

“How you respond to the challenge in the second half will determine what you become after the game, whether you are a winner or a loser.”

—Lou Holtz

STEPPING UP TO THE CHALLENGE

How Facing Challenges Have Impacted My Education

by Rebecca Jackson

A challenge: a task or situation that tests someone’s ability. A challenge: a call to take part in a contest or competition. A challenge: an objection or query as to the truth of something, often with an implicit demand for proof. How would you define a challenge?

Many of the greatest accomplishments in my own education and learning have come as a direct result of a challenge. I had to find ways to understand what was being asked and attack it head on whether it meant being uncomfortable, working in an unknown environment, or being afraid.

I always knew I would be a teacher, but the possibilities for grade level or subject area varied; that is until Mr. Sims. My freshman year of high school I had an uninspiring fall cross country season. When March rolled around and it was time for track and I was skeptical about my role on the team. I had been a good athlete in middle school, but felt like the jump to high school might be too much of a challenge. It was my coach, Mr. Sims who helped me see otherwise. From the first scrimmage of the season he believed in me, running me in two of the premier relays, reminding me I deserved to be there. As the season progressed he continued to boost my confidence, trusting me to run in critical meets and encouraging me to constantly improve. It was after this year I realized I too could impact a student like Mr. Sims had done for me; I was going to teach high school.

From the moment I began my undergraduate education I had a plan – major in mathematics, obtain a teaching certificate, and that I did. After graduation I was met with my next challenge – finding a job. My mom was a high school mathematics teacher and it turned out her district was hiring. While this might seem like a golden opportunity, there were mixed feelings about not just hiring, but interviewing a family member, with multiple accusations of nepotism. In the end, my hard work and credentials prevailed and I was offered my first teaching job, at Woodhaven High School, where I remain today. The opportunity to work with and be mentored by my mom was irreplaceable and significantly influenced who I am as a teacher today.

In the spring of 2009 I accepted my next challenge, becoming the head girls track and field coach, which was something I had hoped to eventually take on, but not so early in my career. I continue to spend time developing a program I am proud of, constantly learning and improving myself as a coach. The cross-country coaching position opened in the fall of 2010 and I happily accepted this position as well. Coaching alongside teaching became my year-long job.

Now that I had been teaching for four years, I realized it was time to add in another layer to my education, obtaining a master’s degree. I knew this would be a challenge with all of my other responsibilities during and after school hours, but finding Michigan State University’s Online Master’s of Arts in Education was perfect for my interests and schedule. Not only could I

complete all of the courses from home, I was able to select a program that allowed me to focus on Sports Leadership and Coaching, but also Mathematics Education; the cornerstones of my daily experience. Each of my ten courses in the program offered a unique set of opportunities, challenges, and resources that I could use in my own experiences teaching in learning. A few of these courses stand out.

KIN 856 The Physical Bases of Coaching with Scott Riewald was one of my first courses in the program. Right away I was intrigued because my instructor was based out of Salt Lake City, Utah and worked for the United States Olympic Committee. Who better to learn from about the physical sciences and their practical application in coaching and athletic administration! The course was divided into eight units: Musculoskeletal Anatomy/Muscle, Exercise Physiology, Biomechanics, Sport Nutrition and Supplements, Strength and Conditioning, Sports Medicine/Injury, Training Design, and Growth and Development. I knew the number of topics and their technical nature would be challenging and I was ready for the task ahead. Each unit would begin with our instructor narrating over informational presentations, readings, and a series of online resources. Then we were assessed on our understanding on the topics with quizzes, assignments, and my favorite part of the course, the creation of a “Toolbox” of resources where we had to take the information provided and put it into an real-life, usable collection of resources to share with peers, athletes, and other professionals. While often a challenge, by taking the time to step outside of my comfort zone and look into a variety of resources, I was able to greatly expand my knowledge of many elements of my sport. Some of the highlights were:

Dynamic Warm-Up and Strength and Conditioning Exercises for Injury Prevention: In these assignments we were asked to use our understanding of muscle groups and movements executed in our sport to develop two documents for athletes: a warm-up exercise routine that could be part of a pre-practice or pre-competition routine and a strength and conditioning exercise circuit to implement with athlete. This assignment was particularly relevant because as a new coach I was working to implement a dynamic warm-up routine, but until this course did not have the knowledge to justify the importance of the program and why certain exercises were selected.

Sports Nutrition Handouts: Using information on the fundamentals of proper nutrition, the needs of teenage athletes, and how to refuel after competition this unit required the creation of three documents: a brochure on Nutrition for Recover, Suggested After Practice or Competition Snack Cards, and an informational handout on Supplement and Ergogenic Aids. This assignment forced me to apply the information learned about proper sports nutrition into a usable document that could be given to athletes every season.

Technique Teaching Plan – Block Start: For this assignment I selected block starts as a skill to break down using ideas biomechanics and evaluating good technique. This was an area I felt I was lacking as a coach, and wanted to spend time researching and breaking down the technique (how a movement is performed) fundamentals (the key elements all athletes should do) to better assist athletes. Next I reviewed these fundamentals, selected the elements that would be given highest priority, and provided rational for each movement.

Creating a Professional Network: In this project we were asked to contact individuals who we could call on as coaches or administrators when we might not have the knowledge or tools necessary to provide support for our athletes. It was important to think about all of the areas that support might be necessary, as well as recognize that as a coach I will not always have to be an expert on all facets of athletics.

