

# *Restructuring Leadership, Reengaging Learners*

Kayla VanEgmond's Synthesis Essay

In any class, a natural assumption is that the goals are focused on the learning of the students. This simple equation becomes more complicated, however, when the students in the class are teachers. When a teacher learns about teaching, the goals of teacher learning and student learning are inexorably intertwined. Despite my appreciation for the importance of this qualification, when I began a master's program focused on K-12 Post-Secondary Leadership, I expected my courses to emphasize my own learning more than in my previous Teacher Education courses. I assumed that I would learn more in the way my students do with an emphasis on improving my leadership skills. However, throughout my masters program, all of my learning has remained centered on impacting the learning of others. Specifically, I have learned more about how empathy with learners, both children and adults, can be used to build trust and respect as a foundation for more effective learning. Through the assignments and reflections I have done in my courses, I have improved my ability to take into account the thoughts and feelings of those of all ages who I am in a position to teach or lead. Stepping into their shoes will help me help them to step forward on their learning journey.

## Creativity in Teaching and Learning

One course that helped me build empathy for my students was CEP 818, Creativity in Teaching and Learning. The course was divided into seven modules, each focused on a different tool for creativity. For my major assignment during the play module, I created the introductory lesson to a unit about the connections between science and sports. In this lesson, each student is given a card describing a particular activity and the whole class discusses and votes about whether it is a sport or not. Since I created this first lesson as the last assignment for CEP 818, I

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really knew what I intended for the whole unit and what I wanted students to know and be able to do by the end of the unit. This allowed this first lesson to be even more meaningful and not just a filler opening lesson to get students excited about the unit. This activity is designed to be playful because there is not yet a specific purpose for thinking about the connection between science and sports at this point in the unit. When the course asked me to examine the benefits of play for creativity and therefore learning, I was able to empathize with some of the reasons my students enjoy play.

Play is a risk-free activity and by incorporating it into the introductory lesson, the unit begins in a way that is accessible to all students regardless of their previous science skills or background knowledge about sports. Thus, by incorporating the empathy for my students' feelings about play into my lesson, I can build trust that this is a unit and a classroom where the thoughts and skills they bring to the table are valued contributions. However, as I learned in ED 800, Concepts in Educational Inquiry, Vivian Paley's research shows us that play is not limited to its effects on trust and classroom culture but rather can actually improve student's language skills and ability to interact with peers, two factors that would both be built into this discussion lesson.

Another way that I built empathy for other learners through CEP 818 was through reflection on my work rather than the work itself. First of all, I noticed that I spent a lot of time editing the work products I created in this class, which was significantly different from how I approached assignments in previous classes, trying to get them done as efficiently as possible. This made me realize that when some of my students are taking a long time on their assignments it may not be, as I tend to assume, that they are goofing off and not being productive, but rather

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that that they, as I did in CEP 818, care about taking the time to make their assignments as good as they can possibly be. This is especially true, for both adults and children, when the assignment is personal to them. In CEP 818, when I had an assignment to make an elevator pitch about why creativity in learning is important, I was proud to show off the video I created to all of my students, friends, and family members. This experience reminded me that authentic, product-oriented assignments will increase engagement for my students as well because they will be more personally invested in the outcome of their work. Through reflecting on both the time I spent on assignments in CEP 818 and the personal connection I made to the more personal assignments, I was able to empathize better with my students, realizing that improving my reaction to their time spent on assignments and remembering to create personalized work as much as possible will both lead to a more respectful student teacher relationship.

## Leading Teacher Learning

Another course that helped me build empathy for learners of all ages was EAD 824, Leading Teacher Learning. The “Designs for Professional Learning” that were at the center of the course showed me that teachers, as learners, want just as much respect as children do. Overall, these designs emphasized that teachers want to learn from each other rather than having a supervisor tell them what to learn because the latter builds respect for all educators. One way the designs can build this respect is by showing the school leadership values what all teachers are doing as a source of information for their colleagues. For example, by using classroom walkthroughs, one of the designs we studied, teachers get the opportunity to learn best practices and practice reflection on teaching while walking through the classrooms of a few of their

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colleagues while they teach and administrators communicate to teachers that they learn best when they investigate the real work done by others around them.

