Russ Olcheske Sept 29 2015

Holt H.S.

C: Ok, it’s September 29th 2015. We are now in the North Campus or the Senior Center…what is it called, Russ?

R: North Campus.

C: The North Campus.

R: Senior Center sounds more like a retirement home so that’s what they said.

C: Of Holt High School of Holt, Michigan and let’s start right off. The first question is two parts: How do you define success in teaching and do you believe that Grand Valley State prepared you for success in the classroom?

R: (00:30-8:03) Well, I’ll start with the second part of the question and I think I probably answered it the same way 8 years ago, I think Grand Valley did a pretty good job. I think the half and half internship, the teacher-assisting and the student teaching in two different schools, one is supposed to be in a diverse setting and one in a more rural setting, that to me was great. I think back to that year internship, that’s what we call them here in Holt (MSU’s nomenclature) is internships.

C: Yeah, because Michigan State, that’s what they call them.

R: That’s…it was wonderful and so I thought Grand Valley…

C: Now, where were your two? Where did you do your student teaching and teacher-assisting?

R: I was at Macatawa Bay Middle School, West Ottawa Middle School and then Jenison Junior High.

C: Ok.

R: So I was in Junior High for both. I requested that so I could stay with my coaching gig at Jenison. I think I mentioned this 8 years ago too, the Social Studies major, in general, doesn’t give you a lot of depth in any one particular coursework. And so in my first year I was teaching Econ. I only had 2 Econ classes under that Social Studies major…

C: Right.

R: …and I struggled in both of them and here I was teaching seniors, some at a very high level and that was, that was tough. Now there is really no perfect solution to that unless school districts are able specialists and with our HR Department, they will not hire a History major. They will not hire a Chemistry major. You have to have that group Social Studies, group Science, whatever or they won’t hire you because they want flexibility in the HR level to be able to slide you around…

C: They have to.

R: But that makes sense but gosh if you could have a History teacher that was a History major, that’s all they took is history…I mean a little government, you know, round it out. So that was the only downfall was content that first year. It was hard for me because you only have two Government classes, you only have two Econ classes under that group Social Studies umbrella.

C: So we’re modifying the major.

R: Ok.

C: It’s in the works now. We started the process last year and what it’s going to be now is a Super Major so instead of a 42 hour major it’s going to be a 54, 56 hour major. Make students take things in Latin America and African and Asian history, which they haven’t always done, but then add a third Poli Sci, a third Econ class, a third Geography class, at least broaden, a little bit, their non-History background. Not a perfect solution but number 1, it will get the history part of it into the whole world, instead of having people concentrate and it will at least get them 9 hours, instead of 6, in the other areas, like you mentioned.

R: Absolutely. College kids probably aren’t thrilled about having to take more credits, but that is a solution to the problem that I just brought up.

C: We were able to plug a lot of it into Gen Ed so they will be able to double-count. It will not delay graduation. It won’t add hours to graduation.

R: Perfect. Then that clears that up too. Awesome. I thought the teacher-assisting, where you taught a half a day and then you still had like 12 credits, I thought that was great and then your student teaching, you were doing your student teaching and I think you also had like a Capstone class or something like that. So I thought the balance was good. Here at MSU they miss every single Friday. The interns miss every single Friday to go to MSU courses and it’s, geez, how do you have that continuity where you are not there once a week so I liked how Grand Valley set it up, for sure. And then the second part of the question: How do I define success in teaching? Well, first of all I want to engagement and you kind of just see that on their faces. First of all if their face is buried in their arms…

C: I didn’t see anybody sleeping.

R: Right. You’re not going to get engagement if you can’t see their faces but can just kind of see that wonder on their faces, “Oh, you know, ok” and that kind of light bulb moments so when I see kids that are engaged we have already won half the battle, if not three-quarters of it, because now they are able to learn. They are attentive so the engagement has got to be there. I try to accomplish that by building a relationship with students as people to people. You know we are all on the same team here. It’s not me against you. And so you try to establish that early in the year with some classroom building type things where, “We’re all in this together. We’re all family” and I think you are going to get more engagement then when the student knows that you care about them as a person.

C: Right.

R: So that might have gotten into strategies a little bit.

C: No, not necessarily.

R: And then I look for growth. That’s another way I define success, is where are they at at the beginning of the semester and where are they at at the end of the semester, at the end of the year?

C: Now is that (student growth) a district goal or philosophy?

