

SYNTHESIS ESSAY

The Desert Sands are shifting: Education for a world of difference

I think it quite significant that I write this, my final reflection, in the Middle East. A hotbed of conflict and development, a geographical center-point with the east and the west on either side as far as the eye can see. And, a region determined to improve the education it provides. This beautiful desert biosphere manages to give one pause for a lot of thought and, interestingly, provides a metaphor for much of my learning.

I first became aware of the MAED program when my wife brought me a flyer posted on our staff notice board. We were working at a school in Northern India and I was nearing my wits' end, administering the residential high school and needing an extra spark to enhance a career that I thought was becoming steeped in the mundane. A kind of professional and intellectual wasteland - a desert, if you will. It is surprising how the excitement and mystique of living and working in a foreign land can quite quickly devolve into being the same as before, just with different scenery.

I needed something to take me through - if not out of - the endless swathes of dry sand that had become my professional life and revive it with something new. Little did I know that I was to learn as much from the experience of passing through this "desert" as I would by getting to the other side and it was the ability to pursue a the dream of studying further that facilitated it. Practically speaking, I liked the fact that the degree was, as it were, portable and that I wouldn't have to be physically on campus - our lifestyle wouldn't allow that. I have subsequently submitted work from eight different countries, proving not only the portability of the course but also teaching me so much about the significance of how the web 2.0 has managed to transform education both in its delivery and learning.

The first experience on my journey through this desert was learning how to keep just ahead of what the locals call the **Haboob** - or massive Dust Storm. Every now and then a dust storm hits and this, when you are in the middle of it, leaves you disorientated and directionless. The coursework and expectations of **EAD 801: Leadership & Organizational Development** with Dr. Nancy Colflesh provided just that impetus to stay ahead of the administrative dust storm. Of the ten courses expected for this degree this, for me, was probably the best with which to start. Being a little rusty with regard to academic protocols and procedures, from the outset I was able to understand the rigours of a masters level course. We were quite literally drilled in the expectations of the APA minutiae and appropriate ways of writing academically and, this put me in great stead for the rest of my degree. In some ways (and much to my relief) no subsequent course expected as much in the way of extensive academic research writing.

Before I create my own Haboob and digress too much further, it is worth reflecting, as I often do, on how the content of this course taught me to establish and maintain, in Michael Fullan's words, a "Moral Purpose" for any educational institution in which I work. Education as a macro-concept and my school and classroom on the micro level will always be subject to the shifting sands of change and it is this

"Culture of Change" (to use Fullan's words again) that needs to be understood and given direction by a moral purpose. If nothing else, I see this as the most valuable lesson from this course and perhaps from myself MAED degree as a whole.

When traversing a desert, one thing that will confound even the most experienced of travellers are the shifting sands. I have physically been into the empty quarter on the boarder between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, confidently following skilled trekkers in our off-road vehicles and quickly realising that "that dune", once so large and prominent, is no longer there but has taken on another shape and identity. These mysterious sands changed a good few times as I progressed through the last five years of this degree - maybe because it took so long - but the most significant was my intention to focus on both Educational Leadership and Special Needs. As a result of the latter, my carefully considered initial Program Plan was peppered with a number of Counselling, Educational Psychology and Special Education (CEP) choices.

The first of which was a very detailed and technical course, **CEP 882 Socio-Emotional Development of School-Age Youth**, with Dr. Cary Roseth. Ever since my tentative venture into the study of child psychological development, some twenty years before, I had been fascinated by the psychology of child development and this, coupled with needing to understand the Special Needs of several students with whom I was working, seemed to be the perfect fit. The course coincided with a move back to my native South Africa after nine years abroad and for whatever reason, never seemed to sit firmly with me - the sands were moving underfoot. I appreciated the renewed and new understanding of the socio-emotional needs of school going children in a school context and, felt a clear sense of understanding and empathy for their experiences now that I saw those experiences described and underpinned by the literature. But, I became more and more convinced that this was not an area into which I could move professionally. Perhaps it was simply that I didn't have the aptitude for it or that, over the years my logical "mind" had changed and my professional "heart" still hung onto the romantic dream of serving student's needs in that way. Both my heart and mind are still for leadership, however, and try as I might to avoid or sidestep it, leadership has always blown my way.

The physical return to my homeland, although only for a year, was to a semi-arid region at the southern tip of Africa. A beautiful contemplative place, out of the hustle and bustle of any city lights and into **the still night of the desert**. I have in recent months spent a few nights camping out in the middle eastern desert and the stillness that one encounters here reminds me of those noiseless, halcyon southern African moments and two of the courses that kept me company. Both **EAD 860: Concept of Learning Society** and, close on its heels, **ED 800: Concepts of Educational Inquiry** were devised and overseen by Dr. Steven Weiland. The former had as its facilitator, Dr. Nicholas Sheltroun, whose measured and carefully considered feedback and comments, coupled with the self-paced nature of the course (both courses in fact) helped me to contemplate the nature of education, learning and inquiry. It was at this time that I was able to stop and appreciate what I had come through in my professional journey, as well as appreciate the lessons learned. I learned to reflect more and, as difficult as it sometimes was, to understand that the sometimes dry desert experiences are part of the journey of professional self-discovery. Because we asked such fundamental questions as "What are education's

purposes, traditions and characteristic activities?", "What are Education's recurring problems?" and "What is most worth knowing and how do we learn?" - and then sought to construct meaningful if incomplete answers - I was slowly able to feel again a coherence of thought, as that when I, full of idealism and head knowledge, first embarked on my teaching career. It was a trickle of water mixing into the dry sands to form a muddy consistency upon which I could once again build.