A second way these designs can build respect for teachers is by providing genuinely helpful feedback. By using the tuning protocol, a feedback mechanism built on the balance between efficiency, based on tight, organized procedures that avoid wasting time with superficial or off-topic conversations, and respect given to each teacher as their colleagues provide constructive feedback in a way that is not demeaning, teachers get to learn from peer feedback about how to improve a specific aspect of their teaching that they chose to focus on. Both of these designs, along with others we learned about in EAD 824 improved my ability to empathize with fellow teachers in their learning process because I was able to get inside the minds of teachers and reflect on what they want when they are going through professional learning. The resounding answer was respect for their professional skills and the designs in EAD 824 ensure such respect remains at the center of teacher learning.

In EAD 824, another way I learned that empathizing with teachers can improve their learning is by providing a respectful place for all leadership styles in their professional learning. Throughout other courses in my master's program, especially EAD 867, Case Studies in Educational Leadership, I learned that people I had previously labeled as "followers" can exhibit leadership because effective leadership is not about being commanding and demanding in an authoritative, in-your-face way that is normally associated with those in hierarchical leadership positions, but rather about being strategic, organized, and flexible, characteristics that "followers" can master as well. During EAD 824, I personally experienced the benefits of this inclusive model of leadership through the way the discussion were structured. By rotating

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leadership roles within the group discussions and using other structures to ensure equitable participation in both conversation and group leadership, the professor made me feel valued as both a group contributor and a leader. I have transferred this feeling to my group work at my school because I feel like I do not have to be the facilitator, a role that is not natural for me, in order to exhibit leadership in the group. As I felt the respect for my own leadership style integrated into the design structure of the class, I gained confidence in those skills, which turned out to be one of the objectives of the class. I can pass this experience on to other teachers I work with in the future by ensuring that anything I facilitate or organize has a structure that values all leadership styles in the same way this class did. By empathizing with others who share my leadership style, I can work against the structural advantages given to those who mirror traditional conceptions of leadership and improve the leadership skills and, more generally, the professional learning, of my fellow teachers.

## Reflection and Inquiry

Another course that helped me build empathy for my students was TE 802, Reflection and Inquiry in Teaching Practice I. Since this course was part of my internship and was focused on literacy instruction, it was built around helping us, as interns, plan our literacy units that we would be teaching. As part of this preparation, we discussed the importance of making literacy units interdisciplinary. First of all, since reading and math are emphasized so much in elementary school, due to both their crucial significance in our students' future education and their role in high-stakes testing, the other subjects tend to get pushed to the side. Therefore, I learned that literacy units are a good way to incorporate some of the content and skills of both social studies

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and science back into daily lessons while still teaching the highly emphasized literacy standards. This may seem completely practical and unrelated to the theme of this essay, but we also discussed how such an interdisciplinary unit, specifically when it includes social studies, can be used to make a stronger connection between school and students' lives. I learned that when I, as a teacher, connect lessons to my students' real world experiences, that empathy for what is going through their brains builds trust by communicating respect for who they are and where they come from.

When it came time to put this interdisciplinary empathy into practice, I designed a folktale unit, in which my fifth graders used folktales to compare different African cultures and then explored their own culture during the composition of their own folktale. This fit with the Afrocentric theme of my school, reinforcing the message that, for my students, who were 100% African American, their historical and cultural heritage was something worth valuing, studying, and celebrating. Beyond learning through teaching this unit that it is worth planning out a whole unit in advance because it allowed me to make sure all the lessons had a meaningful purpose within the overarching structure, I learned that my students' engagement with a challenging writing assignment increased when it was about exploring their own culture. By empathizing with their natural human desire to feel that their identity was important to a learning institution through respect for that identity, I was able to build the trust necessary for my students to be vulnerable enough to intimately explore their own culture and communicate about it.

Conclusion

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Throughout my time in the MAED program at Michigan State, I have gotten better at stepping into the shoes of other learners. Although some of this came through directly learning about how to build trust and respect with both other students and teachers, a lot of it came, surprisingly, from reflecting on my own learning in my master's courses. As I noticed the different ways my professors designed their courses based on empathy for me as a learner, such as group structures to shift leadership responsibilities and authentic assignments connected to my life as a teacher, I learned more about how to do the same for both the students and other teachers I work with. Although I am glad to be done, I am even more excited to use my improved ability to empathize to improve the learning of everyone I encounter.