R: Growth, yes. We have to provide evidence of growth to our principal every year. That’s part of our evaluation, is we have to show that there was growth of some sort. Now the big thing is that we are measuring growth. If you didn’t get a kid from Point A to Point B that doesn’t mean you’re getting fired. It’s doesn’t mean that you have to have a certain percentage of kids that make it from Point A to Point B, which is nice because it’s kind of low pressure but you have to show how you are measuring growth. How are you going about…Ok, so the kid didn’t go from Point A to Point B, what are you going to do next year to modify your technique? That’s all good stuff.

C: That’s legit.

R: That’s legit and we don’t feel threatened by that or it’s not a hiring or firing tool at all so I want to look for growth and the same thing as an athletic coach: Where are you at the end of the year compared to where you were at the beginning? We do a lot of writing assessments in World History and so that first one compared to the last one, there’s more examples. There’s more specificity. There’s more clarity and if I can see that then that’s an example of growth. (6:25)

C: Now do you have, what’s the word I’m looking for, does everyone give the same types of unit tests or whatever? (Common assessments)

R: Yeah. Common assessments.

C: Common assessments.

R: Yeah, and we have these things called DBQs, Document Based Questions, where we all give them the same documents and the same question. We have that on the exam, for sure, but then we try to sprinkle in a few throughout the semester as well so we want to allow teachers to use their individual creativity to kind of do how they want to do the curriculum, but at the same time we want to have some commonality and the exams have to be common. That’s Board mandated. So you want to have each kid have a similar experience.

C: But not necessarily the same one. In fact, not the same one.

R: Right.

C: So is there any other way that you read success? You are talking about engagement, relationships, growth…

R: Growth. And then something that the state might not care about, is that I want to see growth in them as a person, socially. I want to see them be a more compassionate person. I want to see them be a more confident person. That’s another thing that I can measure.

C: Yeah.

R: You know where a kid, maybe at the beginning of the year, was really shy and just did not put themselves out there, now they are raising their hand in class and contributing to a discussion. I don’t know if you can measure that on a state test.

C: Right.

R: And so if I can see kids grow in other areas besides the academic content, that’s something that I want to see and I’m going to focus on that.

C: Yeah. Ok. Question 2: What do you view as the biggest challenges to your career? And you are in your 10th or 11th year of your career?

R: 10th year.

C: Ok, 10th year.

R: I guess, for me personally, is balance. How do I find balance between my professional life and my personal life?

C: Yeah.

R: And I tried to work on that early in my career with my assistant principal at that time and we came to the conclusion that they are both the same for me, anyway. That my professional life and my personal life is the same thing and what I stand for as a person and as a human is what I stand for professionally and vice versa and so my job is kind of my life. It’s what I stand for. It’s what brings me fulfillment. So that means it’s not just 7:30 to 2:30. There’s coaching and then there’s extra-curriculars and that’s part of the job that I enjoy and so there is going to be 12 hour days. There are going to be 14 hour days. There are going to be all day Saturdays at tournaments and whatnot. So we kind of came to the conclusion that there really wasn’t going to be much balance and that was okay because they were intertwined, my personal life and my professional life.

C: But I would consider there still be balance though because if you spend 24/7 just on your classroom, that would be one thing, but you’re balancing your classroom with coaching, extracurriculars, and all the other things that go in.

R: Exactly. Right. So it’s hard to get burned out because there’s so many juggling acts within my job so that it’s not just one thing that is consuming me.

C: Right.

R: So that’s a good point.

C: In fact those other things could be stress relievers.

R: Right. Exactly and that was the thing. We found those to be stress relievers. Now I try to stay away from here one day a week or try to stay away from school work and the last couple of Sundays I didn’t do anything school related it was just…

C: Congratulations.

