

Synthesis: from “Just a Teacher” to a Confident Educational Leader

By Mary Hobbs

At my five-year college reunion, I found myself surrounded by my fellow Biology majors, some in the midst of medical school, others working in labs doing research. The typical conversation starter from a classmate, as expected, was, “*So, Mary, what are you up to these days?*” My response was, “*Oh, I’m just a teacher,*” and then I would promptly redirect the dialogue to their studies.

As I wrap up my Master of Arts in Education ([MAED](#)) degree from Michigan State University, I now realize that teachers are not “just teachers.” Being a teacher is hard work, it’s rewarding, and there is so much more than just creative lesson plans. While it may be possible to get plopped in a classroom and survive as an educator, becoming a great educator takes passion, knowledge, and tools. Teachers are not only conduits for taking knowledge and pouring into students’ brains, but they also are role-models, inspirers, and lifelong learners. Education is a dynamic and innovative field, and I now feel proud to be a part of it.

When I took my first steps into the “real world” after college, I entered a graduate school program at the University of Delaware for education of “exceptional children and youth.” I found myself as a paraprofessional at a charter school for students who struggled to achieve academic success. While my courses were enjoyable and interesting, my job ended up being more behavioral management than I had anticipated. I would find myself sent to the hallways with students that needed more help than I knew how to provide them. While the field of special education is admirable and necessary, it did not end up being the right fit for me. A middle school science teaching position opened at my alma mater, and I excitedly took the job.

After two years of being a lead science teacher and coaching at this private school in Delaware, I was beginning to feel more comfortable. When the comfort set in, I knew it was time to further my craft, which is when I entered the graduate school program at Michigan State. With concentrations in mathematics and science education and sport coaching and leadership, this

program has been a perfect fit for me, and my courses have inspired me to become a more thoughtful educator. There have been many lessons learned, and below I share how three of my courses have taught me that teaching and coaching are so much more than presenting content and putting players in their positions.

Teachers Don't "Just Teach"

Designed as an introduction to the Master of Arts in Education program, *Concepts in Educational Inquiry* ([ED800](#)) allowed me to critically think about the field of education through several different lenses. While the majority of my educational career has been through the eyes of a student, approaching teaching and learning from different perspectives gave me a chance to see that "just teaching" is only the beginning. This course gave me the opportunity to think and write about essential questions of education, its purpose and problems, and the roles of experience and technology. All of this was pondered through inquiry of philosophical minds, ethnographic observations, biographical perspective, different theories of curriculum, and personal reflection. Though the various views differed, I learned that inquiry involves drawing on the past to create new ideas for the future. This balancing of the old with the new is what allows change to happen.

One of my very first assignments in this course was comparing the "traditional" views of E.D. Hirsch Jr. and the "progressive" approach of John Dewey about the purposes and beliefs of education and schooling. Whereas Hirsch presents a "curriculum-centered" approach where the teacher "drills" the material into the students, Dewey supports a more "student-centered" approach where the teacher presents the student with "influences," and supports the child in responding to those influences. While Hirsch believes the purpose is to provide an ability for individuals to understand and participate in their culture, Dewey's purpose centers more around the autonomy of the student. To me, the ideal educational system would be a balance of the two. I believe the purpose of education is to give each individual the tools they will need as they go through their journey of life. So why then, is teaching so difficult, and why can't teachers "just

teach?” As Ken Robinson says, “*Nobody has a clue...what the world will look like in five years’ time. And yet we’re meant to be educating them for it*” ([TED, 2006](#)).

As a science teacher, while my initial impressions of the job were that I needed to “just teach science,” *Teaching Science for Understanding* ([TE861A](#)) helped me understand new techniques and tools to make me a better educator. Teaching content is only one aspect of teaching science, and this course provided some deeper thinking about how students understand science and how we as teachers can support that. With an in-depth investigation of the Next Generation Science Standards ([NGSS](#)), I learned about the “three-dimensional” approach to teaching science, with emphasis on “crosscutting concepts,” “science and engineering practices,” and “disciplinary core ideas.” While my own science education consisted of reading from a textbook and memorizing vocabulary, this course allowed me to see the exciting improvements in how to teach science. We also explored the framework of Ambitious Science Teaching ([AST](#)) and I learned how to carefully plan a unit, which involves finding the best ways to engage students, elicit their ideas, support changes in their thinking, and press for “evidence-based” explanations.

