

The Case of the “A-Ha Moments”

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My educational journey as both a learner and an educator began when I applied for the undergraduate College of Education program at Michigan State University. As I continued through my undergraduate courses and my fifth year internship, many of our professors talked about continuing our education a step further by pursuing a master's degree. As I processed this information, I told myself I would be “too busy” with setting up my new classroom and creating new and exciting lessons from what I had already learned that I wouldn't have time to pursue another degree, right? Wrong! Throughout the course of my first year of teaching in my own classroom, I began to realize the importance of not only furthering my education but also keeping myself aware of new educational theories and technologies that were available for educators. My application and acceptance to the Master of Arts in Education program came in the spring of that year and I began my first course that summer.

When I started my first course, I was excited for what was to come and all the “new and exciting” things I was going to learn over the course of the next six semesters. I began to realize quickly that I was not just learning “new and exciting” things to apply in my classroom, I was learning about past and present teaching techniques, the importance of learning and using different technologies, and the importance of adapting different teaching styles to fit the needs of my students within the classroom. I truly have learned so much over the course of these last five semesters; I find it very difficult to narrow it down to only a few specific topics to share. But as all educators know, those “a-ha moments” in our own classrooms are so inspiring (and often few and far between), that when they do happen they always need to be shared. Therefore, I find myself sharing a few of my own “a-ha moments” from my masters program that I truly believe had a resounding impact on my role as a learner and an educator.

My first “a-ha moment” took place in CEP 883, Psychology of Classroom Management. Throughout this course we discussed different approaches to classroom management and what it means to be an effective teacher. Although, there had been many courses in my undergrad that discussed both of these topics, something was different when it came to this course. As I went through the course, completing the required reading and writing assignments, one thing continued to stick with me – adjusting classroom management techniques to fit the students not the other way around. We had discussed this concept many times throughout my undergrad studies when it came to teaching our students and using assessments, if the students didn't do well on the assessment than something about our teaching approach needed to be adjusted and reworked for the students to gain a better understanding of the topic. Albert Einstein once said, “Insanity is doing the same thing again and expecting a different result”. So how could I do the same thing every year for classroom management and expect the students to adjust accordingly?

I spent many nights that summer reworking and “re-tweaking” my classroom management technique based on the findings from this course. I couldn't just let this valuable information go to waste. With the help of this course, I began to see the importance of change in a classroom. It didn't change my own classroom management style or standards I had set for my students, but it did help me understand that

differentiation should take place both academically and behaviorally. I was able to use valuable resources from this course to find a new course of direction when it came to motivating my students, putting more emphasis on developing relationships with my students as well as the relationships of my students with their fellow classmates, and deciding before the school year began goals for myself and my students and implementing them within the classroom to best fit all of our needs. Classroom management is no easy feat, I realized it's more than just rules and "cute" bulletin boards it is a lot of hard work and responsibility for both the teachers and their students. It is a continuous journey that will sometimes be successful and other times unsuccessful but what matters is reaching the end goal and improving along the way. As quoted in *The Institute on Disability of the University of New Hampshire* from one of our readings in this course, "It is important to recognize that behind every success story, there lies a journey in which commitment, hard work, and humor paved the way". Thanks to this course and my "a-ha moment", it is a journey I look forward to every year!

My next "a-ha moment" came that following semester in TE 855, Teaching School Mathematics. I was very excited for this course for two reasons. One reason was because it is part of my concentration area for my master's degree. The second reason is because I naturally become excited for anything that involves math. I have always loved math and learning new ways to teach mathematics will hopefully provide opportunities for my own students to learn to love math as much as I do! How could I not be excited? As we began this course, I was overwhelmed with how much valuable information I was walking away with. The course allowed several opportunities for group discussions and presentations with my colleagues as well as with my professor. As we continued in the course we began to narrow down specific topics for our Action Research Project based upon previous course discussions and readings. I had realized immediately what I wanted to place my focus on and what would lead me to my own "a-ha moment" that I continuously share with other teachers. Math NEEDS to be more than just a textbook! Now, this was obviously something I had already known but what I did learn was the different ways to incorporate math and the reasons why we should teach beyond the textbook.

