

Learning Becomes Real When Shared

By JihyeonKim

The very first step of applying to the graduate program of the Michigan State University was opening a door to learning. It was a challenge to me, a challenge that I tested myself to see whether I am ready to become a true learner. After being accepted as a graduate student to MSU, the real challenges were waiting for me. As I am an international student who is not a native speaker of English, I needed to spend a lot of time writing even a very brief piece of writing in 300 words. In fact, I found it so hard to write more than 300 words at first because I was too used to writing TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) style essay which requires no more than 300 words. In that respect, I think I was very lucky to take TE848 Writing Assessment and Instruction as the second course of my MAED (Master of Arts in Education), for this course taught and trained me to become confident in writing, which also has a significant impact on the later courses. Every week I wrote different pieces of writing: narrative, expository, persuasive, and evaluative writings. While I was following the course assignments, I initially experienced all kinds of emotions such as fear, frustration, and embarrassment. But later on, I found myself enjoying the process of writing and getting feedback from peers and the instructor. Especially reading the writings of peers helped me a lot in terms of modeling and self-correction. I could learn different styles, and new expressions from the writings of the peers. Their sincere feedbacks and encouragement raised me to be confident. That was the gem of the course that I found extremely helpful. At that time I was in the middle of a three-week teacher training course in South Korea to upgrade from the second degree of teacher certification to the first degree. I got the best score on the writing test thanks to this writing instruction course. Other fellow teachers who knew I was taking the MAED courses became highly interested in what I was learning after comparing my paper with theirs. I felt so grateful and rewarded thinking that my efforts paid off. But most of all, I was really happy experiencing improvement in what I was doing.

The first course I took was ED800 Concepts of Education Inquiry which was like a whirlwind to me at that time. Just right after being accepted to MSU, I found that I

was way behind the course because I received the enrollment package late via airmail. Based on the course description and requirement, I quickly ordered the books to complete assignments. I was so thrilled just to imagine what I would be learning through the course. From the first course, it was an eye-opening experience. I was too absorbed to the lecture notes that I found myself imitating the writing style of the professor. I read four books, viewed a film, and wrote six essays based on the readings and the film. My first essay? Simply a failure. That was about a 750-word essay briefly describing different views of educational philosophers given in the lecture note. It took an entire week to complete it. For me it was like a mosaic of educational jargon. Somehow I started and that mattered to me. With the help of practical feedback from the instructor, I got to know what I should focus on and how I should jump to the point right away rather than beating around the bush. I couldn't forget when I got my first A on the essay with incredibly supportive encouragement to keep going on with great work. I have been a teacher for very long time that I have been the one who gives feedback and support to students. Yet experiencing encouraged was a totally different one, which brought life to "the learner spirit". I still remember vividly what I wrote in the essay. I not only learned how to think and express myself, but also how supportive feedbacks played a crucial role in learning process. These experiences surely extend to my current school setting and I am sure that my students are under this positive influence.

Throughout the courses I found something in common that I experienced in all of the courses. Although I couldn't meet the instructors or colleagues face to face, I felt strong closeness to them. That was mainly because of frequent exchanges of feedbacks supporting to each other. To be honest, I felt writing more comfortable than speaking because writing allows me to have some time to think and edit. I think when I got to be confident in writing, I also could gain confidence in speaking. I changed slowly and steadily in terms of thinking and expressing what I have to say as I completed projects and assignments. After finishing the first two courses, I tried to take more challenging courses, even the ones that I had no prior experience or background knowledge at all: special education. I cannot describe how much I learned through the courses. One of them is CEP 840 Policies, Practices, and Perspectives in Special Education. Dr. Carol Sue Englert, the professor of the course,

provided a wide variety of materials in the form of texts, videos, audios, and diverse resources that are relevant to the course. I borrowed many ideas from the resources, for example, a lot of assessment tools were extremely useful not only for the students with special needs but also for any struggling learners. I adapted some of the resources and applied them in class, which turned out successful. The course required technological skills for creating a webpage to collaborate information about assistive technology and other various topics, allowing colleagues to cooperate together to build a webpage. It was a very helpful experience that I had to discuss with two other colleagues and initiate the project to get it done before due date. During the process of collaboration, three of us shared the work and ideas. Of course I could learn a lot from them watching what they put in the webpage. Finally our webpage was chosen as the best one through voting, and the professor sent me a prize by airmail because I was not in the U.S. That was a priceless experience. The entire process of creating the webpage involved open discussion, full support of the professor, individual contribution, and perfect collaboration.