R: …me trying to watch football and this and that. I found that to be helpful. You can always work on that balancing act and taking some time away is actually going to give you energy then to go into the week and all that. But I’ve got a couple of other volunteer opportunities that I do too and people are like, “How do you juggle all that?” I enjoy those volunteer things that I do and so it’s not like it’s more stressful. It’s those things are kind of fun and their hobbies and so. And the other challenge I have is that I struggle with motivating apathetic students that are kind of, “F U school. F U teachers. I don’t care.” Part of me it just says, “Ok, that’s fine. I’m going to focus on the students that are here to learn. I’m going to focus my energy on them because if I focus my energy on the two or three kids (that don’t care) then I’m taking away from the other students.” And so that’s really not the right approach because you can’t let any students fall behind. You know you’ve to be there for all 30 of them. But I struggle in my career reaching that student who just has that “F U” attitude toward school in general and part of me is like I just want to let them learn the life lessons. If you don’t do well in school, if you don’t apply (yourself)…at some point I’m hoping that it’s going to click in for them. That, “I should probably do well in here. I should probably pay attention.” You know that sort of thing. I never give up on a kid completely but those kids can challenge me and sometimes it is just easier to say, or maybe it’s me saying, “I’m probably going to benefit you more by letting you figure this out for your own. Me saying, “This is important. This is important. This is important. You’ve got to figure that out on your own.” And hopefully they do and I’ve seen it happen where maybe a kid as a sophomore, by the time they were a senior they have turned things around. And they had to go through some failures and they had to take classes two or three times to finally get that kick in the pants of, “Ok. This is kind of pointless me retaking classes in the summertime when I could be having fun.” Apathetic learners, apathetic students could be another area.

C: I always figured that if I picked one student to be my “mission” for the year and if I could turn that one kid around instead of trying to turn every kid around that was in trouble then I felt a little bit of success and really it was realistic at that point. It was more of an objective than a goal.

R: And going back to the whole building relationships thing, maybe they’re not getting anything academic but maybe socially they got something out of my class. Maybe their self-esteem rose because I treated them a certain way, so, you know, I could maybe only think of 5 kids off the top of my head that I was just unable to make zero connection with, never able to break through, from day 1 to the last day they were checked out. They just weren’t going to do anything. I can think of maybe 5 kids (13:07) were like that so.

C: 5 kids over 10 years isn’t bad.

R: Yeah. I can think of 5 that just had an F U attitude from beginning to end. Most kids you are able to get something at some point out of them, and maybe they still failed your class but they probably walked out with something they got from you.

C: And it’s interesting you mentioned teaching in the future here working with LCC (Lansing Community College) I encountered taught at the local community college in the evenings too, out in Kansas, and every once in a while I would get one of those kids, maybe not from my (high) school, but they were coming back into the education realm and they said, “I blew off high school and now, in my mid-20s I want to change my life around.” You want to talk about invested in their learning and even though World History didn’t apply to nursing, you saw by their faces that they were engaged and excited…

R: Learning in general. That’s beautiful stuff.

C: So you combined, which is good, 2 and 3, I guess, to a certain extent, but are there any other things you do to relieve the stress?

R: Yeah, I, that was kind of an easy question for me. First of all, and these are things I had to learn, they didn’t just happen, I had to learn to not to sweat the small stuff. You just can’t, whether it’s in the classroom. Whether it’s administrative, whether it’s…you just can’t let the little things bother you and you have to continually be flexible and adaptable. If you come in and, “Here’s what we are doing today. We’re doing A, B and C” well, now a fire alarm happened, ok, “Now I’m behind the whole weeks messed up”. No, you’ve got to learn to roll with the punches in this field because if you have that kind of A, B, C mentality, “Here’s what we are going to do today”, it might not work out that way and then, “Now I’m stressed out at home because I didn’t get as much done as I thought I would and now we have a snow day and how are we ever going to…” You can’t let that stuff bother you. You have to do the best you can with the time you have. So I had to focus on realizing that I needed to control what I could control and the things that I can control are actually very minimal. And I had to learn to be okay with that. One thing I do control though is the attitude that I bring to my students on an every day basis. And so that’s something I can control. I can’t control the budget. I can’t control the switch of 9th and 12th graders (from having a “Freshmen Center” building to a “Senior Center” building). I can’t control these kids’ home lives and the horrible things they are dealing with. I can control the attitude that I bring every single day to that classroom. So focus on that because that, actually, really, gives me quite a bit of control. I still have a great influence on these kids. I can still do great work with them. I can still be a great role model for them in their lives. So focus on what I can control, which actually isn’t much, and, but when you look at it from another perspective you still do have a lot.

C: You have total control over yourself.

R: Yes, yes. Exactly. And then one of my teachers, when I taught at Jenison for that half a year, he said, “You can’t take yourself too seriously.” He said, “Yes, school is important. Yes, our job is important. Yes, we have all this content to teach them, but you can’t take yourself too seriously. You’ve got to have fun with it. Otherwise you’re just going to get burned out after five years or whatever.” So, you’ve got to be okay with there being some losses. Some failures, if you will. Just do the best you can.

C: Who were you with at Jenison?

R: Doug Smith.

C: He’s still there.

R: He’s still there! That is insane.

