

Becoming a Lifelong Learner

Becoming a lifelong learner is a decision that we make, and mine began the moment I started my master's program through Michigan State University. I knew that I wanted to pursue a graduate level education in administration and leadership, but what I gained from the process was so much more. Now ending my four year journey through the Master of Art's in Education program, I have developed skills that more than just qualify me to take on a leadership position. I have learned not only how to lead a school, its faculty, and students, but also how to further my personal pursuit of knowledge to be the very best leader that I can. In addition to creating individual goals to continue my education throughout the rest of my career, I have also learned the importance of creating environments that ignite and support the continuation of professional development for teacher learning communities. I have found that the whole learning environment of a school is a domino effect. An administrator that is both interested and invested in furthering her own education will pass that motivation on to her teachers, who then relay that excitement for learning to their students.

Although these ideas are not new revelations in the world of pedagogy, when looking back at all that I have learned from my classes, along with my experience in the classroom, they are the foundation for what has been the biggest take-away from the application of my studies. I have been so lucky to work in two different schools that have provided me with very different perspectives of leadership, both from the administration and in my role as a teacher. I was fortunate enough to have the support to apply and reflect upon what I was learning in my classrooms. My classes through MSU provided me with diverse learning opportunities that challenged my leadership skills and helped me to grow as a lifelong learner.

One specific class that taught me a great deal about how learning occurs in many of the things we do on a daily basis, both intentionally and unintentionally, was EAD 860, The Concept of the Learning Society. Learning can be defined as a process in which behavior alters the ways in which people think and perceive the world, based on acquiring information, ideas, skills, and attitudes. People come about this information through highly structured learning, such as my master's program, moderately structured learning, like churches and museums, and lastly unstructured learning, like daily experiences. The basic economic use for learning is to aid people in preparing to work, in order to provide for themselves, their families, and to provide utility to societal needs. Becoming a life-long learner does not take experience, but rather self-motivation and desire. It is a choice. What I learned most from this class is that it is not only important to become a lifelong learner as an administrator, but to also spark lifelong learning in those whom which you are leading.

My favorite book read in this course was, *Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance*, by Atul Gawande. The idea behind his studies were that betterment is perpetual labor, and therefore, in order to perform at a high level, one must continue to better themselves in that field. According to Gawande, performance betterment takes shape in three different ways, including diligence, doing right, and ingenuity. Although his perspective was looking through the lens of a doctor, his

idea can be applied to the educational field of study. His ideas really resonated with me and taught me that lifelong learning is required in order to perform at the highest of your abilities. Learning should not stop when your degree is done. That is just the beginning.

Another class that had a huge impact on my learning was EAD 824, Leading Teacher Learning. This class is the reason that I have become so passionate about teacher learning communities. In my proposal for building a year-long plan for teaching learning, I was able to structure PLCs, or Professional Learning Communities, that were directly related to the school's biggest issue, differentiated instruction. To offset enrollment deficits, St. Joseph was admitting students with greater academic needs permitting that the teachers would be able to accommodate such needs without relying on any special education services. As more students with greater needs joined the school family, many teachers found that differentiating their instruction was becoming much more challenging. In order to increase student achievement, the school needed to function as a learning community, supporting the education of professional learning. Creating this context of a learning community is an ongoing process that never looks perfect. However, the benefits of creating this environment are critical to the success of the learning community. Using the PLCs, I was able to find a way that teachers could collaborate both at the grade level and in vertical subject areas to improve their instructional differentiation.

Although building the year-long proposal was the biggest project of this class, there were other big ideas that left a lasting impression as a future administrator. For example, trust is one of the most important elements to creating a successful relationship between an administrator and her teachers. Respect the time of your teachers. Professional learning days need to have a focus and purpose. Professional learning communities will not be successful if they are not constructed in the right environment with clear goals and communication tool to help the flow of discussion and problem solving. All of these topics were key ideas that have helped shape how I would approach building learning communities to create lifelong learners as an administrator. Another impactful class, EAD 801 Organizational Leadership, focused on the broader idea of what it takes to be a successful leader. In my analysis of St. Joseph School, I had realized that the decreasing enrollment was not necessarily because of anything happening within the walls of the school, but rather the effects of outside variables. The failing economy around 2006 began driving out young families that could no longer afford the Sylvania, Ohio price tag along with the tuition of a private school. Older, second-home families moved in and the enrollment has steadily decreased since. This K-8 parochial school, once filled three classrooms per grade level to the brim, currently has whittled down to just two meek classrooms per grade. The solution? It's a fighting combination of external advertisement and showcases along with internal restructuring. This project really broadened my view of what it takes for a school, particularly a private sector, to run as a business and what to do in times of decline.