The best thing about the courses I've taken is that every assignment in every course has had different forms and thereby diverse effects on my learning. I had to adapt myself to different learning settings, since every single course I took was operated in a different platform. At first, I didn't want to change my learning routines that I felt comfortable once I got accustomed. First, I've experienced learning through ANGEL learning, followed by Wiki space, Desire 2 Learn, GoogleDoc, Google sites, personal blog, Edmodo, and Piazza. These are major platforms I experienced, so there may be other things out there that I've not yet tasted. Once I went through a few different platform of learning, I could easily and quickly fit myself into a new environment later. I became a flexible thinker and learner, no longer a stubborn one who insists just one way. Rather, I was expecting a new adventure with new courses. When I was telling one of the coworkers at my current school, who had written a reference letter for me, about how I had been doing with the graduate work, he just shook his head in amazement. He expressed a sincere envy and showed true admiration for the passion I had about learning. He already holds his graduate degree and is more experienced in a public school setting than I am. And yet he does not hesitate to discuss with me the idea of improving students' language learning. That's when I felt so rewarded and

heartwarming. Truly learning can take place like a chain reaction. Michigan State University is located far from South Korea, but because of the fact that I am connected to the school through network of learning, the power of learning has been influencing approximately 200 people daily including my students and coworkers. Every once in a while I shared what I learned from the courses with my students and I was so pleased to see a lot of them inspired or challenged.

The courses I have taken are all uniquely powerful and inspirational. Of those courses was TE 843 Secondary Reading Assessment and Instruction which taught me how to view and modify already existing classes to more dynamic ones in which students can explore deeper meanings in what they are learning. That was inquiry-based instruction. The term “inquiry” sounds quite broad and somewhat doubtful if it could be used in class in any practical way. But I found that inquiry-based learning is what I had been looking for my class. Mostly the teachers are the ones who ask questions and the students answer in a typical classroom. Besides, the questions are for recalling facts and pieces of information. That’s not true inquiry according to what I’ve learned about inquiry-based learning. It starts with creating thought-provoking questions and delving into them in diverse ways. I began reflecting my own way of imposing questions to my students. What types of questions have I asked my students? Are those thought-provoking? Are those intriguing enough to promote another question in students? Did I give my students a lot of opportunities to make their own questions? The series of questions arose in me and it turned into inquiry-based reflection. While I was learning with the course, I applied what I learned right away to my classes. I tried to go beyond from factual understanding, to interpretive, to critical, and to applicative understanding. At that time, we were reading a short biography of Ramanujan, the mathematician, who was self-educated and later recognized by his mentor G.H. Hardy, the professor of University of Cambridge. While I was reading the text with the students, I asked what-if questions about Ramanujan and the professor Hardy to get my students to think about the situation differently. That was just a little change but the responses my students showed were really different. It didn’t seem that anything particular happened outwardly, but I saw them getting more interested in the story. Oh, how could I explain the slight change in the atmosphere? It’s like adding glow to the dull color. Their widened eyes

and strong agreement with nods sent positive signals. I shared what I learned and that was a little moment of learning becoming real.

I started the graduate program in the hope of becoming a better teacher and a learner at first. I simply wanted to learn more. That was all. I didn't start with an ambitious dream. It was totally a personal aspiration. I just wanted to make a difference just for myself, for my satisfaction. Now the aspiration becomes great inspiration. I once read this quote by William Arthur Ward. "The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires." I've admired this saying for long, and whenever I enter a classroom I remind myself of this saying. Now I have an ambitious dream. I want to be an inspirational teacher who shares not just knowledge, but life and dream with anyone who comes to me. I am so grateful for the time I have had with the MAED program that makes me realize that true learning takes place when I put into practice what I learned. I truly believe that learning becomes real when shared. Thus, I will share what I have learned with open arm.