C: For 30+ years. (16:46)

R: Oh, he’s got to be pushing 40 years.

C: Probably. The woman who lives next door (to us), she’s pushing her early 50s (years old), she had him as a teacher in Jenison.

R: Wow!

C: And he was phenomenal and I had Beth Washington at Mac Bay and her husband became principal at Kalamazoo Central and the whole Kalamazoo Promise and they had Obama come to speak at graduation so I feel like I had two really good mentors that were really excellent educators and yeah, Doug Smith said, “You can’t take yourself too seriously” because I can remember one particular occasion I was upset because March was “Reading Month” I think and at random times the principal would come on the intercom and say, “Stop what you are doing. We are reading for 10 minutes” and the kids could read whatever they wanted but they really wanted to implement kids reading but I would get upset. “I had this lesson plan and now my hour just got cut short by 10 minutes” and he’d say, “Calm down. You’re taking yourself too seriously right now. We will pick up tomorrow where we left off. It’s fine.” So.

C: Well, good for him.

R: He was helpful, for sure, and I haven’t talked to him in a while so I will have to touch base with him.

C: So, Question 4. Are you ready to move on? Ok. How are you motivated to best serve your students? What keeps you going?

R: Yeah. What keeps me going? I’m still loving it. I am still enjoying it. I don’t have any intention of pursuing other fields so despite all the ‘doom and gloom’ (focus on education today) I still able to have a pretty good disposition towards my job and thus my life. So for me I feel like I get a lot from them. The kids provide me with a lot. My kids have given me so much love and respect and fulfillment and enjoyment and so right when you think you have reached maybe a rock bottom or you’re questioning yourself in this field some kid will write you a letter or some kid will just say something that, “That’s why I’m here” and now I have the energy to go another week or month or year or whatever. So, for me I’m here for them. This isn’t about me. I love to talk but it’s not about me. I’m here for them and what they’ve given me in return makes it all worthwhile. So, another thing I do in my spare time is I volunteer at a local crisis center so I answer the phones.

C: Oh, boy.

R: Suicidal call, this, that or whatever, so obviously I’m giving a lot to the community but what I get in return and the growth I’ve had professionally and personally by doing that, so I guess I’m kind of selfish, in a sense, that I do all these things that I get a lot back. (19:29) I get a lot in return for doing what I do and and that’s what keeps me going.

C: But your motivation isn’t for the return.

R: Right.

C: What changes, if any, have occurred in the strategies and methods that you use in your classroom and you mentioned something already but are you different than you were in 2008 or when you started teaching?

R: Yes and no. Yes and no. I think some say, “Some habits are hard to break”. A lot of things…I’ve found something that works and I’m a big believer in “If it’s not broke, don’t fix it” and I feel in education we’re constantly reinventing things. Well, wait a minute! That was working. Or we only did it for a year. Maybe we need to do it for 2 or 3 years to get some measurable data here. So, in some sense, if it’s not broke, don’t fix it. Lecturing is not bad. Bad lecturing is bad. So if a teacher is up in front of class talking that can still be beneficial learning. As far as assessments go, I’ve tried to go away from multiple choice testing. Early in my career I was making questions based on rote memorization type stuff that kids could study quickly before class and just cram it in. Now I’m more about writing. I’m more about discussion and kind of measuring student learning through writing and communication and not so much multiple choice tests. I’ve been stepping back on that and our administration is very open to that, going to a more standards-based grading, Socratic seminar as a kind of unit assessment, all that stuff I like.

C: You mentioned standards-based grading and I think it’s over, if I remember my story straight now, at Hamilton High School, southwest of Grand Rapids, they went to a standards-based rubric, 1-4, that matches with the standards and they are just trying to implement this at the high school so the high school teachers are a little bit shaky about how to…they have some kind of calculator that will change it back to percentages…

R: Right.

C: …but it actually is a huge rubric that they have to deal with and go through these 1-4 things. Is that what you are talking about here?

R: Yeah. And we have Math teachers that do that and parents were kind of upset. “What’s my kid’s grade? I need a percentage. I need a letter grade.” “Well, just keep working and you’ll reach the standards.” So parents weren’t too thrilled with it but if the communication was there, between the teacher and the parents, it seemed to work a little bit better. I haven’t gone to standards-based grading but it’s one of those things that is out there now and it’s something to think about and maybe…It’s ultimately just a different way of measuring a student’s learning.

C: Oh, yeah.

R: And I’m all for that.