In completing research for this project, I read an article by Jo Boaler in the *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* that discussed the importance of going beyond the textbook. It stated: "Many students are able to learn mathematics for 11 years or more but are then completely unable to use this mathematics in situations outside the classroom context". We had discussed in several classes the importance of making real world connections, but something about this quote struck me and truly pushed me to include more real world math experiences within the classroom. After reading this quote and completing this Action Research Project, I realized how important it truly was. To the students math became "enjoyable" and little did they know it was actual meaningful learning experiences, too! After this course, I have made a much more conscious effort to include weekly Math Workshops, centers, or hands-on activities that do not always revolve around their math book pages. Thanks to this course and my "a-ha moment", my students (and myself) are continuing to find new ways to enjoy learning mathematics.

My third "a-ha moment" took place during TE 846, Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners. Although this course is required to renew your teaching certificate, I was excited to take this course because it is not a subject area that is part of my

concentration and I was looking for new ways to differentiate my reading instruction. I have found over the last three years of teaching that my students are at a wide range of reading levels and I was constantly searching for other ways to differentiate for both my high readers as well as my lower readers. As we completed each of the assigned readings, we were asked to think about how each of these concepts would benefit our classroom as well as specific students in our current classroom who we could focus on for a case study. I was going through the motions of reading (which I often find my own students doing), when one of the concepts jumped out as the solution to my problem. I had my own student “a-ha moment”, where while I was reading everything was summarized in a short and sweet acronym – C.A.R.E.S.

C.A.R.E.S. stands for Change, Alter, Revise in terms of accommodations and Exchange and Substitute in terms of modifications. I have made several changes in my approach to my independent reading curriculum. Students are taking home a reading book every week to read for homework based on their reading level. I also try to incorporate weekly reading centers where I can work individually with students on different reading strategies. Altering materials for reading has been a very exciting task for me since this course. I have incorporated the use of an iPad for both reading comprehension games as well as using the video option to record students reading where they can play back their recording to themselves to hear and assess their own fluency and decide upon areas where they need to improve. I am continuously bringing in new ideas and activities that fit the C.A.R.E.S. approach to improve my students’ confidence in their reading. Thanks to this course and my “a-ha moment”, applying the C.A.R.E.S approach shows my students I “care” about them as individual readers and they learn to “care” about their reading success.

My final “a-ha moment” occurred this past summer in one of my favorite courses in the MAET program, TE 831 Teaching School Subject Matter With Technology. When I read about this course I was very excited because I thought I was entering this course as a technology expert and would be able to share what I already knew with others, I mean I am on a computer every day – what else is there to know, right? Wrong! My “a-ha moment” in this course was more of a realization that when it comes to technology you really can never know or learn enough. One thing about this course that helped me reach this realization was we had to use the technologies ourselves before we could use it in our classrooms. Often I found myself talking about a type of technology (or even a technique to use in math or reading) without actually taking the time to try (or retry) it out myself. Sitting down and creating a digital story, a digital poster, or even a voice thread helped me learn the ins and outs of the program and also see what websites and tools would be best for my students for specific projects. I learned quickly in this course that implementing technology does not mean just picking a technology and making the curriculum fit that technology. It takes a blend of my own knowledge, of the content knowledge in terms of the curriculum, and the technology that could best fit each of these needs.

Another way in which this course helped me reach my technology based “a-ha moment” was it created an urge within me to learn more about each of the discussed technologies as well as to see what else was out there for my students. Not having the most up-to-date technologies in my classroom, like a SMART board, I often found myself pushing technology aside because it wasn’t right at my fingertips. This course

gave several resources to use that did not involve using a SMART board but could be implemented in our classroom iPad or even with laptop computers. Not only did this course cause me to pursue my own technological interests but it also gave me valuable resources to share with my colleagues. Thanks to this course and my “a-ha moment” I learned the importance of completely understanding a technology and all of its uses and how it can benefit the content of the lesson and the students’ understanding of the curriculum.

Looking back on my journey through the MAET program I cannot believe all of the things I have learned and accomplished nor can I believe it is coming to an end. Over the course of this program, I have gained so much knowledge (too much to share in one essay) that I am constantly sharing with my colleagues as well as with my family and friends (even though they aren’t even teachers or most likely aren’t interested). I found a joy of learning in each of these courses and I hope I portray that same joy in my own classroom. Each week, I looked forward to learning something new in my course just as I look forward to each new day as an educator. As I continue growing as both a learner and an educator, I will look back on the variety of things I learned in the program and use them as building blocks for my future. The possibilities are endless with education, both as a student and a teacher, and I cannot wait for my next “a-ha moment”!