Capstone Paper

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**Introduction**

In this paper I will describe how my perspective as a leader in curriculum and instruction has been impacted by my coursework with the American College of Education. I have experienced growth both in terms of new knowledge and new skills. My professional work has been enhanced in a variety of ways. My professional goals have become more nuanced, and my leadership skills have matured.

**Professional Growth**

**Growth of Professional Knowledge**

In my first course with the American College of Education, I learned about the value of Positive Behavioral Support Systems. According to PBSS principles, schools should try to achieve the ratio of five positive interactions to every one negative interaction (Knoff, 2007). Secondly, there should be a school-wide effort to teach behavioral expectations, and those expectations should be taught in the environments where they are expected to be practiced (Carter & Pool, 2012). Third, teachers and staff need to see a clear link between behavior and instruction. In this course I was prompted to reflect on the fact that what I do in my classroom has an effect on the overall school climate, and that maintaining school climate is a team effort.

In subsequent courses, I also learned a great deal about the role of research in education. As a science teacher, I came into this program with a strong understanding of the scientific method and of experimental design, but I did not comprehend the range of experimental models that are used in education. I already knew, for example, that scientifically based research is the gold standard with regard to scientific reliability. When scientific methods are used, teachers can draw direct conclusions about causality. The concept of *action research*, however, was something entirely new to me. As a science teacher, I was especially surprised by the idea of using triangulation in research. Using three methods to increase the precision and accuracy of one’s conclusions was not what surprised me. I was surprised by the fact that research might include experiments that were not carefully controlled. Upon reflection, this made sense. Teachers need answers, and we do not always have the time to control everything. Nor do we always have access to relevant research that has already been conducted by others. Sometimes we just have to try things ourselves and be as scientific as we can under our conditions.

While I have learned about a broad range of educational topics, I have come across the greatest abundance of new information in my digital learning classes. I discovered the term *learning object* and realized that I had already been using many learning objects. Then I learned that there are learning object repositories that collect learning objects for use by teachers and individuals. I had a similar experience withWeb 2.0 tools. As with learning objects, I had used Web 2.0 tools before, but I did not understand the wealth of tools that are out there, and I did not appreciate what makes Web 2.0 tools distinct from earlier web tools. As a result of my coursework, I now have experience with social bookmarking sites, blogs, survey tools, games for learning, Wordles, Google tools, screencasting, Tweets, and more.

**Growth of Professional Competency**

In addition to learning new skills during my masters’ program, I have also acquired both a wider skill set and a broadened perspective on the teaching profession. I have not only learned about Web 2.0 tools, I have logged many hours actually using those tools, and they have become essential components of my practice. In more subtle ways, I have also acquired new skills that help me to motivate students, to provide more relevant instruction, and to be a more empathetic adult.

One new skill that I am especially thankful for is the ability to create a screencast. In my Digital Content course, my professor endorsed the use of Camtasia as a tool for creating screencasts. I had heard of the software before, but I had been on the fence with regard to buying it due to its cost. After hearing my professor speak highly of it, I bought Camtasia, and I am very glad that I did. I have used the software every week since I purchased it. In fact, I am planning to use it to create my *original* *contribution* for my capstone experience. I find that creating videos is an excellent way to reach all of my students. It allows me to be in more than one place at a time, and it gives students access to learning around the clock. Students can watch me at home, in a study hall, or on their iPhones at the beach.

**Impacts of Curriculum and Instruction Program Outcomes**

**Overview**

Mastery of the Curriculum and Instruction Program Outcomes has definitively enhanced my professional work. One aspect of this enhancement is in increased awareness of educational issues. A second aspect of this enhancement manifests as new skills that help me find and deliver more effective content to students. Other aspects of this enhancement relate to the manner in which I engage professionally with my colleagues and with the community.

**Increased Awareness**

When I speak of increased awareness of educational issues, I am referring to topics such as 21st Century Learning. I now firmly believe that the educational playing field has undergone a fundamental change over the last 20 or so years. I appreciate this change, and I embrace the new learning that I must undertake as a teacher of digital natives.

