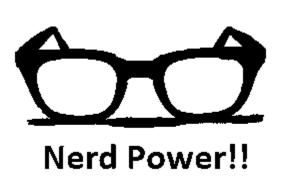# One Week In June

Tells the Story of 5 Years of Hard Work and Dedication

Nerd Power!!

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Introduction

During the last week of June, 2012, I attended a week long training seminar for work. All of my colleagues that had the same job title as myself were called back to Baltimore, the home of Talent Development Secondary (TDS), the organization I work for. Among other things, we learned data driven decision making strategies, implementing the TDS curriculum, tiered interventions, family outreach, and all manner of best practices. At this point I should say that TDS is a school turnaround organization, and a part of Johns Hopkins University's School of Education. We partner with schools and districts that are going through major challenges and work with them to make the changes that they already want to make. We have a specialized curriculum that meets the students where there are to bring them up to where they need to be. We support schools as they implement tiered student supports for those kids that are at-risk and nudge them back on track. We are an organization that also provides the personnel necessary to support this change process; from curriculum coaches and instructional facilitators to onsite turnaround coordinators and organizational facilitators. Last year I fell into the onsite turnaround coordinators and my job title was "School Transformation Facilitator" or STF. It was at a gathering of eighty STFs and Org Facilitators that I am referring to when I talk about the last week in June. This one week can be used to tell the story of my professional growth as an educator and the completion of my work for a Masters in Educational Technology (MAET) from Michigan State University (MSU). At the same time as the STF Training week I was also working to put the final touches on my portfolio for the MAET. From the moment I finished my bachelors until the writing of this paper I have been working on completing the work for the MATC. It is perfect that these two events would coincide. Both the culmination of years of

work and dedication. From a new teacher having little to no idea what I was doing, barely treading water to survive, to an educational consultant that specializes in school turnaround.

From Brand Spankin' New to Helping Those Who Are Brand Spankin' New

I did not come to the teaching profession directly. I took sort of an oblique route. After graduating high school in the 23rd percentile I went on to the local community college where I dropped out after a couple years of skating by with Cs and Ds. When I was finally ready to become a teacher I came back to it with a vengeance. I re-enrolled in community college to bring my grades up and earned a 4.0 the entire time. I transferred to Michigan State University where I was accepted into their Interdisciplinary Social Science program and then into the College of Education to become a high school teacher. I believe my story as an educator begins with my experience training to become one at MSU.

To understand what I mean, I have to tell you that the first time I ever stepped in front of a class I froze. I was a student teacher, it was my first day actually teaching, and as I was talking about post WWI immigration through Ellis Island I forgot what I was supposed to say and where I was going. I just froze. My mentor teacher had to jump start me again by taking over the class for 2 minutes while I regrouped. This was not the only time I was unprepared for the classroom. My entire student teaching year was an uphill battle. I had a huge learning curve, and it took almost the entire year for me to figure things out. A lesson I developed for that student teaching year, and later refined during the completion of my Education Technology Certification at MSU, was a Stand Alone Instructional Resource (StAIR). Based on the House Un-American Activites Committee during the height of the cold war, the students went through a 'choose your own adventure' type story in which every decision made by the student led to another and then

another and then another. In the end the student was either charged with Contempt of Congress

or had to name their friends and colleagues as communists. At the same time I also started a

blog at edublogs.org, that was later incorporated into my own website, EduNerd.org. That first

site was created to fulfill a course requirement for the Ed Tech Certification, but has since been a

place for me to rant and rave about education, technology, and other things nerdy. It came in

handy as a new teacher in New Orleans, LA, where once again, I was struggling as a teacher.