Beyond my own learning and reflection, I felt challenged through these courses to ask the same questions of my students. This meta-learning is now at the core of many of the courses I teach and I believe has provided the basis for a much deeper understanding of the specific subject matter. I have consistently found that my student's responses have been intelligent, insightful and accompanied with an element of relief, bordering on gratefulness, simply because of the opportunity to explore why we learn what we learn.

Not until I moved to the middle east did I start to appreciate the **seasons and traditions** of this part of the world. To me, it was always a media-hyped, mysterious, oil rich, desert region whose inhabitants ranged from burkha clad women and camel-riding Bedouins, to opulent sheikhs and their bejeweled falcons. Creators of the tallest building in the world and that same hotbed that produced ISIS. These and many other perceptions and misconceptions characterised my romanticised image of what this place would be. Clearly some of these elements do exist, but in a way that only a fellow inhabitant would understand. The old adage, "You never truly know someone until you've walked a mile in their shoes," would be very apt if you changed "shoes" to "desert sandals". The bejeweled and scented mystique of the middle east is just that ... a place with an identity of its own and, in reality a melting pot of cultures - each with their own unique identity. With this, somewhat lengthy preamble in mind, **EAD 850: Multicultural Education**, taught by Dr. Riyad Shahjahan, examined the concepts of "identity", "privilege", "power" and "difference" and how these affect personal and social transformation. We started with the premise that in order to understand and appreciate the identity of others, one must be able to firmly identify one's own identity. As the course progressed I was afforded the opportunity to explore how multiculturalism affects the learning process and as a result am a confirmed believer in teaching children how to learn from and with other cultures. I consider myself very fortunate to have had the multi-cultural experiences I have had, as they have positively shaped much of my approach to education. More and more I can explore with my students how to celebrate our differences instead of romanticising, idealising or even fearing them.

Another positive spin off of this has been the fact that I am quite well placed to speak to students, their parents and staff who have made the move to a more multi-cultural international environment and to help them to make a "transition bridge" between their own culture and the new one/s into which they have moved. It is easy to celebrate the differences but quite a different matter to deal with many of the inconsistencies and difficulties that one encounters not only in adjusting to the culture while maintaining one's own identity, but also the new and sometimes quite daunting expectations of a new educational milieu. Needless to say, this is a long, slow but ultimately rewarding process.

It is time to speak of my arrival at an **oasis** in the desert. Oases after all, are that which weary traveler's dream of and revel in when they are found. Cool pure water, date palms and a contented, refreshing rest and revitalisation accompany their discovery. Earlier I mentioned a shift in the sands and as they were beginning to settle I was able to find a new place (in addition to Leadership) to focus my attention. As the semesters progressed, it seemed that more and more I was being drawn to educational technology orientated courses. The first of which was **TE 831: Teaching School Subject Matter with Technology** that was taught by Erica Hamilton. From the outset, the course was presented with what for me was a new and quite daring interface. We were very quickly inducted into the use of a Wikispace which although it had us negotiating its content in some of the same ways we did for the Angel and later Desire 2 Learn online Learning Management Systems, it appeared to me as something much more malleable than the official Michigan State University Learning Management Systems. We could contribute as much as was presented to us and through this crowd-sourced platform, we did. We could quite literally add (and sometimes by mistake delete) pages of our and others work and this created, for me, much more of a collaborative feel. There was a give and take of ideas and resources, making us constantly aware that we were all in this together and not, separate entities contributing alongside each other.

In addition, the course was filled with helpful educationally related tech tools, that I could use to enhance my classroom delivery and hopefully my student's learning. For once we were allowed to play with the technology as a way to finding its advantages. It confirmed that digital technology is here to stay in an ever changing world and we, as teachers, need to seek the educational relevance in it all and know how it helps to make our students learning authentic. It also was my first introduction to the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework which clearly helped me seek the appropriate ways to teach with technology.

As a direct result of this course I now use a Wikispace to deliver all my class/course content. I find that once my students get used to its idiosyncrasies it serves our purposes very well and allows for the interaction that I experienced and enjoyed in TE 831. That however, was not all. Now that I had a tech-tool in hand that was simple to use, flexible, easily editable and above all free, I felt as though my teaching has been given a drink of cool refreshing and reviving oasis water. It was as though I have found a new vehicle with which to communicate my passion, which fortunately is also my job.

I never thought that I would look forward to the **Winter**. Having been born and raised in the barny Southern Hemisphere, the last decade and a half in the Northern Hemisphere has still not helped me to get used to the much more severe winters that this half of the world experiences. In the desert, though, that is reversed. With summer-time highs in excess of 53°C (127.4°F) the respite that comes as winter approaches is delightful. All of a sudden one wants to do things ... instead of wilting in the shade. People come together and talk; we celebrate at gatherings and share outdoor meals. As colleagues at work we find more time to meet socially and, because teachers so often cannot separate school and home, we share classroom experiences and resources, create "activities" and find new ways to facilitate learning ideas. There is a sense of newness and discovery, release and relief and; for me, this particular season coincides with the end of a long process of academic growth and development. This final

Capstone Course has been, in many ways, like the winter in the desert - the end of a particularly intense season and the moving into one of reflection, exhibition and celebration. I look at the achievements I have listed through the pages of my website and am gratified and contented. I have traversed the desert, learnt much along the way and a still peace has descended.

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2014