

Portfolio Reflection

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My journey to candidacy for the Masters of Education at Sonoma State, which began five weeks before the pandemic shut down in the Spring of 2020, has taken place during a fundamental transformation in educational theory and practice. While the dust from this exciting and difficult time is still settling, I know that the education world from which I entered the CTL program has changed substantially from today's. As a result of my work, I am a very different teacher than I was when I entered the program, with a new set of theoretical and practical knowledge.

The work I did the first semester of my program is a powerful record of the shock and panic of the early days of the pandemic. In EDCT 586, Teaching and Learning: Research and Application in the Classroom, with Professor Karen Grady, a research project on learning in a school garden was suddenly deprived of both school and garden. As the floor literally dropped out from under what I considered to be teaching and learning, new practices were being developed before my eyes. I eventually adapted my project to the situation and found that the constraints placed by having to interact with students digitally, gave the study a purity that I hadn't expected, resulting in an analysis of the children's artworks which foreshadowed my current interest in arts-based research methodology.

As a Reflective Educator in EDCT 570 with Prof. Katharina Sibbald, I had the opportunity to look away from the alarming present and investigate my position within the broad context of the history and philosophy of education. I developed an understanding of the epistemological development of idealism and realism to the perennialism, essentialism and progressivism of the modern era. In addition, the conflicting notions of education as social

reproduction versus education as social reconstruction within educational policy, helped me see that my story began at home. My mother as an alumna of the University of Chicago Lab School, shared vivid recollections of her time at Dewey's school and shaped my understanding of the value of experiential learning. My father spent his career in the Office of the General Counsel for the Department of Education in DC and was essential to the interpretation and implementation of education legislation for over 30 years. Both taught me that education is a precious right and my graduate work is dedicated to my father, Theodore Sky, who passed away in November of 2022.

My reflections in EDCT - 570 also pertained to my past experience as an art teacher in the Chicago Public Schools.. A foundational memory, accessed through position papers from 570 and throughout the program, is of bringing my tough-as-nails students from the south side of Chicago to a nature preserve and seeing them suddenly seem to become children again as the stresses of inner city life faded into wonder. My belief in the fundamental right of all children to learn through meaningful experiences in the natural world is the foundation for my current teaching practice in school gardens as well as my work in the MA program. Because I believe that schools are the key to reconstructing environmental attitudes and practices, my research and applications throughout the program have involved ways to recontextualize environmental practices and attitudes through pedagogy which encourages creative connection between children and nature. In this way, I see environmental justice, which is paramount to my work, not only as a right of people, but as a right of all inhabitants of our planet to a safe and healthy home.

In EDCT - 585 *Curriculum Development, Theory, Practice and Evaluation* with Prof. Michael Suarez, I explored theoretical approaches to developing an arts-based environmental literacy curriculum which allowed me to create a cohesive overview and rationale for Learning in the Landscape, a program I currently run. The curriculum is particularly influenced by Dewey's

belief that learning is social and experiential and must not stifle the individual interests of the child, as well as the Freirean notion of education as a dialogue, which through humility and love, individuals become agents of transformation and change.

As I moved through the program, the pandemic continued to shape my course of study, leading me to reconsider my prejudices toward educational technology, which I had considered antithetical to experiential learning. In EDCT -586 Technology, Pedagogy and Society, Prof. Fawn Cannady introduced me to the work of the New London Group and connected learning through digitally mediated participatory cultures. I had the opportunity to conduct an ethnographic study of an online affinity group as it transitioned from a primarily local organization to a global community for online learning. Through interviews and observations as a researcher-participant in the live webinars of The Bay Area Nature Journaling Club, I identified practices through which the group created a culture of inclusivity and respect. Presenting my findings to the group, during one of the live Zoom sessions, was joyful and emotional as members saw the impact of their practices reflected through my research. Experiencing the potential of this kind of informal and communal learning helped me understand the advantages and possibilities that educational technology offers.

Building my course of study through electives was incredibly valuable and has added a rich dimension to my understanding of teaching and learning through exposure to material, faculty and students in other departments. In EDMS-475 , Teaching Science and Visual and Performing Arts in the Elementary School, with Professors, Al and Sharon Januslaw, I had the opportunity to develop practices for teaching the STEAM subjects, as well as to gain familiarity with the NGSS standards. EDMS- 475 also gave me a chance to interact with pre-service

teachers, which I really enjoyed, as I was able to guide parts of the course through sharing my art teaching experience.

The electives have also given me insight into my teaching practice as well as helping me to flesh out my cognate project. Through EDEC 531 - Play and its Role in Development and Learning, with Prof. Charles Elster, I learned how to incorporate play in the school garden with loose parts and natural materials, by way of Gibson's theory of affordances, which shows how the perception of unique qualities and characteristics of materials influences learning. In my final project for the course, a learning story, I documented TK-2nd grade students as they interacted with the fairy garden, a permanent installation of my school garden where students learn through constructive, imaginative, nature play.

ARTH 480- Selected topics in Art History (Site Specific Art and Environment) with Professor Lethia Chen gave me the opportunity to examine the role of site and the natural environment in artworks across historical periods and geographic areas. An exploration of the geopolitical underpinnings of ancient odalisques as well Ai WeiWei's sculpture, Circle of Animals, seen during a field trip to the site-specific sculpture collection at Donum Estate Winery, has informed the guidepost project that is part of my cognate. The class also introduced me to the theory of geo aesthetics, which considers how artworks are informed by the agentive power of the landscape. This idea that the creative force of nature not only influences artworks through spatial and temporal relationships, but also can be seen as the artwork itself, has transformed my understanding of art and landscape, while giving the cognate project a compelling aesthetic framework.

Finally, since GEP- 319 - Native Plants in Restoration, was a class I have been hoping to take since I started the program, it was fitting if not ironic that it was the last course. In addition

to demonstrating techniques for the care and propagation of native plants, in the University's native plant garden, Professor Heidi Herrmann, structured the course around field trips and speakers from local conservation organizations such as the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, the Sonoma Land Trust and Audubon Canyon Ranch. I think of it as symbolic that Heidi gave me some of the native grasses we seeded which now reside in my schoolyard habitat restoration garden. Also through the course, I developed a relationship with the SSU's Center for Environmental Inquiry and the Fairfield Osborn Preserve, where I have been participating in their naturalist training program and where I plan to bring students as a component of my cognate project.

The pandemic changed the course of my masters experience as it changed so many things. The fact that those first five weeks in the Spring of 2020 were the only face-to face contact Ive had with students and professors in the MA program, has certainly detracted from my experience. But I also was fortunate to be able to witness the program overcome the challenges in real time and continue in its mission and framework, within which I have been able to develop my practice and vision.