

**Synthesis Essay:**  
**The 7 Habits of a Highly Effective Teacher:**  
**What Graduate School Has Taught Me**

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When I accepted a position at my current school in August of 2012, I was introduced to “The Leader in Me”- a character building and behavior program being implemented in schools all around the United States. My school was considering adapting this program. It is a rendition of Stephen Covey’s “7 Habits of Highly Effective People” and it revolves around the “7 Habits of Happy Kids.” The theory behind the program is that if we can teach children to live their lives by the “7 Habits” then they can develop strong problem-solving and communication skills while leading balanced, successful, productive, healthy lives. It sounded great and just what this generation of youngsters needed. After a year of dabbling in different aspects of the 7 Habits, the school as a whole made the decision to commit to adapting “The Leader in Me” program. This involved days of intensive, ongoing training, and some significant changes in the structure of our classrooms and school. In June 2013, I completed the training and became certified in the program and since the beginning of this school year, I have been teaching my students the 7 Habits and integrating them throughout our entire school day.

For as long as I can remember, I have been hearing the quote “Practice what you preach.” That being said, I, too, have been living my life through the 7 Habits. When sitting down reflecting, trying to recall all I have learned in the past few semesters as a graduate student, I could not even begin to think about where to start and how to organize my conglomeration of thoughts. I can say that overall, I am a changed person, and more of an expert in teaching, classroom management, and literacy. I realized that the culmination of my learning as a master’s student, pertaining to three main aspects: literacy, classroom management, and my personal development, can be summarized and presented through the 7 Habits.

***Habit 1: Be Proactive.*** I tell my students this habit means to be responsible for yourself, take initiative, choose your attitude, and always do the right thing, even when no one is looking.

Many of my courses were classroom-management based. One thing I learned was to never give up when it came to reaching students that frequently portray misbehavior. If one thing does not work, try another, and keep on trying until you find something that makes a difference. I learned that creating a behavior plan involves collecting data to figure out if what was put in place is working, and if something is not working alter your plan and try again. With this in mind, one must have a very positive attitude, an attitude of patience and perseverance. With every class I took, I was reminded of the challenges that come with a career in education, the high burn-out rate, the intense expectations, and the ever-increasing demands. It is easy to get caught up in

these negatives, but I choose my attitude and stay positive, and enjoy every day I spend with my students.

When talking about choosing an attitude, I always tell my students to “remain positive” and “focus on the positive.” When thinking about this in my relation to my graduate classes, I cannot help but think about classroom management. Some thoughts that come to mind include “positive” reinforcement for our students, “Positive” Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS), and all of the research that shows that this is how to construct a preventative environment where desired behaviors can be taught, and in turn effective teaching can occur.

***Habit 2: Begin With the End in Mind.*** We must live our lives with a vision and design a plan based on that vision. Every Monday morning, my fourth graders set weekly goals and they have also set yearly goals. We have talked about what we want to accomplish in our lives that day, that week, that year, and even in our future down the road.

August 2005 marks a very significant time in my life. Growing up in a fairly small town, in the comforts of a close-knit family and a home full of love and support, going away to college was certainly, for lack of better words, a “big deal.” I made the decision to room blind I remember meeting one of my roommates for the first time. We introduced ourselves, fishing for small talk and conversation. Because it was our first day on campus as college students, it was no surprise that the topic of majors and career paths came up. When asked what my major was, I confidently replied with, “I want to be a teacher.” It was that very moment that it hit me- I was finally on my way to becoming what I always wanted to be. I had always wanted to be a teacher; I was beginning with the end in mind and I was now officially on the right course to do so.

During one of the several “7 Habits” training sessions I attended, the audience was asked to imagine our 80th birthday party. We were to describe all of the positive statements that would be said around the table by those in our lives that reflect all we accomplished in our lives and what we were known for. Naturally, I wrote down that I wanted to be known for being an outstanding teacher that made an impact in my students’ lives. With that in mind, I know that earning my Master’s degree is only a stepping-stone in my life when it comes to being an outstanding teacher. Yes, I have certainly gained an immense amount of knowledge that will help me be an effective teacher, but I realize that to truly be an outstanding teacher as the years pass, I must be a lifelong learner that stays up-to-date with the latest research, programs, instructional strategies, practices, and daily life. In one of my essays for the Capstone Seminar course, I played off the idea of this Habit- beginning with the end in mind- and realizing that truly with learning and teaching, there is no end in mind, and I am committed to being a lifelong learner.

My undergraduate and teaching internship experiences with Michigan State University were

rigorous, challenging, positive, and extremely educational, so when it came time to select graduate school options, it was no doubt that MSU was my first choice again. Acquiring a Master's degree was the next "end in mind." Now that I am wrapping up my program, preparing to walk across the stage and accept my diploma, I am nearing this "end" but realize that there are many, many more "ends" to come in my career life.

Now, to apply this Habit to my daily teaching life... With every lesson that we teach daily, we begin with the end in mind, by identifying an objective for students. We ask ourselves, "What do I want my students to learn?" All of the literacy courses I have taken throughout the Master of Arts in Education program have taught me what my students should be learning when it comes to literacy. I have learned how to plan well-structured, effective, differentiated literacy lessons.

***Habit 3: Put First Things First.*** I teach my students to sort their "big rocks," the most important to-dos in life, from their less important "small rocks" and focus on the more important things in life.

I have learned to always, always put my students first. THEY are my "big rocks." Their needs as individuals and learners come before anything else in the craziness of working as a teacher in a busy school and community. Before a day of learning can take place, students psychological needs of connectedness, competence, and contribution must be met and a classroom community must be in place, and I learned how to do so. Before planning and carrying out a literacy lesson, my students' needs as literacy learners must be identified, resulting in differentiated literacy lessons and pre, post, and ongoing assessments.