Before taking this course, I had never taken the time to deliberately plan for what questions I would ask to yield maximum student thinking. Through several “discourse” assignments, I was able to plan exactly what questions I would pose to students and think about potential student responses in order to listen for key ideas and phrases. I was also given the opportunity to develop an entire unit on Newton’s Laws of Motion, which involved not only planning “just” what content to teach, but also how to clearly state objectives, frame discussions, and craft a “three-dimensional” assessment. When I implemented the unit in my own classroom, it was exciting to see improvements in student engagement and understanding from my previous years of teaching that same topic.

By looking at education through various lenses and by learning that there is so much more to science teaching than memorizing facts, *Concepts in Educational Inquiry* and *Teaching Science for Understanding* showed me that teachers don’t “just teach.” In order to give students the tools

they need to get through life, teachers need to creatively find ways to reach all learners. Not only does teaching science require these skills to help students through their journey, but through my graduate school studies, I have also realized that coaching sports involves this same thoughtfulness in order to maximize the potential of the athletes.

Coaches Don't "Just Coach"

Upon entering my teaching position at my alma mater, I thought to myself, "*I enjoyed playing sports, so that must mean I can coach.*" Being an athlete allowed me to step on the field/court as a coach and guide players through practices and games, but now I see that effective coaching, like teaching, is a profession that can be viewed through many lenses. Through my graduate school studies, I had the opportunity to approach coaching from physical, psychosocial, legal, and administrative standpoints. *Psychosocial Bases of Coaching* ([KIN855](#)) provided me with the most reflection about my own coaching and made me realize that, like teachers, coaches do not "just coach."

In KIN855, through various projects, readings, videos, and writing assignments, we were given the opportunity to engage in "reflective practice," bridging the gap between experience and knowledge, and we also learned about several techniques and strategies to help our athletes cope with the "mental game" of sports. Additionally, we explored deeply the topics of ethics, motivation, goal setting, and group dynamics of coaching. In the very first module, I was able to develop my own coaching philosophy, which allowed me to think critically about my own values and why I coach. At the core of my philosophy is the education of athletes, which I determined is shaped by the enjoyment and connection that the athletes feel. I then considered both "on the field" (ex. fundamentals, skills, fitness, health, game sense) and "off the field" (ex. life skills, leadership, growth mindset) components of sports. Developing this philosophy framed the remaining assignments of the course, including a project where I observed my own field hockey practice and quantified certain behaviors that I exhibited. As I had expected, because I consider myself a positive and enthusiastic coach, I provided a lot of "general reinforcement towards desirable behaviors." What I learned, however, is that providing too much general reinforcement

can limit the autonomy of the athlete because it might lead to more “extrinsic motivation” if the reinforcement is expected. Prior to taking this course, I would never have realized the impact of how much and what type of reinforcement I was providing, but since taking it, I have tried to be more deliberate about what I say to my athletes.

Through developing my own coaching philosophy, observing my coaching behaviors, and through writing assignments on the value of “self-talk,” the “attribution theory” of motivation, and the “ethics” of bench players, KIN855 showed me that coaching is not “just coaching.” Every coaching move should aim to be deliberate and with a purpose. Coaches should strive to build autonomy in their athletes, and I have now learned some different tools and strategies to try to support my players. Through my coursework in coaching, I now understand, like teaching, coaching will require personal continued growth and constant improvement and creativity.

Conclusion

To prepare individuals for their lifelong journey is a complex and exciting task. Through my graduate school coursework, I have become more confident in my teaching and coaching. I have learned, through personal reflection and practical applications, that education is a field where I can constantly improve my craft. By thinking about the purpose of education through various lenses in ED800, refining my teaching of science in order to better promote understanding in TE861A, and through developing a philosophy and finding ways to foster autonomy in KIN855, my knowledge about education has tremendously grown.

Moving forward, I know it is time to share what I have learned with others. I not only want to be a part of the field of education, but I also want to be a leader in it. Creating this portfolio will be a platform to share my newfound knowledge, and by continuing to update it as my learning journey continues, I hope to stay current and thoughtful as an educator.

I look forward to my ten-year college reunion where I can edit my response to my fellow biology majors. In response to the, “*what are you up to?*” question, I can now say with confidence, “*I*

have earned a master's degree in education, and I am proud to be a teacher and a coach."

Through my graduate school studies at Michigan State University, I have gone from "just a teacher" to a "confident educational leader.