courses that were the most difficult or uncomfortable for me are also the ones that had the greatest impact on me. Teaching Subject Matter with Technology (TE 831) was one of those courses that pushed me far out of my comfort zone. I truly didn’t know how I was going to make this course work for me—technology, in some ways, goes against a lot of what I preach at my job. One of my biggest goals is to get children to “unplug.” Get out there in nature, step away from the TV, turn that Xbox off. It was extremely difficult for me to feel like I was compromising my own educational philosophy in order to fit the needs of a course. However, that couldn’t have proved to be more untrue. The course wasn’t asking me to sacrifice nature for technology. Instead, it encouraged me to use technology to enhance nature, and even to benefit wildlife. For example, I explored using a software called ZooMonitor in my lesson plans. Participants track and record animal behaviors and locations via a tablet, and then data is synthesized at the end to create a conclusive, easy to read report. This is such an essential tool for wildlife conservation and animal welfare. My students can still get out in nature and connect with animals (aka “unplug”) while using technology to enhance that experience, for themselves and for the animals. Of course, going back to my previous statement about addressing inequalities in education, I’m still quite conscious of when and where I can implement technology in my teaching. I try to make amended versions of my assignments that don’t include technology, as well as include technology in lesson plans only when I can provide the appropriate technology on my own. This course taught me to embrace technology, rather than to be afraid of it, as it is such a valuable educational resource.

Lastly, there was another course that challenged me, not because of subject matter, but because of one of my own biggest admitted flaws: procrastination. Educational Inquiry (ED 800) was an introductory course to the program consisting of six assignments and zero due dates. All assignments had to be completed by the end of the course, but you could set your own pace. While I genuinely enjoyed the content of this course, and appreciated the value of each assignment, the biggest thing I took away from ED 800 was a sense of personal accountability. Setting your own pace is a dangerous game to play when you’re a chronic procrastinator, and I would learn this the hard way through this course. More than anything, it taught me that you have to take responsibility for your own tasks and deadlines, and that someone isn’t always going to be there to remind you when something needs to be done. While I still admittedly

struggle with putting things off, this course served as a huge wake up call to me that if I do not hold myself accountable, I am standing in the way of my own success. I now work much more diligently to set deadlines for myself, and to make sure I leave myself enough time to successfully meet those deadlines. I have started using a variety of resources, including Google calendars, reminders on my phone, and a physical whiteboard calendar so that I'm constantly aware of things coming up, and I have no excuse to put them off. The subject matter of ED 800 was of course very beneficial to me as well, but overall as both a student and educator, the personal growth I took away from this course is what I value the most.

I like to think each course I took throughout my time in the MAED had its own unique effect on me that same way that every student I encounter leaves me with a little something to grow from. Without these critical courses, my incredible professors, excellent classmates, and invaluable resources, I don't think I'd be half the educator I have become. I'm grateful that both the content and lessons I took away from my classes in the MAED continue to stay with me in my professional life, and that through this program, I can be a better mentor, student, educator, and advocate.