Education Minor Capstone

A look into the insights that I have gained while completing the education minor at Cornell University

My 4 Main Insights

1. Teaching is a mutual learning journey for both the student and the teacher

2. Students’ contexts cannot be separated from learning and the classroom

3. The classroom is a space for not only intellectual growth, but also moral development

4. Teachers should always be prepared to accommodate various learning styles
I was first exposed to the idea that teaching is a learning journey for both the student and the teacher while completing the class “Community Learning and Service Partnership”, otherwise known as CLASP. During my semester with CLASP, I realized that my learning partnership with a Cornell employee was a mutual relationship. I taught my learning partner efficient methods for personal computer use, and he taught me valuable life lessons.

The semester that we spent together was a journey that I will never forget. I learned about labor unions, the relationship between Cornell employees and students, how to burn CDs, and effective teaching practices. In fact, I might have been the learning partner who benefitted most from our partnership. My experience with CLASP taught me something that I have carried with me throughout all of my education-related experiences: effective teachers are also learners.

Since my experience with CLASP, I have noticed many more instances in which I, as the teacher, have also been the learner. For example, I am involved with a program called YOURS, which works with different groups of students from the Dryden area in order to teach skills relevant to their age and grade level.

This past semester I worked with the middle school group on a project called I-Teach. Each of the mentees chose a topic that they were interested in and created a presentation. In order to support my mentee, I assumed the position of the learner. Throughout this past semester, my mentee taught me everything that she knew about sewing. By allowing my mentee to become the teacher, I was indirectly able to facilitate her learning. The I-Teach project taught my mentee how to create a presentation, increase her public speaking skills, and gain more confidence in herself and her abilities.
Insight #1 - Implications

Although I developed this insight in an educational environment, I believe that I will be able to apply it to many different situations and settings in my life. For example, the development of the parent-child relationship is a mutual learning journey for both the parent and the child. If I decide to have a child, I will embody this insight by ensuring that I am always prepared to assume the position of the learner in the parent-child relationship. As long as I remain receptive to learning, the responsibilities of parenting will teach me many lessons, such as patience, the ability to learn from my mistakes, empathy, and effective communication. If I am unable to view parenting as a mutual learning journey, I will fail to be the best parent possible, as I will have missed out on many valuable parenting lessons. Not only will this insight create direct personal benefits for me, but it will also aid in my future child's development. Utilizing the idea that parenting is a mutual learning journey, I will encourage my child to teach me what he/she knows, which will instill a sense of confidence and importance in the child. After reflecting on this insight and its implications on parenting, I now realize that both the child and the parent simultaneously grow and develop.

In terms of being an educator, I believe that this insight will benefit my future students. The implications of this insight will help me create relationships with my students defined by a mutual respect for each other’s knowledge, rather than dominance. Thus, my classroom will be a safe space that encourages students to be curious, creative, and confident in their knowledge. Hopefully, my students will realize that I am open to learning and variability, and thus they will be more likely to provide feedback and express their emotions. I believe that my classroom will be an innovative space for mutual learning due to the many positive implications of my new insight.
In order to be an effective educator, it is imperative that teachers acknowledge their students’ contexts. I recognize that this is a broad statement, but I believe it is crucial that educators embody this way of thinking.

Before taking DSOC 2710: America’s Promise, I had only been exposed to education on a small scale, such as in individual classrooms or after school programs. I had never discussed the education system and the implications that go along with it. However, after completing DSOC 2710, I am more prepared to discuss the systemic issues that affect the public education system.

Every student walks into their first day of school with a different set of tools. These are not academic tools, but rather types of capital, such as social, economic, and cultural capital. Students that do not possess dominant forms of capital are at a higher risk of lower achievement in the classroom. Therefore, I think it is important that teachers recognize their students’ context in order to combat structural inequalities that can negatively affect their students. For example, as discussed in DSOC 2710, teachers should create a space in which students can authentically express their language and culture. Students should not always have to abide by the rules of the dominant culture.

I purposely chose to use the word ‘context’ in my insight due to its broad meaning. Not only should teachers consider the different forms of capital, but also a student’s context on a daily basis (although these types of contexts most likely interact).