In addition to administration, my master's area of focus was also on athletic leadership and coaching. This too requires an evolution of learning from experience and self-directed education. One specific project that I conducted in KIN 855, Psychosocial Basis of Coaching Athletes, focused primarily on the importance of coaching observations. Observation is another

way to continue lifelong learning and the pursuit of betterment. When we evaluate our effectiveness of communication during real-time, we become aware of our individual strengths and weaknesses when teaching and coaching. This awareness allows us a chance to tweak our ways of communication with students and athletes. During this project I conducted an observation on a high school volleyball coach and the results were surprising.

The observation conducted on Coach Sean Haugen, a high school Varsity volleyball coach, utilized the Coach Behavior Assessment System (CBAS) to analyze the frequency of types of responses to athlete's desirable behaviors, mistakes, along with other forms of communication between the coach and his players. The results found that Coach Haugen communicates most often through mistake-contingent instruction as well as reinforcement of desirable performance. The results also revealed that with a lack of punishment, Coach Haugen was experiencing some misbehavior from his athletes during down-time or when he was focused on working with other athletes. The results from this study, along with all of the aforementioned studies show that coaches can become more effective in their coaching strategies and communication when conducting regular observations. With different assessments, this same type of observation can be done with teachers as well and is critical to improving lines of communication between teachers and students and vice versa.

Another notable project from this course focused on my personal communication skills with athletes. Like most coaches, I really thought that I was an effective communicator. Using the GROW model, I realized that I talk way more than I should when conducting meetings with athletes. Instead of the athlete talking 80% and the coach talking 20%, I was doing the opposite. Listening is one of the most important ways to communicate with athletes. I found the GROW model to be very successful when goal setting with athletes. It not only gave athletes the ownership over their own personal goals, but also held them accountable for reaching those goals. Effective communication with athletes is a critical tool for successful coaches. My approach to leadership began in the classroom as a young student, but progressed more recognizably through sports as a young athlete. I began coaching young children how to play tennis and volleyball, from there led as a captain in high school, and eventually coached my own teams in college. My leadership roles have evolved over the years, much like my knowledge of leadership. My main influence has been the coaches and teachers that I have had the pleasure of learning from. My influence for wanting to pursue leadership has mainly come from the joy I get from having that same influence on the people I am teaching or coaching. When I first began this program, my thoughts that this was the beginning of the end. I wouldn't have to go to school anymore after completing my masters! I couldn't have been more wrong. What I have learned is that this is only the beginning of the leadership learning curve. More than anything else, the experiences that will come with taking on an administrative role will teach me the greatest lessons yet.

Because of this program and a new perspective, I am completely passionate about pursuing my goal to be a lifelong learner. I have learned how to budget and finance, observe and analyze, and respect and listen. I can restructure schedules to integrate professional learning

communities where teachers can get the support they need to develop professionally. I value the structure of the school as a business and the effects of the surrounding economy on it. I seek to become a better leader through continuing my education. Where there is a need, I will create proposals for plans to goal-set and restructure as I see fit. Being a good leader is extremely important to me, and I hope to continue to learn and apply my knowledge as a leader. To my Michigan State University professors: Thank you for taking the time to instill in me the importance of becoming a lifelong learner. I pledge that I will constantly evolve and change with the betterment of knowledge and strive to be a great leader. To me, being a lifelong learning is a choice, but it is also a responsibility. Administrators and leaders have a duty to be lifelong learners for the benefit of their team. Doing this takes time, motivation, and self-determination. I am looking forward to the opportunity when I get to apply everything I have gained from these classes and continue to from new experiences as an administrator. My goal is to be the administrator with the domino effect. The one that positively influences the teachers, who then teaches their students in the most effective and influential ways.