  I don't know why I have to need to make the same mistakes and learn the same lessons

over and over again, but I have and I do. As a newly minted teacher sent out into the world I

landed a job in New Orleans teaching at Walter L Cohen High School. I have to say, once again,

I was barely surviving. I was given this curriculum, called Freshman Seminar, from an outfit in

Baltimore about study skills, conflict resolution, and looking forward to college. When they

handed me that giant packet of materials I thought to myself, "I was trained as a social studies

teacher, not a remedial skills teacher." That year I learned one of the driving forces behind not

only Talent Development, but most of the social services industry. I had to meet my students

where they were, before I could bring them to where they needed to be. I am paraphrasing what

I have heard from my wife, a social worker, fellow teachers, colleagues at TDS, and also from

the research behind the TDS curriculum. If you don't meet them where there are, how can you

ever understand HOW to get them where they need to be? Just like my student teaching year, I

got turned around by a mentor teacher there to help me implement the curriculum. Talent

Development doesn't just give you the curriculum and send you on you merry way, they also

provide coaches to support you along the way. I credit mine, a man name Tyson Giles, as one of

the two reasons I didn't quit my first year.

The Data Nerd

A major part of my work for TDS is with Early Warning Indicators (EWIs). EWIs are data points that can tell us as early as 6th grade if a student is at risk of dropping out of school later on in their academic career. Those indicators are attendance, behavior, and course performance (the ABCs). These indicators are nothing new. In fact, they follow simple logic. If you don't show up on a regular basis, do not behave while in school, and do not complete the work or understand the material, then you are not going to graduate. The process that TDS developed to use the EWIs to intervene with students who are off track involves an interdisciplinary team of teachers getting together to discuss their students. A requirement for this meeting to be successful is that every teacher at the table has to share the same students, so this requires them traveling from teacher to teacher in cohorts, and then giving those teachers a common planning time to discuss students. This process was used at the first school I ever taught in: Walter L Cohen High School in New Orleans, LA, and it was a process that I fought tooth and nail.

Every morning all the Ninth Grade teachers would assemble behind the library in the school's conference room. For most of first period we would talk about our students, what worked, what didn't, and how we could help each other work with our most challenging students. I did not feel that this process worked for me. Nothing the other teachers were talking about would apply to my classroom, and the students they were discussing as improved or well behaved were not so in my classroom. It got to the point where I would ask the secretary to call on me when a teacher needed a sub. First period was always the hardest for the school to cover. Things happen and teachers show up late. When I wasn't able to get out of it I would always bring grading that I needed to do. After ignoring the work done at EWI Meetings for most of the

year I was not improving as a teacher. I started thinking to myself, "Maybe it's not them. Maybe it's me." I was telling this story to our people from Guam when they asked, "And, how did you finally make the decision to buy in?" They were having trouble with a few obstinate teachers.   In the end, I had to admit that it wasn't anything the school did to force me across the chasm from no to yes. It was the meetings themselves. By nature they are meant have us work collaboratively on our common challenges and celebrate our successes. When my challenges were not getting the same collaborative effort as my colleagues, they remained my challenges and did not go away. I also could not share in the success, because I was not having them either. From there it was simple to make that final step to buy into the process.

My belief in the EWI process has led to the development of two major projects and one huge presentation for both my work in TDS and for this master's program. The first two occurred while I was working as an onsite turnaround coordinator for a single school in Detroit. For the second half of the 2010-2011 school year I was brought in to a middle school that was making the transition from an elementary (K-5) to an elementary/middle school (K-8). Looking at the data for this school, most of the problems were occurring in the middle grades, and it was here that I focused my attention. The first step was to restart the school's EWI Meetings, which had fallen to the wayside in the absence of a fulltime onsite person. To facilitate the process I created a database using Microsoft Access that linked the school's student information system with the interventions we developed in our teacher team meetings. I was linking student achievement data with implementation data. A year later, working with several schools in the Detroit area, as well as East Baton Rouge, LA, I developed a series of training modules in my Teaching K-12 Students Online course (CEP 820). Instead of developing a fake course that I wasn't teaching, I used the course to create a training regimen for K-12 teachers to implement

the EWI&I Tracker. The end result was that teachers were able to see the fruits of their labor through progress monitoring. We could follow a student's progress as they either responded or rejected our interventions. This database and the training modules that accompany it are available in my professional artifacts as the Early Warning Indicator and Intervention (EWI&I) Tracker.

