LEARNING AS A LIFELONG PROCESS 1

*Learning As a Lifelong Process*

*A Reflection on Personal Theory for Meaningful Education*

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Abstract

This essay is a reflective analysis of my own personal journey in my educational career. This paper will revisit my initial interest in becoming a teacher and travel through the major events and turning points that have led me to where I am today. I will also explore some of the primary motivations and personal theories that infuse my teaching, and how they came to be developed through my eleven years in teaching. There are a few major philosophers whose theories can be seen threaded within my own personal theory including Mortimer Adler, Jane Addams, and John Dewey.

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Some say teaching is in the blood; that you are born to it. I do think that you need certain attributes to be a teacher, but more importantly, you have to have a love of children and a passion to help them succeed on their own journey. My journey into teaching actually started with another primate, the Bonobo Chimpanzee. While pursuing my Bachelor’s Degree at UCSD in Biological Anthropology, I began an internship that involved a study of Bonobo Chimpanzees and their cognitive abilities. It was through this unique endeavor that my interest in cognition was initially piqued.

The Partner’s At Learning (PAL) program at UCSD was the next step in my blossoming interest in teaching. It was here that I began my internship at Oceanside Elementary, a one-on-one tutoring experience, which also involved spending time in the classroom with my mentee. I was assigned to Lupe, a fifth grader, who was a first generation immigrant. She was a very bright and inspired young lady, who captured my heart with her determination and enthusiasm for learning. I had the pleasure of meeting Lupe’s parents when I was invited for dinner one night. Although they spoke no English, my apprehension was quickly laid to rest when Lupe eagerly interpreted our conversation. They were so grateful for the time that I spent with Lupe, and I really understood the value that they put on Lupe’s schooling and opportunity for a level of achievement that they were not afforded in their own youth. This experience was the first to really open my eyes to the importance of home to school communication, a philosophy embraced by reformer, philosopher, and founder of the Hull House, Jane Addams.

After graduating from UCSD with a degree in Biological Anthropology, my initial interest in

teaching took a back seat. At the time, I was dedicated to a career in the Veterinary field, and

was a newlywed. Through a series of personal and tragic events, I found myself back in Sonoma County, the home of my youth. This was a time of flux for me, but with the love and support of

my family, a new opportunity quickly landed in my lap. I saw an ad for a math and science

enrichment teacher at my old middle school, BrookHaven. I was instantly hooked on the idea of

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teaching at the location of one of the most cherished places I ever knew; it seemed to be fate knocking at my door. I was hired in BookHaven’s Creative Arts Magnet Program, Mariposa. This program embraced the students as part of a learning community including teachers, administrators, and parents. Additionally, the incorporation of art and critical thinking enrichment within standard curriculum was a unique learning atmosphere. This was where my passion for teaching was realized, and the vision for my teaching philosophy was born. Within a year, I had enrolled in Sonoma State’s Credential Program in order to obtain my Multiple Subject Credential and begin my teaching career.

After two years of teaching enrichment at Mariposa and earning my credential, a wrench was thrown into the works. The Mariposa program was moving to a new school and a new district, Hillcrest Middle School at Gravenstein Union School District. This was a program that I was passionate about, so I actively pursued a position in the new district. Unfortunately, no position was available, so I had to start from square one and wait for an opening. With supplemental credentials in both math and science, I was offered a position as the lead mathematics instructor with the understanding that when a position came available in the new ENRICH! Creative Arts Magnet Program (formerly Mariposa), I would be the first candidate considered. The new position of lead mathematics instructor in Hillcrest’s Traditional Program was no walk in the park, and I quickly realized that the position that I enjoyed at Mariposa was a unique one indeed. That first year taught me a great deal about the different approaches to teaching, but also solidified my blooming beliefs of education, and where I was meant to be. I have learned to embrace the idea of community and parents as partners in learning. When students feel connected to the school and find that connection resonates at home too, the educational experience is enriched beyond measure.

I was fortunate to reflect on my past ten years in the ENRICH! Creative Arts Magnet

Program when I was asked to help prepare our district’s Distinguished School application. In

reviewing our mission statement and description of practice, I found myself feeling very proud

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of the strides made within our district, and my contribution to it. The ENRICH! Program began in the 2003/04 school year. At that time, this GATE program encompassed two self-contained, combination classes in grades 4/5 and 6/7. As the program has progressed, we have expanded our middle school campus to include six, self-contained classrooms, two in each grade level (6th, 7th, & 8th). This growth can be attributed to the demand of our community for high academic opportunities, coupled with an enriched curriculum. This has led to a student body that consists of more than 50% inter-district transfers.

In order to achieve the high expectations of increasing students’ critical thinking skills, and preparing them to enter adulthood as active, responsible, and successful citizens, our students attend school for an additional forty-five minutes daily. This extended day provides us the time to facilitate the enrichment of our curriculum. Our various enrichment and elective courses utilize the many diverse professionals in our community as supplemental instructors. Some of these courses include drama, dance, glee-club, culinary arts, music technology, digital arts, lego-robotics, poetry, fine arts, public speaking, and photography. By being exposed to a range of experiences and professions, our students are offered the opportunity to find meaningful interests that can be fostered over a lifetime. It was later in my career that I recognized that many elements of our program were also embraced by philosopher John Dewey, who touted the philosophy that a child’s life could be used as a driving force to incorporate meaningful curriculum and developing skills within context.

I am fortunate to be in a teaching community that recognizes the unique needs of middle school students. The goal of maintaining self-contained classrooms in the middle school environment allows us to address the concerns for students’ physical, social, and emotional development. By offering this self-contained structure, we are able to develop deeper working

relationships with our students. This also allows us to differentiate instruction as needed within our standards based structure. We can readily tackle various interests, and concerns, while continuing to effectively address the rapid cognitive development seen in this age range.

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Through this unique program I can also offer frequent and integrated field trips, art infused curriculum, and long-term units of study across several core subjects and standards. I have a very strong focus on delivering the core curriculum, but continue to move my student toward critical thinking and questioning as they progress. The famous 20th Century philosopher, Mortimer Adler also felt that developing the core subjects to ensure a solid academic foundation was the gateway to an individual’s growth in critical thinking and questioning. This in turn leads to active and contributing member of society.

The culture and climate of the ENRICH! community consists of parents, students, teachers and administrators. Parents support responsible, creative, and caring behavior, and support the school with time, expertise, and financial contributions when possible. Our studentsare expected toengage in creative and cooperative learning; maintain responsible behavior; actively participate in problem solving; respond to opportunities for leadership and citizenship; and demonstrate effort and interest in enrichment activities. The teachers and administrators foster an environment that strives to create a campus where students are familiar with each other, and feel like their individuality is embraced and part of the working whole.

My personal goal as a teacher is to support my students’ social and intellectual growth, while maintaining a strong academic core. I try to model a joy of learning as a lifelong process, and build interactive relationships with school families. As a commitment to the success of our program, our district holds monthly advisory committee meetings, which serve as an avenue of communication, giving a voice to and gathering input from all members of our community: parents, students, teachers, and administrators. My personal teaching philosophy embraces many core ideas, including the importance of home to school communication and transparency, a commitment to the core curriculum as a foundation of understanding and educational growth, and a dedication to students as emerging citizens with a passion for the lifelong process of education.