C: How about technology? A lot of people mention that.

R: Yeah. Well I just got this cellphone, which looks normal. I just got this cellphone like 3 or 4 months ago. I had a flip phone for 8 or 9 years.

C: A “dumb” phone.

R: A flip phone and kids gave me a hard time about it. It was just unbelievable. Once again, if it’s not broke, don’t fix it. The kids would say, “That’s broke. That’s one that’s broke. Ok? You need a new one.” So I’m not big into the whole…I remember when I was in college Power Point was becoming really popular. “Teachers have got to use…oh, kids, you know…” And then my educational professor, Michael Wolf, said, “There’s no research that backs teachers who use Power Point kids are learning more. In fact they found some students have decreased learning because of all the flashing gadgets and stuff.”

C: Yep.

R: So when something new comes out technology-wise, I’m not real quick to jump on it. I want to kind of sit back and assess it. I think that technology has caused more harm than good, not just from an academic standpoint, but the bullying that goes on on social media and things like that, but it’s awesome in class when a kid can pull out their phone and plug in a due date on their phone and have a little reminder of that. That’s taking advantage of the technology in a good way. I don’t know if kids necessarily need a computer 24/7 because then everything just becomes Google.

C: I think they don’t need it. (That often)

R: Right. Everything is just becomes Googled then. Any question, “I don’t know. I’ll just Google it here.” You’ve got to think through it. You’ve got to critically think about it instead of just going to Google or Wikipedia to get the answer right away.

C: Right.

R: So I don’t implement a lot of technology. The things that I do learn are from the students and I’m kind of ancient in that sense. I haven’t implemented a lot of technology and…

C: You don’t look that old.

R: I know. I know but…

C: Is that a Smartboard in your room, by the way, or just a projector?

R: In my room?

C: Yeah.

R: It’s just a projector. Some of the teachers do have Smartboards and five years ago, “Hey. Who wants a Smartboard?” And I’m like, “I probably wouldn’t be able to learn how to use it.” I hate to sound like a disabled, apathetic student but I don’t think…what I have is fine. What I have is totally good.

C: If it works and they are learning. Exactly. Are you ready to move on again? Evaluations. Here’s the big one, or for a lot of people, maybe not for you. I don’t know. What types of evaluations, both informal and formal, are used to assess your classroom teaching, in other words, when the administration assesses you, and how are these evaluations used to better your teaching?

R: Oh, so what evaluations are used to assess me?

C: Yeah. Now if you use student evaluations to assess your teaching that’s also part of this question.

R: Ok. I don’t know the new legislation is, specifically, of how often we have to be evaluated.

C: It is all over the board with people putting it into effect.

R: Last year nobody watched me one minute. And my understanding is teachers have to be evaluated on a yearly basis, every single year and we got an email like on June 5 that just said, “We got kind of busy and we weren’t able to get in to see you” and I touched based with other teachers and they said the same thing. (25:44) “Yeah, he never came in to see us” so that was kind of strange. But like I said, earlier, at the end of the year we had to provide him with some evidence of “here’s how we are measuring growth. Here’s how we are going about tackling growth.” And that seemed to be the big thing because the evaluations now, it’s not just based on, “Hey, your principal likes you and he writes up a good report.” There’s other components to it now.

C: Right.

R: But I’m not 100% sure what some of those components are, but I know growth is one of them and so I just focused on that, but we haven’t gotten to the point yet where your kids’ exam scores are now a part of your evaluation. I think legislation wants to go in that direction.

C: Some schools have adopted that.

R: Yeah.

C: Like 30-50% (of the teachers’ evaluations are based on standardized tests).

R: Yeah. And some unions are pushing back and saying, “Let’s think of alternative ways to measure teachers because…” We’re not real keen on that here. I know that, that teachers don’t want exam grads to be a part of your evaluation or ACT testing or SAT testing…Michigan just switched to the SAT. We don’t want that to be part of our evaluation for reasons you are probably aware of. I mean there’s only so much that we can control here. What about how much their parents read to them? What about…you know? That just looks like we’re passing the buck, the blame onto somebody else but…

C: No, no. I mean I think that is realistic. It’s not passing the buck or anything like that and back to your earlier comment about, “there’s only so much that you can control”. If you’re working off a ‘growth’ model and it’s not ‘everybody deserves an A’, and the knowledge that every once in a while you are going to fail because they are going to fail because they are not going to do anything, then I think that’s more realistic than saying, “Every kid is going to score on the 80th percentile” or whatever, which, I think, is totally unfair.