The second major project I developed while still at that single school was a redesign of the basic quarterly report card. It is a part of TDS protocol to implement report card conferences for the student as well as their parents. The purpose is to ingrain them with the idea that the report card is theirs. They must take responsibility for it and ownership of it if they are to succeed. It was to facilitate this process that I attempted the redesign to reflect the EWIs. A caring adult sits down with the student and goes over their report card with them. What grades they are getting, why they are getting them, and what they can do about it. It also brings in a student's attendance and behavior referrals in an attempt to make the link between showing up, behaving well, and better grades. Like the EWI&I Tracker, the student report card was developed using Microsoft Access and the district SIS. Also like the EWI&I Tracker, the student report card redesign was done in conjunction with my MSU coursework. As a teacher researcher I was learning to develop action research projects that could be applied right away to the classroom and teacher practice. The report card redesign was submitted to my TE 808 class, <u>Inquiry in Classroom Teaching and Learning</u>. As the son of an accountant and an art teacher it was great being able to put my data/number side together with my design/creative side to develop a report card that used color, graphs, and some of the basic elements of design to convey extremely relevant information to the student.

It was all of this work with student data that led my supervisors to ask me to develop a presentation for the last week in June, 2012, around data driven interventions and data driven school turnaround. It was all about data. I was asked to create this presentation for the entire room, eighty people. I would like to remind you of what occurred the first time I was in front of students and apply that to a room of peers and colleagues. The entire time leading up to my presentation, which was on Wednesday, I kept going back to that first time. Because of that fear I chose the same remedy that worked way back then: over planning. I developed a complicated, intricate, and detailed plan for this session, which is another artifact included in this portfolio. I knew that I would be more confident and prepared to deviate from the script if I had a detailed script to deviate from. The end result of that presentation was that mine, along with another colleague from Detroit, were the only two presentations mentioned by name in the participant evaluations as being conducted extraordinarily well. I thank Carol Steele for teaching me how to plan so I can improvise if need be.

One Summer

Six months after starting with Talent Development and four years after I first received my teaching certification and became an educator, I took a summer off to become a full blown college student again. Every summer since becoming a teacher I would teach summer school, proctor state testing for students retaking the exams, or enroll in professional developments offered through the district and that offered stipends to teachers. I was a new teacher, a new husband, and woefully in debt. One summer I didn't do all that. One summer I dropped everything and became a college student again. I lived on campus, in a dorm, which I had never done before, and will never do again. I did this while participating in MSU's Hybrid Summer

Program for the second year of the MAET. This summer taught me more about what it means to be a nerd in education than any class or series of classes before it or since. Among the many thinks I learned during that summer I played with websites, wikis, video/audio editing, blogging, multimedia presentations, and video games. These applicable skills were matched on a daily basis with educational theory and philosophy presented each morning. The daily workshops were modeled after Top Chef: Quick Fire challenges meant to get our creative juices flowing and long term and graded projects, similar to the Elimination Challenges, were meant to test the skills we learned throughout the summer.

Leading up to the last week in June, and while developing my presentation and workshop for the STFs I reflected on this experience and took from it what I needed to make my presentation as interactive and engaging as I could. Instead of using PowerPoint I switched to Prezi in order to show the flow of the Positive Feedback Loop as well zoom in and out of the work plan developed by TDS for each of its schools. The hour long activity was broken up into multiple "quick fire" challenges that added up to a full "elimination challenge" reviewed by their fellow STFs.

In Conclusion

Looking back on my experience with the MAET I see this experience as being broken up into 4 phases. The first was before I even stepped into the classroom for the first time as a newly minted teacher. I was taking the introductory Educational Technology classes while I was in the process of moving down to New Orleans as a teacher. The second phase occurred as I was transitioning from a classroom teacher to a school turnaround coordinator (STF) for Talent Development. The next phase was spread out over the next year as I took classes online and

transitioned in my job once again, but this time from supporting a single school in Detroit to multiple schools in multiple cities. The final phase of my MAET experience is about to wrap up; hopefully with the completion of this paper and its upload to my online portfolio. The use of educational technology is how an educator adapts to new teaching environments. With the completion of this Masters of Arts in Educational Technology I will be well prepared for the transitions I know are coming but can't yet see what they will look like.