***Habit 4: Think Win-Win.*** This is the Habit of mutual benefit.

I think of classroom management with the idea of "thinking win-win." In order for my students to behave and respond in the way that I would like, I must also give them what they want and need. My greatest connection to this Habit would be what I learned about student input when it comes to classroom management. Teachers envision how they want students to act in their classroom, and I have come to learn that students have great input for teachers to consider when they organize classroom rules and expectations that encourage students to do so. CEP 883: The Psychology of Classroom Discipline, specifically taught me the importance of class created rules, teaching students the meaning and importance behind rules, and accepting student input all around. I am committed to doing so, and valuing my students input and wants to create a "win-win" situation.

I have learned to plan my school days and lessons following a "think win-win" model. As teachers, we want our students to learn. When our students learn and master objectives, we

“win” in a sense. Students want fun, engaging lessons. When students are excited about a lesson, they are engaged and motivated, and more likely to learn and behave accordingly. When students are learning, the teacher is “winning” and when students are enjoying their time spent at school, they, too, are “winning.” Throughout graduate school I have better learned how to plan lessons that are fun and engaging for students. Students’ interests must be considered, and one great way to attain information about their interests is by asking students to fill out surveys and respond to interviews. Learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic for example) and multiple intelligences (verbal/linguistic, interpersonal, musical/rhythmic to name a few) and must be identified through assessment and considered when planning lessons. Lessons must be viewed by students as relevant and important in their daily lives and I have learned the importance of making connections to students’ lives through my teaching. When planning lessons, I “think win-win.”

Along with mutual benefit comes mutual respect. I have learned ways to show my students respect and also how to approach students to gain their respect. This makes me think of something I learned about in CEP 841: Classroom Management in the Inclusive Classroom, about different types of authority a teacher can portray in a classroom setting. I strive most to portray referent authority, the type of authority that reflects the person in charge to be trustworthy and caring. Like respect, this type of authority is earned. If Habit 4 is the habit of mutual respect, in order to gain respect from our students, we must value and respect our students as well, their needs, strengths, idea, and inputs.

***Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood.*** This means to listen to others with the intent to truly listen and not with the intent to respond. Act in a way that leads to mutual understanding.

This Habit can be applied most to what I have learned in my classroom management courses as a graduate student. What I learned in my classroom management courses is that in order to facilitate a structured, organized classroom free of behavior problems, one must first understand each individual student and establish a strong, comfortable classroom community environment. Through my readings and case studies, I learned that students do not misbehave simply to misbehave; rather there is a reason behind their actions. Perhaps their psychological needs are not being met outside of school? What is the function of their misbehavior? What is this student trying to tell me about their life and how they feel by the way they are behaving? How can I find out why this student is acting this way? Clearly, each student must be understood first before we can teach and expect them to understand what we are teaching them.

This Habit can also be applied to my learning about literature. Because literacy was my focus, a significant amount of my studies were dedicated to studying literature, not only as a curricular resource used for pedagogical purposes. Specifically, TE 849: Methods & Materials of

Children's and Adolescent Literature, pushed me to really understand literature and its purposes. Much of the coursework involved reading various pieces of literature critically and analyzing the hidden meanings, lessons, and issues within the literature; this challenged me to try to truly understand the literature and the author. I have taught my students to do the same with the literature they read, and since then they have been showing signs of increased comprehension when it comes to interpretation and reflection.

As important as it is to understand others, one must conduct them self to encourage mutual understanding and when it comes to teaching I have learned to make the purpose of a lesson very transparent and connected to the learner's life and teach in a way that allows others to understand me.

***Habit 6: Synergize.*** Work together effectively and work well with others.

Throughout my graduate school experience, I have been involved in more group work than any other time in my life. However, this group work and these interactions were never face-to-face interactions and only occasionally real-time interactions. I learned how to use various forms of technology to make these interactions as beneficial as possible and regardless of the technicalities of these interactions, we made them work, learned from each other, and synergized.

As a result of synergizing, I have learned so much more beyond just the "content" of my graduate school program. I was reminded that every person has their own unique life situation and experiences they bring to the table to make sense of the information and task at hand. So many times during my courses, I remember participating in discussions and writing, "I never realized this until I read your response..." or something along the lines, and this showed me that participating in group interactions, whether it was a simple discussion board, or a semester-long project, my own thinking was being pushed and challenge by others' thinking and this was such a strong learning experience. I remember during the Children's and Adolescent literature course I took, the group of five that I was in would all read the same book and have five completely different, deep interpretations and of the same story. Overall, I realized the power of working together and I now place more importance on that in my own classroom because just like I learned so much alongside other graduate students, the young learners in my classroom can do so as well.

***Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw.*** This is the habit of renewal, for we cannot only focus on the golden eggs but we must nurture the goose that lays the golden eggs. I teach my students that this means, "balance is best." We must balance our work life and personal life.

Well, what better way to describe well-structured literacy instruction? Balance is best. I learned

all about structuring a balanced literacy program in my classroom that includes all aspects of literacy.

Lastly, this Habit has been helpful for me in my personal life, as it is very easy to get overwhelmed with the high demands and expectations of teaching full time, completing a Master's degree, and trying to carry on a normal, productive life of a 20-something year old. I have learned to make time for myself, my well-being, and the important relationships in my life in order to feel rested and refreshed. The idea behind this Habit is that if we take time to "sharpen the saw," we will be more effective individuals in our work life. If my overall goal is to be an outstanding teacher, then taking time to "sharpen the saw" will allow me to be more effective in the classroom with my students in meeting their individual learning needs and preparing them for a successful, productive life beyond the classroom.