R: Right.

C: And it doesn’t prove what kind of person they are going to be later on either.

R: And if I’m a “great” teacher, then maybe I get all the special needs students or I get the low achieving students.

C: That’s happening.

R: If I’m a “great” teacher maybe I get all the high level students. You’re comparing ‘apples to oranges’ when you look at the population within each classroom. It’s impossible to compare me to another World History teacher when the clientele is different. That would be like comparing dentists; one in a low poverty and another in a very affluent area. Well, of course, the affluent area is going to have their dentists ranked higher. They had the education. They had the correct early care, et cetera.

C: They are using fluoride and flossing.

R: Exactly.

C: Exactly. Yeah. So, you really don’t know if there’s a name to the evaluation tool?

R: I really don’t. I really don’t. I mean I have tenure. I have good reports from my previous evaluations.

C: Oh, that’s good.

R: And we have three tracks. We have a Track One, which means you’re on the good and narrow. Things are going great. Track Two is there’s a problem area that needs to be worked on and then Track Three means you were on Track Two and you’re not showing improvement on Track Two. I’m on Track One so if there were ‘red flags’ I think they would make me aware of them and they haven’t so as far as I know I’m doing a good job. I think they give me some trust and autonomy too that, “Ok, we didn’t get in to see him last year, even though we were supposed to…”

C: Right, but everything up until that time was (good)…

R: Right, right. So it’s not like, all of the sudden, “What’s going on here?”

C: So here comes the question. It’s the follow-up to that, in your previous evaluations did you have a debriefing session where you could have a conversation and did those evaluations as a whole, or those sessions help to make you a better teacher?

R: Yeah. Especially in my career because there was so much growth to be had, really, in my career and I had a really good working relationship with both of the assistant principals that were working with me for that four year non-tenure period. And, yeah, I got a lot of those and they were very low pressure and I remember on one occasion, maybe my first or second year, I just said, “I feel like I’m doing a horrible job. I feel like I’m definitely going to be let go at the end of the year and they’re like, ‘Oh, no. You’re doing great. We’re just trying to help you. We’re trying to make you better. Here are things that we…’ “ So they really instilled in me a lot of confidence that I was doing well and they were just trying to make me the best that I could be. It was low pressure, low key. It wasn’t…I didn’t feel like it was an adversial situation.

C: Good.

R: Once I got tenure, and I think at that time it was every three years, or every two years you got evaluated, then the feedback became much less. The conversations became less. It was kind of like, “Hey, we have to deal with these other younger teachers that you were in their position 5 years ago.” So I would say in the last 5 years I haven’t gained a whole lot (from the evaluation process) but I can remember early on in my career I got a lot out of those when they came and observed me and then we talked about it. And, “Here’s what you can improve on” or “Where you are at these different standards”, I thought that was great.

C: Good. Good. I mean that’s really important when you start your career too. What types of mentoring were provided for you and how would you characterize the results of the mentoring that was provided for you?

R: Like I said, I had a good relationship with those first couple of assistant principals that were observing me and working with me so that was great. We were supposed to have a mentor-teacher from our department and that just never really materialized. And I think I mentioned this on the last interview, my first year here I was teaching U.S. History at the main building. All the other U.S. History teachers were here in this 9th grade building. I was the only Psychology teacher and then Econ was just a disaster for me and the guy I went to for help he was over my head too, so that first year I didn’t have a whole lot of guidance and I feel there was like there was some ‘rough waters’ those first couple of years, but in the long run I think I gained from that. (32:06) I did have to come up with some things on my own, figure some stuff out. What’s working? What’s not working? And so there wasn’t a whole lot of teacher guidance or support and our specific department is very dysfunctional. There’s a lot of loud personalities, if you will and we actually got called down to the principal’s office last year, basically saying, “You guys got to get your shit together” and there’s just a lot of dysfunction and there’s not a lot of good relationships within our department. So for me, instead of getting in the middle of all the dysfunction and chaos I’ve just kind of stepped back and, once again, control what I can control. Focus on what is important. And I have stayed out of it. So I don’t feel like I have in my department, necessarily, that “go to teacher”. “Hey, what are you doing for this lesson?” Or, “Hey, how did this writing assignment go?” “Can I bounce some ideas off you?” And part of that is I travel (between the two schools) so you may not be able to have that ‘lunch buddy’ where you can discuss stuff or whatever.

C: Troy Vanderlaan, I don’t know if you remember him…

R: Yep, yep.