TE 846 Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners with Autumn Dodge was a required course for the State of Michigan's Reading Requirement for Professional Teaching Certification. As a mathematics major and someone with very little knowledge of reading assessments, strategies, and methods, I knew this course was going to challenge my thinking. The course was divided into five broad topic areas associated with literacy instruction and assessment practices: cultural and linguistic differences, individual motivation differences, neuropsychological differences, instructional arrangements to accommodate learning differences, and required components of effective literacy instruction. While we did spend some time specifically discussing reading and literacy in our content areas, the primary focus of the course was an in-depth case study on one of my students, which through the first few weeks of the course seemed like an almost impossible task. I had to identify a student to study, determine her weaknesses, select and administer an assessment, create and teach a intervention lesson plan, and then write recommendations for the future. Because I had so little prior knowledge of how to assess reading and literacy deficiencies, what methods were currently being used in my high school, how to read current reading and literacy test results, and the best practices for literacy instruction, this project required a lot of collaboration with friends and colleagues, as well as a very patient course instructor. There were many hours spent on edge, with a feeling of uneasiness about what I was doing and how I would ever come to understand these topics well enough to actually help a student, but continuing to work through these challenges and pushing beyond those uncomfortable feelings, I was able to make a difference. The student I selected to work with was one I knew well as her track and cross-country coach, but had never had in the classroom. I knew she struggled in reading, spelling, and comprehension. It gave me an opportunity to get to know her better and provide one-on-one attention and strategies for improved literacy performance. Below are some highlights from my analysis.

Struggling Secondary Literacy Learner Analysis

- I. *Brief Background and Reason for Project* – In this portion of the assignment I was required to find current and relevant research to support the idea that a schools need to provide targeted literacy training to students with a variety of methods to asses and manage diverse groups of students. It is also here that I introduce the add-on instructional program, which used diagnostic spelling and word recognition assessments to identify areas of weakness for the implementation of instruction with my learner, Emma.
- II. *Home, Family, and Emotional History* – In these sections of the analysis I had to analyze Emma's reading habits with the help of surveys given to Emma, her parents, and her teachers. It was interesting to learn how her attitudes toward reading changed as her confidence increased, something that was very relatable to my experience in a math classroom. The district used a program called *Read 180* to administer assessment looking for deficiencies and suggesting specific

interventions, which had been very beneficial for Emma. Again, I found myself comparing these methods to what our school does as a math department, wondering if such programs exist?

- III. *Assessments* – This was one of the most difficult parts of the analysis due to my unfamiliarity with literacy assessment. I discovered two spelling assessments and one for word recognition. The Monster Test, used to categorize developmental spelling levels, helps identify common states in which errors occurred. Kottmeyer’s Informal Diagnostic Spelling Test breaks words into categories based on phonics and common rules, helping to identify a grade spelling level. The San Diego Quick Assessment of Reading Ability uses lists of words, revealed one at a time, for students to read or attempt to read in order to determine a reading grade level.
- IV. *Lesson Plan* – After reviewing the original assessments, it was clear that I wanted to work with Emma on reviewing her work and possibly repeating words out loud. Again, I was lost at first, unsure of any reading strategies, but was able to find two: Imitating Errors to Facilitate Self Correction and the Multisyllable Word Reading Strategy.
- V. *Reflection* – While recognizing that this analysis required me to step out of my mathematical comfort zone, it was rewarding to see how the implementation of my spelling and word recognition lesson provided useful strategies for a specific student’s needs. I was able to implement a research-based approach, appropriate for a single student, which contained an array of effecting literacy instruction practices and discuss how to apply these ideas in future writing and spelling tasks.

TE 831 Teaching School Subject Matter with Technology with Cathleen Clara was one of the first courses in the program that tested what I thought about the use of technology in the classroom. I had always thought using my graphing calculators, word-processed notes, document camera, and Promethean Board made me tech-savvy, but it was in this course that I discovered the extent of the resources available. The course examined the “great debate” in the field of educational technology, asking us to reflect on the affordance and constraints of technology, all while placing a high priority on doing as a pathway to understanding. Topics like TPaCK, digital citizenship, digital immigrants vs. digital natives, the National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers (NETS), and using Internet-based technologies for educationally profitable outcomes. The course was divided into three units with interactions between students in the class via discussions, chats, and wiki communication alongside a series of projects. Some of the highlights were:

Google Docs Discussions: One of my greatest concerns about an online master’s program was how I would be required to do group work when I would never be in the same room as my group members. For this portion of the course our instructor used Google Docs as a platform, making distance-learning group work a breeze. In small groups we were required to pose questions related to the week’s readings and after all group members had posted, we were to thoughtfully respond like we were having a conversation. I liked this program so much that when my district implement Google email for all students, I adjusted projects in my classroom to use Google Docs for collaboration between students and myself

Critically Engaging Technology Young Adult Novel – FEED by M.T. Anderson: In this assignment we were challenged to think about the message behind the young adult novel FEED. The story discusses a futuristic world where the majority of citizens have a digital implant or *feed* which allows them to access an Internet-like database from their minds. We were asked to think about whether all technology is actually enhancing teaching or learning or does it negatively influence social control, personal privacy, and reliance. Ironically, after reading, we were required to use Skype to have a video chat to discuss our thoughts, attitudes, and opinions on what we read.

Re-Purposing Technology Lesson Plan: In this project we were challenged to find a technology that we could modify to be useful in our classroom and craft a lesson around that piece of technology. My lesson was used as a final project for a Geometry course, where students were asked to create a Digital “A to Z” Geometry Vocabulary book. They were required to use Google Presentation to layout images and definitions of Geometry terms for every letter of the alphabet. Once their Presentation is complete they had to upload their work to the Video Slideshow Program Animoto, selecting a theme, adding music and editing transitions to complete their final book. This project showed how technology adds value and creativity to an average final project.

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My work in Michigan State’s MAED program has presented me with a variety of challenges, molding me into the professional I am today and although I am at the end of this challenge, I am excited to see what future challenges are to come!