For example, one day during my fieldwork in The Art of Teaching, I noticed that a particularly active and talkative student was abnormally quiet. Therefore, while the students were doing individual work, I asked her if she needed any help. After some conversation, I discovered that a storm from the previous night had caused a tree to fall on her grandfather’s home. Her behavior that day was clearly a result of her personal context outside of school.
Insight #2 - Implications

This insight has particularly important implications for teachers and their ability to create equal opportunities for all students. I would like to tell a story that an elementary educator told me during an interview. This story reminds me to question my biases so that I never place my future minority students at a disadvantage.

One day, an ELL lead teacher was absent, so a substitute teacher had to take her place (with the help of a city-year member). The next day, the lead teacher returned, and the city-year member told her what she had missed. Before the students arrived, the substitute teacher read a list of the students’ last names, which were names that were mostly of Hispanic origin. She then said to the substitute teacher, “Wow, this is going to be a rough day.” In this instance, the teacher’s obvious biases were brought to the surface, and I would assume that they negatively affected all of the students that day.

In order to be an effective teacher of a multicultural classroom, it is essential that I always question and acknowledge any preconceived notions that I may have about a particular culture, race, gender, etc. so that all of my students are equals. In the future, I will attempt to understand the context of each of my students so that my expectations and perceptions do not affect their achievement. For example, I will ensure that my classroom is a space for authentic expression. I will make sure to teach the dominant culture so that my students are not at a disadvantage later in life, and I will also provide opportunities for my students to express their cultures. Overall, I hope that the implications of this insight will help me facilitate a successful multicultural classroom.

I believe that my second insight can apply to all aspects of life, as a person’s context cannot be separated from their daily life and activities. This insight has had significant implications for me and my way of thinking, as it has led me to become more culturally and socially sensitive. After taking DSOC 2710, I am now actively aware of how my actions can affect others, and I always try to reflect on what I say or do. As a socially aware citizen, I acknowledge that I am a part of the dominant white culture. By recognizing my context, I am capable of questioning myself and my place in society to ensure that I am not silencing minority voices.
Throughout my work in education at Cornell, I have realized that teachers facilitate not only students’ intellectual development, but also their moral growth. I am fortunate enough to have been exposed to different aspects of moral development in a variety of settings.

My first education course at Cornell, Educational Psychology, revealed that education and schooling are partially responsible for students’ moral development. Of the theories that we discussed, Kohlberg’s stages of moral development resonated most with me. Elementary students are likely to be categorized in the pre-conventional stage of moral development, in which students act a certain way to avoid punishment or receive a reward.

In order to support students on their journey of moral development, I believe that it is necessary for teachers to actively explain morality and why certain actions are right or wrong. If teachers do not vocalize their reasoning for reward or punishment, I believe that students’ progression to the conventional stage of morality will be delayed.

While completing my fieldwork for The Art of Teaching, I encountered a relatively straightforward classroom management system that also aided in students’ moral development. For example, one day Mrs. LeFever gave popsicles to her animal science class. However, she did not have enough for the entire class, which prompted one student to sacrifice his popsicle. Mrs. LeFever rewarded his selflessness by adding his name to the raffle jar, thus reinforcing the desired moral behavior (every Friday Mrs. LeFever would choose a lottery ticket from a bowl, and the winner received a small gift).
Looking back on my experience with Mrs. LeFever’s class, I think it is crucial for teachers to consider their influence on students’ morality. I believe a classroom is also a space for social and physical growth; however, the teacher has the most influence and control over the moral and intellectual growth of the students. For example, students look towards authority figures, such as teachers, to understand society's ethical rules. If a teacher fails to acknowledge morality in the classroom, he/she is indirectly harming the students and their future success as morally responsible members of society.

For this reason, I believe that it is necessary that parents and teachers have a dialogue concerning the morals that will be discussed and taught in the classroom. In the future, as an educator, I will create a list of morals that I believe are essential for my students’ development. At the beginning of each school year, I will present this list to the parents and have an open dialogue about any questions or concerns. Although the role of teachers in moral development is controversial, I believe that it is essential that teachers recognize the impact that they have on their students’ ethics and morality.

