

## Questions into Questions: A Journey of Inquiry

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As I was considering another graduate degree after 24 years of teaching, many asked why. My primary answer is that I enjoy continuing my learning and growth intellectually and professionally. At a time of several transitions in my life, I felt I was able to devote to formal learning, and it just seemed right. Throughout most of my professional development, my learning was self-directed led by curiosity or professional inquiry, the search for better tools of learning or mere curiosity. This Master's degree in Education was a return to formal education to validate and reinforce my informal learning. I wanted to focus on two concentrations: Learning and Technology and Educational Leadership. I hoped this experience would also improve my own teaching as I explored different issues in education.

Once I began the program, I enjoyed being a formal student again with the readings, reflection, and writing, but it was the questions that I remember. My first course (EAD 882 Education in the Digital Age) was a great introduction in online learning as well as topics that I would focus on throughout my degree. As I reflect on all of my courses, questions arose that would provide a framework of my learning. Where does learning and education take place? How does technology affect learning and schools? How can schools continue to build on their mission of education for all students? I saw myself returning to these questions as they led to new questions and explorations.

### **I. When and where does learning take place?**

Just as I have seen in my own life, the context of a lifelong process of education needs to be valued. I believe it is important to be mindful of where and when education takes place, and this program, especially the course **EAD 860 Concepts of a Learning Society**, helped me expand ideas of learning. Whether in the classroom, at home, in the workforce or for pleasure, learning continues throughout life. Education is enabling one to meet his or her potential, just I as see myself still working to realize my own. It is important to continue to develop new knowledge and competencies to adapt and actively participate in a knowledge-based society. As educators, we need to be mindful of learning in our own classrooms, but more importantly see that learning in a greater context of a lifespan. To develop lifelong learners, we need to stress the need to continually update all kinds of abilities, interests, knowledge and qualifications from pre-school to post-retirement.

What makes the concept of lifelong learning more significant is that we are seeing the pace of change quickening in our society, and education becoming redefined, rearranged, with new values and utilizations. New digital tools and technologies are transforming education as a mix of both formal and informal learning which is moving the focus from content ("knowing that") to more skills ("knowing how"). I see learning as becoming more problem-centered rather than

content-oriented with the learning centered around more subjects/topics/problems of interest. Moreover, with the current knowledge revolution, self-directed learning will be increasingly important, especially as technology and the availability of information upsets traditional definitions of education.

But what are our roles as educators? Although new tools and greater access to information allow for more independence in learning, I still find there is a need for good teachers. There is a role of both progressive and classical education as educators need to meet students where they are and guide them to where they need to go. Teachers need to be aware of students as learners but also know the tools to enhance that learning. As learners ourselves, we need a continuing process of growth and reflection. Just as John Dewey writes, "Education is not preparation for life, it is life itself." In my own experience, I am constantly finding areas of improvement and seeking feedback from my students and peers. I am interested in finding new ways of creating an environment where students learn content in History by feeding their natural curiosity and willing to put in the rigor to ask and answer their own questions.

## **II. How does technology affect learning?**

Throughout my graduate program, I have seen the benefits of technology on my own learning with a variety of tools for creativity, interactivity, expression, and collaboration. This experience has caused me to be more knowledgeable about the role of technology and learning for my students and myself.

For teachers to still be a guiding component of their students' learning, they need to create engaging learning opportunities. In **CEP 817 Learning Technology Through Design**, I had to consider the aspect of design as an important component of education. How do we reach our students? We are all designers--of lesson plans, of our students' experiences in school, of our websites or portals, and even of our own lives. In design, there is logic and method, but also art and the flexibility of openness and unpredictability. As teaching resources move from static print to digital media, there are new advantages and possibilities for learning.

There is an aspect of art in teaching as we become artists, dancers, jazz musicians in our classrooms. Creative teaching is disciplined improvisation as it occurs within broad structures and frameworks. Focusing on design, I came to see them more as architects of learning. Whether face-to-face or online, teachers still provide guidance or navigation; new content such as readings, media, and presentation; and different pedagogical routines and interactions. As technology creates tools and products for learning, educators still need to think with the end in mind--student learning. **How can teachers differentiate learning to allow for different pacing, perspectives, and responses?** Once purpose and objectives are established, design can take place accumulating content and developing skills. As expectations change for skills needed for future jobs and employment, and as students join more participatory cultures and new networks, we need to help them become designers themselves as they develop skills of critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration.

**How can we get student to become critical and creative thinkers, collaborators, or future architects themselves?** In **CEP 816 Teaching with Technology Across the Curriculum**, we discussed that we as educators must participate in this world of change and new developments. Even though our students are enmeshed with new technologies, they still need help effectively navigating through their world. With our experience, we need to help them ask the right questions, find good resources, be willing to put in effort and rigor into learning rather than seeing technology as a shortcut, and understand the benefits of new resources, collaboration, and publication as well as the responsibilities that come with it. This is not entirely as big of shift in thinking as we may think, and perhaps it is old wine in new glasses. This is actually a mindset of living in this world and understanding new shifts and the familiarity with what new tools offer. Students need to be become active explorers and detectives of information instead of just passive consumers. It is important to have students be more reflective of their learning and ask the them--how do they know what they know? It can be messy, but learning is messy.

How shall teachers integrate technology? Technology tools allow the teacher to model learning as fellow learners; monitor, seek, and give feedback; provide multi-modal opportunities for learning and differentiation; and most importantly allow create environments where learning is visible as the student is creator and teacher. Moreover, technology can break down the walls of the classroom to by introducing students to resources and audiences and help direct students to learn outside the classroom to eventually become more self-directed, lifelong learners. The end objective of student learning and other skills helps educators find a focus as they integrate technology into the curriculum. This graphic on the left came up in **CEP 816 Teaching with Technology Across the Curriculum**. At times it may be difficult to communicate the purpose, but focusing on the verbs of the right side of this graphic helps provide direction. In this way, technology then becomes a tool, not the outcome.

