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Synthesis Essay

Small Impact on a Big World: My Learning Journey

The first learning experience I remember completing comprehensively was the process of learning how to fish. My relatives had a lake house in North Carolina on beautiful [Lake Gaston](#) in whose waters plentiful amounts of catfish, blue gills, and bass made their home. My father had been a prolific angler in his younger years and his father before him. Knowing this and hearing him talk about it, seeing him do it, sparked a desire in me to want to learn how to fish myself. I then remember asking my Dad to begin to teach me how to do it.

The process started with the logistics of fishing: the equipment (rod, reel, lures, tackle box) and the time of day and location of fish. I remember mini-lectures in the car as we went to purchase the equipment and on the way to the spots where I would both watch my Dad model the tricks of the trade and where I, too, would try my hand at the skill. I recall, distinctly, fastening little lessons of learning into a large bunch of understanding which one could call “fishing.”

This learning analogy through fishing created, from an early stage of my life, the understanding that learning was possible, important, and invigorating. It also planted the seeds of my belief that learning was about mentorship, motivation, and one’s own maneuvers in the process. This knowledge, in part, led me later in life to enter the field of education. As I entered this field, one for which I was gifted but had little formal training in, I realized something about myself. I was now a small fish in a big pond. This contrasted my position of big fish in a small pond at [the small liberal arts college I attended](#). Though this realization could have been daunting, I was confident because I knew some things from my fishing experience. Though the pond, as it were, does not often change drastically, fish do. For instance, fish grow. In addition, fish learn to adapt to their habitat as they learn it through exploration and adaptation. I kept this in mind as I meandered through the new waters of teaching 5th grade mathematics and reading at a charter school in the northwest section of the city of Philadelphia. I felt like I was a fish, constantly moving, searching out the next thing that could fuel my work, confronting obstacles in the treacherous waters.

Nevertheless, a determined fish, [I kept swimming](#), I grew, and I adapted. I learned to work hard and to love the hard work I was doing. Through the processes of experimenting, reflecting, and honing that accompany a classroom teacher's day-to-day work, I began to identify and embrace my role as a small fish in the big pond of education. More importantly, I saw, via my students' success, smiles, and strides, that I could make a big difference as a small fish.

Keeping my foundational learning philosophy in mind, however, I looked to explore other options in the realm of education that took me out of the high-stakes testing environment of the crowded classrooms of an underserved district. I did not want to run away, as it were, from the specific location of the pond of education in which I had swam for the first two years of my teaching experience. But, rather, I wanted to venture into another area which emphasized [the other side of the report card](#) more so that I could do more of the mentorship that I knew in my heart was crucial to the educational process. Thankfully, I found my current workplace, the [Milton Hershey School](#), at which I took a job at an experimental education program where I wore many hats including caretaker and manager of the living facilities, mathematics and reading instructor in the scholastic realm, and most importantly a mentor to eighth grade boys and girls.

I have worked at this school since that transition in many roles. However, I have grown to want a job more focused on mentorship and through which I can make a larger impact in the waters of the pond of education through a role in a leadership position. This desire impelled me to find the [Master of Arts in education at Michigan State University](#). Through it, I earned a [Sport Coaching and Leadership Certificate](#) and pursued a concentration in K-12 School and Postsecondary Leadership.

My passion for mentorship and belief in teaching values and skills through education has manifested itself mostly through my work in athletics as a soccer coach. As an avid and accomplished soccer player, I love the game and know a great deal about it already. Before coursework in coaching, I was a good coach but I viewed my role as a coach from a more narrow perspective of how to get the best out of the athletes' physical performance. However, a class entitled *KIN855 Psychosocial Bases of Coaching* expanded my coach's toolbox by providing a deeper perspective about the multi-faceted nature of motivation and the [inner mental game](#) of sports. To use the fishing analogy to describe my learning in this class, it is as if I learned that there were

other lures out there that could help me catch, as it were, my athletes' best potential. The course immediately influenced my coaching as it gave me practical ideas to employ to improve the threshold of my athletes' (and therefore teams') performance. For example, I began to utilize [imagery](#) as a pre-game ritual. I guided my soccer players through scripted pre-competition rituals with the purpose of helping them mentally prepare for prime performance. Using learning from the class, I also created pre-game individual and team goal setting exercises that my athletes completed via educational technology at least one training day before a game. In addition, I designed post-game goal reflections that the students used to reflect on their individual and our team competition performance. With the practical things I compiled from *KIN855*, my approach to coaching became more holistic as I helped model important mental processes to my players and got to know them more deeply as individuals through the exercises. Furthermore, through my professor's guidance and the content of the material, I better understood psychological concepts (like [self-determination theory](#)) and philosophical concepts (like [consequentialism](#)) that I could reference and apply in coaching as well as in my role as a teacher and parent. *KIN855* exemplified the type of learning I hoped for in graduate school as it gave me new tools for the aspects of learning I most sincerely believe in: mentorship, motivation, and one's own maneuvers in the process.