C: …He’s still in the Freshmen Center at East Kentwood. His mentor teacher was across the parking lot (at the high school building). He said, literally, two years, didn’t see the person.

R: Right. That’s kind of a logistical thing that if we’re trying to help teachers that should be addressed.

C: Yep. Yep. Have you pursued continuing education and I know by seeing the diploma on the wall you did, either in the form of a graduate program or professional development and how has this education influenced your success in the classroom?

R: Like we were talking about at lunch when I was trying to figure out what I want to pursue and administration wasn’t of any interest. Counseling maybe, but I really liked being in the classroom, so I didn’t want to be a counselor so I got my Master’s degree in General Psychology, which led us to having an AP Psych class here. (34:13) It led to me, or the goal is or the idea is next year I’ll be running the LCC class. I’ll be the lead professor (college psych class). So that Masters’ degree opened up some opportunities for me. It increased my pay here at Holt.

C: How about PD?

R: PD. We have ‘late start Wednesdays’ here at Holt, where pretty much every Wednesday school starts at 10:30.

C: Wow.

R: And I’m not sure how we get our hours in for school but we usually go a little bit later into the summer but every Wednesday morning we have PD. There’s departmental PD sometimes. Other times there is interdepartmental; we will be in a mix of people from other departments talking about different issues and ideas. There has been some good that has come out of that. Like I said, my department is kind of dysfunctional so sometimes there is more arguing and whining and complaining than anything but…

C: How about from the ISD?

R: Yeah, my first year there was a program through the ISD where we went almost monthly. The new teachers would go monthly to new teacher PD essentially but I haven’t been in school now…actually I had to take a reading class to be recertified. That was about 3 years ago. All of a sudden I was getting ready to renew my certification and, “Oh, you have to have a reading class and…” “What?!” So, I took that class to be recertified but now I’m at another crossroads again. Do I want to go back to school? Do I want to pursue another Master’s degree? If so, what would it be? Mental health is really important to me so how could that apply to the class. There’s some ideas but right now I have that Master’s degree and we’re just staying pat with that for now.

C: But you found the Master’s degree really applicable then?

R: Oh, yeah. And the program wasn’t designed for people to be counselors. The program was just general psychology for people that were teaching it at the high school level, for people who just wanted it for their own personal gain. Whatever. I found that very beneficial. That was through the University of Phoenix. Online. 100% online. That was kind of hard for me at first because I like the face to face interaction and the live audience, if you will, the live professor, the live students, the interaction, but I still got a lot out of it and the convenience allowed me to continue working full time. Allowed me to continue coaching full time. I could go to school at midnight. I could go to school on Sunday afternoon. That was phenomenal and now I think there is so many online programs and so many arenas and so many fields that it has really made education accessible to everybody. Working people. And that diploma was never questioned here in the sense that, “Oh, University of Phoenix” or “Oh, online. That’s not as good as MSU.” Or whatever. It was never questioned. It was accepted right from the get-go and…

C: Well, they have to be certified.

R: Yep, and they are NCATE or whatever the certification, they are, the University of Phoenix is, but sometimes they have a bad name in society. I know that they have been getting in trouble because of their marketing. “They’re just trying to get money out of kids.” But I enjoyed it. I thought it was great. I would say good things about it and I’d recommend it to somebody, especially looking for the convenience aspect of it. If you’ve got family or you’ve got…

C: Well, even Grand Valley, in the last few years, is offering more online and I taught one last fall. “Pearls of Wisdom”: Here you get to expound. What would you tell current students at Grand Valley to make sure they know before they, or anybody going into teacher prep, before they start teaching. In other words, what do you wish you knew before you left GVSU?

R: I didn’t get a lot of information about the politics of education. I didn’t know anything about unions. I didn’t know anything about…I remember in my Capstone they touched on that a little bit but I didn’t know much about unions or the MEA and the politics of this field and maybe it wasn’t this bad 10, 15 years ago. Because now it seems like we’re really vilified, like there are people who just hate teachers and we have all had a bad teacher at some point so we know what a bad teacher looks like but I think those are the minority. That’s not the majority of teachers. Most of us are here for (the right reasons) so just be prepared to be attacked by society and by parents and by political people that are just, “Your budget doesn’t matter. We’re slashing it.” This and that. That can be frustrating.

C: Yes, because there’s so much “fat” in education. (Sarcastically)

R: Right. It can be very frustrating.