Also regarding increased awareness, my coursework has also prompted me to pay renewed attention to some parts of education that will never change. Among these constants is the need for safe, supportive classrooms. Students will always need caring, empathy, safety, and attention as individuals.

**Enhanced Skills**

A variety of new skills enable me to find and deliver content more effectively. Instead of simply *Googling* everything, I am now able to access even richer sources of content, such as learning repositories and social bookmarking sites. I know how to set up an RSS feed, so that the content comes to me, rather than the other way around. As I have already mentioned, my delivery of content is better than ever, now that I am proficient in creating and uploading screencasts. In addition, I am optimistic that tweets will surpass email as a tool for contacting students on late notice.

Another enhanced skill that I have already mentioned is the ability to conduct action research. Action research allows me to answer questions about what really works in the specific context of my classroom. Action research also allows me to contribute to the collective body of professional knowledge at my school.

**Enhanced Professional Relationships**

My professional relationships with my colleagues have been strengthened as a result of my coursework with the American College of Education. In my Teacher Leadership course, I was required to assemble a team of coworkers who helped me create an action plan. At the time, the exercise seemed very contrived, but my colleagues actually enjoyed the process, and it was an excellent bonding experience. What developed was not exactly a PLC. It is more a loose *community of practice*, in which we get together to have inspiring conversations about the issues in education that intrigue us.

**Changes in Professional Goals**

When I look back at my earlier professional goals, what strikes me is that, while my goals have not changed, their context and their implications now seem much richer. Before completing my coursework, my understanding of my own goals was somewhat hazy. Now that I have experienced the breadth of this program, I see the contexts and implications of my goals in much higher resolution.

The first goal that I set for myself was to increase the value of what I teach my students. While I did have an inkling that focusing on *21st Century Skills* would be a logical extension of this goal, I did not understand the broad nature of 21st Century Skills. I had been thinking that I could teach students to use CAD software and to do some coding, and that would be enough. As it turns out, 21st Century Learning is much more than that. 21st Century Learning encompasses creative thinking, innovation, collaboration, communication, and problem solving.

My second goal was to find ways to improve motivation and satisfaction by making learning more meaningful to students. At the time that I came up with that goal, I was picturing myself when I was a child and imagining the types of experiences that would have motivated me. I was not imagining today’s digital natives. I have since come to realize that my conception of what is interesting to today’s learners needs to be recalibrated.

My third goal, to increase my students’ retention of knowledge and skills, has undergone the smallest change. What has changed is my *bag of tricks* for accomplishing this goal. My bag of tricks has grown immensely during my coursework.

**My Experience as a Curriculum and Instruction Leader**

As I have already mentioned, my foray into curriculum and instruction leadership was a positive one. I was able to assemble a willing group of colleagues who were excited to talk about ways to improve student achievement. In the end, we decided that what our school really needs is a greater sense of community, both among staff and among students. In the process of tackling this issue, our team developed into a loose community of practice. We all acknowledged that our team provided a unique opportunity. It offered us a structured way to talk about the educational issues that interest us and that we feel are most important.

In addition to my experience in the structured exercises of my Teacher Leadership class, I have noticed that my coursework has allowed me to slip into a more subtle leadership role. I am now conversant on almost every school improvement topic that arises, and my colleagues have begun to rely on my knowledge. I noticed this most recently as I sat on an interview committee. I was probably the only interviewer at the table who had heard of all of the new educational strategies, frameworks, and tools that were being described by our candidates.

**Conclusion**

My experience in this masters’ program has been extremely valuable. I have grown in terms of both knowledge and general competency as an educator. I understand my students better than ever before. Whereas my professional goals were once quite simple, they are now rich and full of new possibilities. Finally, at least in the eyes of my colleagues, I have become a leader in curriculum and instruction.

References

Carter, D., Pool, J. (2012). Appropriate social behavior: teaching expectations to young children. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. 40, 318.

Knoff, H. (2007). Developing and implementing the Behavioral Matrix. *Project ACHIEVE Press.*