

A little less conversation, a little more action, please

By Paul Booth

Driving around town today and trying to teach my children about the wonder that is Elvis, I started to think about these past two years that I have been in this Master's program. For two years I have been studying how to become a better teacher, reading about best practices, and talking about how these practices would work in my class. While taking two classes a semester, I taught 120 kids with three different preps. The course requirements for this program and my teaching load left me little time to implement these new ideas, and little time to put these conversations into action.

Early in the program when I started to realize how little time I had to try to implement all the new things that I was learning, I started an "Idea List". I started this list so I would remember ideas for projects and ways I can improve my teaching practices and resources that I want to use in my future classes once I have more time.

Throughout this program, I took classes where I encountered constant opportunities to learn and it seemed I kept gaining and gaining with each paper I wrote and with each post I reviewed for a classmate. Then there were other classes where the material was not as ground breaking and the learning was minimal. The classes from which I learned the most were the ones that I found to be the farthest out of my comfort zone of math and science; these classes seemed to make my Idea List the most.

One of the major contributors to the Idea list was ED 800. My wife and friends find it funny that this class made my list because of the struggles that I had completing this course. The course was "at your own pace" which meant that I filled all of my newly-found "free time" with other more pressing activities, only to do the lion's share of the course's units in the last month. This course became one of my favorites because of its contributions to my Idea List and the ongoing conversations that I have about the reading of this course.

For starters this class had us read poetry from Billy Collins, which was totally new to me. Having been a science major in school, poetry never came across my desk. In the class I learned about Billy Collins's 180 Days of Poetry Program where he is trying to get schools to read a poem a day just for the love of poetry. I liked the thought of this program and I tried to implement this program at the start of this school year only to see it fade because I did not have time to keep it running. This is an idea that stays on the list until next year.

Having not been an education major as an undergraduate, the first unit on the history of education and education philosophies was very interesting to me. I had never taken a class like this, and everything about John Dewey and the fight between traditional and progressive education I found fascinating. I find myself, when creating a lesson, thinking about Dewey and his thoughts on learning in the abstract and using that to drive my lesson to real life experiences and trying to engage my students in solving real life problems.

We were asked to read Howard Gardner's book *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed* and it has left a lasting impression on me. Gardner's thoughts on teaching ethics inside the school are something that I believe in very strongly. Since reading this book I have been trying to figure out a way for these thoughts to get off my Idea List and into my classroom. This book has strengthened my beliefs that we, as teachers, have more to teach our students than reading, writing, and arithmetic.

The third unit involved acting as a participate observer taking what we learned from reading Mary Catherine Bateson's *Peripheral Visions* and applying it to what we saw in the movie *Whale Rider*. I was particularly fond of this unit because I was able to use my experiences as a Peace Corps Volunteer in West Africa, where I was essentially a participate observer for two years.

I know that the focus of ED 800 units was to look into the different forms of inquiry, and I did learn about inquiry but that was not why the class was so important to me. To me this class was the perfect blend of new learning, application to the classroom, and it drew off my past experiences to make it one of my favorite classes over these last two years

TE 846 was one of the first classes that I took when I started this program. It was taught by Dr. Goufang Li. This class focused on the different literacy learners and was one of the main reasons I enrolled in graduate school. I wanted to learn how to teach students to read. I know this sounds strange coming from a math teacher, but in twelve years of teaching I have noticed that the primary reason that my students are not able to answer the math problems correctly is because they cannot read the problem.

In this class I was able to study how to work with different types of readers, from English Language Learners to students with disabilities. The work load in this class was enormous, but all of it was valuable. We learned strategies to help in reading comprehension and the many reasons students are not successful readers: all of which I was able to apply to my math class.

My final paper was a case study where I applied these reading strategies to my classroom. I chose to use two strategies that my students were familiar with and that I thought would work well with math story problems. The first was SQ3R, (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review) and the other was concept mapping. Knowing that "good readers are active readers" I thought that giving my students a plan to implement while attempting a story problem would help them with their understanding. Both strategies did show some improvement in their comprehension of the story problem.

This class was important to me because it laid the foundation for my studies throughout this program. What I learned in this class I applied to other classes and to my classroom. Even though I have not used most of the strategies that I learned that first semester, it is what I learned about my students as readers that have been enduring. I have applied what I learned in this class to all my other classes, ranging from CEP 832 Teaching Students with Challenging Behavior to TE 831 Teaching with Technology.

I took TE 831 with Erica Hamilton and Darryl Chris this past fall. TE 831 was the first and only education technology class that I have ever taken. What made this class so useful for me was that all of our assignments and discussions were designed to be used right away in our classrooms.

Our first assignment major assignment was a vodcast. Not only were we asked to make this vodcast but we were to try it in our classroom. I learned the most during the process of creating the vodcast. I had to learn how to find photos and music and then learn how to edit them so they could be used for the assignment, none of which I had ever done before. The feedback that I received from my own students and 831 classmates was valuable for future vodcasts.

Additionally, throughout the course we had three "Tech Talks". These Tech Talks were a forum where each class member was asked to put forth a technology that could be used in the classroom. Through this forum I was given a list of technologies with a short review which were geared toward my math classroom. Having three Tech Talks was a challenge for me; I wanted to find new technologies that had an application to a math class that also had not been introduced by other students in an earlier Tech Talk. I found myself travelling around my school asking my coworkers if they had any suggestions that I could try and review for my class. The three Tech Talks was the single largest contributor to my Idea List.

Finally the Repurposed Lesson may have been my favorite assignment for this class. We were asked with this task to take an already existing technology that was not intended to be used in education and to use it in our classroom. I particularly liked this assignment for the following two reasons: first, I was able to problem solve and be creative and second, it forced me to (again) go wandering around through my school talking with my colleagues looking for ideas. For this assignment I used Ipads and QR codes to differentiate the leaning in my classroom. These were two technologies that I had never used. After the lesson I actually had a student thank me for how this class helped him with his learning. Not only did my Idea List grow from my own Repurposed Lesson, but I also took some Ideas from the lessons of my classmates.

One of my other classmates had used blogging for the Repurposed Lesson. This was something that I found interesting and could use immediately in my classroom. After reading my TE 831 classmate's Repurposed Lesson, I started having my students research TED Talk videos, post to our blog, and lead their classmates in a week-long discussion. My hope was to extend the walls of my classroom and have my students learning and thinking outside of our school building. This was yet another concept that I learned and practiced in this class.

I am currently enrolled in TE 848. Even though I am only partially through this class, I have quickly grown to love it. Being the only non- language arts teacher in this class, I have had to work hard to incorporate the course material into my math class. The learning curve for me is very steep, but it is highly rewarding. Through this class, I have started to realize the power of having my students write to help their understanding of math.

Every week, every reading, every post I add something new to my Idea List. The number of ideas that I have come up with from this class is not what is as impressive as the range of ideas. I have thoughts of having my students write code to help their understanding of math. Next year I am going to have my grade level have our students free-write for a warm-up in every class to help them grow as people, part of an idea that I had from Howard Gardner's book. I also have the idea of adapting a genre project idea

that would help my students understand all of the different ways people write while using math. This class has also given me ideas on how to include parents and administrators into the learning. And my final project will look into ways to help my students understand math through their writing in class.

I am thrilled to have TE 848 as the last class that I take in this program. It has left me excited about what I can do when I have the time to take action. I am looking forward to dedicating the time that I spent in this program, studying, writing, and talking about how to be a better teacher to actually working on becoming a better teacher, using that time to actually try out ideas that have made it to my Idea List over the past two years. Unlike Elvis, I am not totally at the end of my rope and will relish this last few weeks.