Not all parents, schools, principals, and other local actors in a child’s development support teachers influencing children’s moral development. Some believe that a school is solely an environment for intellectual and social development. My third insight is controversial because teachers may or may not have the same moral values and rules that a child’s parents abide by. I understand the concern, as I would not want an educator teaching my child opposing values.
My position as a teaching assistant for Educational Psychology has led me to believe that teachers should incorporate different methods of learning in their teaching. After leading several discussion sections, I found that some of my students preferred learning by discussion, others liked to create concept maps, and some students preferred to specialize in one topic and teach it to the class.

I was able to arrive at this realization due to weekly feedback and evaluation forms. However, I soon realized that it was very difficult to accommodate different learning styles in a single class session. Therefore, I decided to alternate my method of instruction for every section to meet the differing needs of my students. This method proved to be successful as it allowed every student a chance to utilize their strengths, and it also occasionally prompted students to leave their comfort zone, which was a valuable opportunity for students to develop new skills.

As a student in Educational Psychology, I was exposed to theories that support and helped develop this insight. For example, Gardner states that there are multiple forms of intelligence. While one student may be logical and talented at math, another may excel with verbal reasoning. It is a teacher’s responsibility to account for these different types of intelligence and provide a multitude of opportunities for individual students to flourish.
Although I recognize that it is very difficult to accommodate all learning styles, I believe that teachers can be successful if they constantly question whether or not their teaching and assessment style gives students an equal opportunity for success. It is also imperative that teachers differentiate their lessons, as some students possess different forms of intelligence. If teachers do not cater towards multiple intelligences, students may believe that they are inferior. In the future, I hope to help students uncover their strengths and their best selves by supporting multiple forms of intelligence.

This insight also has implications in realms other than teaching. Every person, no matter how young or old, has a unique combination of preferred learning styles and intelligences. If I decide to leave the classroom and pursue an alternative career, I will utilize this insight, as I will inevitably teach in some capacity and have to conform to an individual’s unique learning style.

For example, if I became a human resources coordinator, I would have to adjust my training methods depending on the learning style of a new hire. On the other hand, perhaps I will become a researcher for education policy after working in the classroom. In order to present my findings at a conference, I will have to alter my presentation to support the learning style and preferences of the audience. Over the course of the education minor, I have learned about the diversity of the human mind, and the importance in altering my teaching style to my audience.
When I decided to complete the education minor, I believed that it would be a great addition to my studies as an animal science major. I thought that if I were to become a veterinarian, I would also have to be a good teacher because veterinarians must be able to explain a medical phenomenon in relatively simple terms. However, the education minor was extremely influential and it transformed my way of thinking and altered my career path.

After completing my work in education at Cornell University, I have come to realize that a classroom in a public school setting is an incredibly complex space. Each person brings his/her background into the classroom, which creates a space filled with an immense diversity of thought, learning styles, race, culture, and more. Additionally, the classroom is an environment where students are not only developing intellectual curiosity, but also a moral foundation. A teacher is tasked with the incredibly difficult job of teaching the value of diversity while also creating a safe and conducive space for moral and intellectual growth.

The complexity of the classroom drew me away from veterinary sciences and towards a career in education. However, I believe that my interests in progressive education and animal science are somewhat similar. In fact, two years ago, in an essay about my teaching philosophy, I stated: “Progressive education is very similar to my interests in science due to the fact that this philosophy embraces change and realizes that knowledge is constantly changing.”

I am proud to say that my experiences from the education minor, including classes, fieldwork, and faculty, have led me to pursue a master’s in elementary and special education at Bank Street College of Education. The education minor at Cornell has taught me the value of reflection, and I hope to bring these many insights into my future work as an elementary school teacher.
Photos:

1. https://c2.staticflickr.com/2/1330/1394771422_ca065388de.jpg


6. https://lh6.googleusercontent.com/ruFwxuQLFls8qsy4caFkxaQ_zQryYygIU11_A9bE1rtKIIbsfgOhK0cYjoYm3GS55sAU7f_QXhT3z2uqHpBLDQieaLnS70a6Wj9tqqI_EbWkDrZ7YONk

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