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Technology, however, brings higher expectations of technological knowledge for teacher/architects and also higher expectations for designing learning. I appreciate the [TPACK model](#) of intersecting content, pedagogy AND technology knowledge for teachers. I find it is more of a mindset of using the technology rather than the technology itself. There are, however, times when there is a need for understanding the technologies to be used with students. I

realize one does not have to be the master of all new tools, but there is still some sort of learning on apps/sites/tools or whatever in order to use them. As a teacher who does try to integrate technology tools in the classroom, I feel at some point I do have to sit down and learn the tool. But, with an understood purpose or a need for application of technology, it is easier to learn new tools. I find this approach helpful especially when working with other teachers. I do, however, find myself at times getting bogged down in the tool and need to pull my head out to focus on those right-side verbs of this graphic. Even with students, I think it is helpful to have them understand certain digital tools, not master them so much, but at least have an understanding so they can add them in their arsenal of tools to handle the right-side objectives.

### **III. What is the role of online education?**

As long as I've been teaching, I've been wanting to break down classroom walls and find new opportunities for student learning. As the web continues to evolve, we see that it affords us the process of inquiry that improves over conventional texts and visual texts alone. Web 2.0 and later technologies open up more opportunities for students to be more active in their own learning, but also more opportunities for different types of assessments of learning both formative and summative. Teaching now can become more of a conversation rather than lecture. Mastery can be the product, not the test. Web technologies can break down classroom walls and keep the learning conversation going. Hypertext and mobile tools allow for more open-ended and nonlinear approaches of inquiry. Will Richardson writes that "shifts [in education] will only come when we fully understand open connections, open conversations, open content, and open learning that comes as a part of a community of learners who are invested in their own passions." There's no one blueprint on how to move forward, but I think just taking steps whether big or small is worth it.

Online education has the potential of providing more flexible access to content and instruction from any time, any place. I am glad I had the opportunity to experience online learning for myself for this Master's degree. Through both synchronous and asynchronous communication, technologies can actually strengthen interactions with students. Online education supports expository, active learning, and interactivity, learners are given some element of control over their learning. In **CEP 820 Teaching Students Online** I was able to experience creating components of my own course. I have seen good online courses encourage meaningful contact between students and faculty where it is collaborative and social. I plan to continue to add elements of online learning to my own face-to-face courses which will allow for multiple ways of accessing and connecting to resources and content. Online education and tools will continue to be a disruptive force in education, and it is important to continue to investigate new opportunities as the web evolves.

### **IV. What is the responsibility of leadership during times of change?**

For teachers to manage change and new possibilities, schools need to be mindful of transforming culture into professional learning communities. As we want our students to grow, we must expect that of ourselves. Just as we desire our classrooms to be a growth-oriented cultures, we must demand that of our educational institutions. We discussed in **EAD 824**

**Leading Teacher Learning** that schools must develop a supportive environment, as well as create opportunities and provide time for shared inquiry, collaboration, and reflection. Creating a growth-oriented climate, sharing knowledge and skills, building resilience, and determining priorities is no easy feat. Moreover, more time should be spent on sustaining change than implementing it. There needs to be deliberate and conscious planning to create highly effective teams that sustain themselves in the process of continual renewal and accountability. Significant change will occur when people alter their attitudes, aspirations, and behaviors, as well as knowledge or skills. I have learned that the school improvement model of PLCs provides a model for that change. I have found that focusing on the questions for clarifying the purpose of a professional learning community will help focus on improvement for classrooms, teaching practice, and schools--**what is it we want students to learn? how will we know when each student has achieved the learning? how will we respond when a student is not learning?** These questions help shape the real end in mind, student success.

In **EAD 801 Leadership and Organizational Development**, I learned that in times of uncertainty and change, leadership actually matters even more. As learning organizations, we need someone to motivate, mobilize, and challenge people to face problems and look in new and different ways. To do that a leader needs to establish trust and develop relations so that the organization can solve problems and flourish in times of uncertainty. As a school leader, I want to work on clarifying personal and institutional values which can provide internal guidance for the school to navigate, meet challenges and adapt to change if needed. School cultures need the support of effective leadership. As the role of principle/leaders has evolved into instructional leader or leader of learning, leaders need to be self-aware, engaged and active. The leader needs to see the school as a system in need of continual growth and evolution. In order to create that culture, leaders need to build relational trust with respect, competence and a communication of a strong vision of learning.

My reason for focusing on leadership in this Master's program was to improve my confidence and abilities helping teachers work with each other, grow and learn, and improve student learning. As John Hattie writes, the biggest effects on student learning occur "when teachers become learners of their own teaching, and when students become their own teachers." It is, however, difficult to break out of the egg-crate isolation teachers are accustomed to. I enjoy learning as well as reflecting and improving my own practice, but I have missed dialogue—sharing and learning from others. In a leadership position at my previous school, I tried to create opportunities of dialogue but was taken aback from resistance and some unwillingness to grow and work with others, especially by senior faculty members. Unfortunately, I felt ill equipped with a lack of vocabulary, context and tools to press on. With application from learning of this program as well as resources from my courses, I feel more confident in meeting my objectives as well improving my ability to move a school culture to look forward. I plan to continue to combine my work in the classroom as well as administrator roles. It is the work and connections with my students that reveal what a human endeavor teaching really is. Ambiguity, multiple perspectives, creativity can lead to dialogue, new ways of knowing, new relationships, and new questions which lead to an exciting journey.

*Try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.*

Rainer Maria Rilke