As I mentioned above, my entry into graduate school was, in general, a means to discover my niche in the realm of education. In particular, I looked to my coursework through Michigan State to provide a solid foundation for building my leadership knowledge. A summer intensive course entitled *ED801: Organizational Leadership and Development* required me to read two seminal works on leadership, discussed situational ethics, and explored strategies of how to approach difficult situations in leadership with classmates and the instructor. I read about concepts such as [full range leadership](#), [organizational theory](#), and [adaptive leadership](#) that provided me concrete conversation topics to discuss with educational leaders. A case study of leadership presented in a book entitled [How Stella Saved the Farm](#) promoted exploration of common situations that confront any leader and prompted conversation about how to approach those situations. This book had a great impact on my thinking and that thinking began a shift in my mindset related to my role in large organization. It prodded me to start viewing scenarios at my place of employment through the lens

of a leader involved in navigating and managing them. In terms of the fishing analogy, after taking the class it felt as though I had discovered a new and exciting area of the big pond of education. The class had practical application too as knowledge from this class prompted me to develop, on my own, a management philosophy that I could reference in a role as a leader as a guiding framework. The content of *EAD801* in many ways matured me as an educator as it challenged me to think about the long-range, big-picture implications of decisions made concerning how to deliver excellent education to children.

Lastly, I looked to graduate school to explore the general idea of learning, something I had understood and valued for so long with more of an emphasis on the facts of its developments aside from my own personal opinions or perspective. An educational psychology class, *CEP800: Psychology of Learning in School and other Settings* provided just the sort of stretching of the mind I was seeking. Content from the class guided me through a deep dive into the developmental stages of how one learns. Weighing whether [Jean Piaget's idea of schema](#) was more pertinent to learning than [Lev Vygotsky's social development theory](#) aided in a deeper understanding of the concept of learning. Exploration of expertise via readings and an introspective analysis of an area in my own life in which I was, ostensibly, an expert was intriguing. Understanding both the beginnings of learning (developmental stages) and the potential product (expertise) helped me to develop patience with regard to the learning journey of the children with whom I work on a daily basis. A meaningful exercise that solidified what I really believe about learning involved creating a personal theory of learning by compiling all of my thoughts and knowledge about the subject. This descriptive document of my thoughts on learning enables me to have richer discussion in my professional workplace about prescriptive measures to get students to experience it. Overall, the outcomes of the class served as landmarks that I could revisit in my journey of [swimming through this real thing we call education](#) that further developed my understanding of the ultimate goal that it pursues: learning.

Overall, the courses I took through Michigan State augmented my passion for education with practical knowledge about it. The program provided the tools, skills, and resources that turned the once turbulent waters of the pond into a pristine pool through which I felt much more comfortable navigating. My experience through the Master of Arts in Education also enlightened me. For one, it enhanced my knowledge

about education. Before the program, I did not fully understand the history of schooling in America or the extensive science and numerous theories concerning learning. Exposure to important dates, people, and theories in education turned me from someone merely just passionate about education to someone knowledgeable about it. Secondly, my master's degree coursework reinforced my view of education as being central to a more successful society. Several classes in the program evidenced the causal relationship between improving education and improving the world at large. Experiencing, via wisdom from classmates' discussion board posts and interaction with class material, the powerful potentiality of education changed me from a passionate participant in education to an ardent champion of it. The Masters of Arts in Education program through Michigan State also instilled in me the importance of life-long, self-directed learning. As my coursework required me to delve into a wide range of material from the subject of education deeply and deliberately, I realized the multi-faceted nature of the field. Seeing the beauty in educational experiences through reading [Billy Collins' poems](#) or being exposed to the importance of ethnography through [a movie about the Maori culture](#), showcased the ubiquity of the concept of learning and illuminated the journey of learning as being of the utmost importance in terms of living a fulfilling life. Without the Masters of Arts in Education, I would have never had the depth of appreciation for a field I had spent most of my professional life engaged in wholeheartedly. Because of my studies at Michigan State, I can now truly call myself an educator whereas before I would say I was only just working hard with young people.

To conclude, I am glad that I no longer see my role as a small fish in a big pond as daunting and difficult, but rather as promising and full of potential. Furthermore, I am thankful that the whole experience has made me, if I do say so myself, a fish much more appealing to catch than the small one that first swam among the shallows of the large pond.