C: You’ve outsourced everything (Holt has outsourced as much as they can, according to Russ.) you can possibly outsource. All your classes are 25 or above. And you have too much money.

R: Yeah. I do understand our school board and our superintendent. It’s like, “There’s not money growing on trees.” They are in a tough position but when they say we’re making cuts that don’t impact the classroom. When you cut a custodian or a security guard that does impact us. It impacts the students, the teachers. Also I would say make sure you are getting into it for the kids. If you’re really passionate about a subject matter then pursue that subject matter further. Become a college professor. Get your doctorate degree in history or whatever. This has got to be about kids, first and foremost. Because you are going to find that a lot of kids don’t care about your academic passions. One of my jobs is to show that passion and relate to their lives. “This is important. The Renaissance in Italy, it does matter and here’s why.” And having that passion and enthusiasm will get them onboard but if it is all about subject matter and that’s your main energy then you have to pursue that then further because I get a lot of people that come into this and, they are like, “The kids aren’t willing to learn.” Or, “They are not excited about history.” (40:29) And it’s like, “Well, you have got to find a way to get them excited” but this has got to be about kids and…

C: And one thing I noted, too, you read that selection in your two classes, right, from “The Prince”, Machiavelli, but then, immediately, as soon as you finished that, turned that into a question of relevance about what they see going on in politics or the history of political leadership or whatever, so they could see it’s not just the words in this textbook on page 375, but it’s, “How does this relate to me?”

R: Exactly.

C: And I think that’s really important.

R: Yeah, I feel like that’s one of my strengths in how I get kids on board and Psych is easy because Psych is in our every day walking life and there’s some Psych involved in government too. There’s some Psych always in government. You know what I’m saying?

C: I withhold comment at this point.

R: Somebody told me that one time. I said, “I’m teaching Psych and Government” and they said, “Those two go together really well.”

C: Especially right now.

R: So World History is probably hardest subject in the sense of, “How do you take something from 1350 and make it applicable to their day-to-day lives?” Where some of them are trying to figure out, “Where am I going to eat tonight?” “What am I going to eat tonight?” “Is there going to be heat on in my house tonight?” How does this matter to them? And World History makes it (relevancy to students’ lives) the most challenging, for sure. It’s probably my least favorite subject to teach, World History.

C: But you can sure match up the bubonic plague with Ebola.

R: Sure. Why Ebola didn’t spread the way the Bubonic Plague did? And then the other thing I here was, the school day itself, if you looking at an 8 hour school day, 5 days a week, that’s your 40 hours right there. If you’re coaching or doing the play or band director, this or that, you’re looking at about another 20 hours a week during the season. We haven’t even talked about grading anything yet. If you’re grading papers, I am going to guess maybe 5 to 10 hours for me a week. So now we’re at 60 to 70 hours a week. You’ve got to be prepared for that and you have to have a spouse that understands your passions and why it…I haven’t been able to find a way to balance…I’m single, I’m not married and I don’t have kids…I’ve never really wanted to find that balance but I don’t know how people do it. I don’t know how you did it. That’s incredible.

C: It wasn’t easy, Russ.

R: And then you got your Master’s degree and it’s not easy getting your Master’s degree and this and that, so 60 to 70 hours a week, plus you might be pursuing a Master’s degree on the side, it’s a lot of work and anybody who has this, “Oh, you’re out of work at 2:30” or “You have all the summers off”. They just don’t understand. I remember when I was in high school. I thought, “Man, My teacher only works 6 hours a day. They get a lunch break, a prep hour. How great is this?” You know? So, you’re just going to be working a ton of hours and…

C: You don’t get ‘overtime’.

R: Right. Right.

C: In fact if you break this down, and I’m sure you’ve probably done this, at least in your head…

R: For coaching, sure.

C: You get paid less.

R: Than minimum wage or whatever. But if it’s fun and you’re getting enjoyment out of it and there’s fulfillment and once again it doesn’t really seem like work. But I think most teachers, most young people going to college to be a teacher, I hope they understand that this is 60 to 70 hours a week. If they don’t…

C: I tell them.

R: If they do nothing else outside of the school day then maybe you can trim back, you know. I remember one time a teacher was complaining on conference day because they had to be there until 8 o’clock, “Oh, gosh, have to be here until 8 o’clock for conferences” and I’m like, “This is just a normal day for me. I got out of practice today because we had conferences. This is going to be a short day for me. I’m getting out of here at 8 o’clock! I get to leave at 8. I’m going to get dinner tonight at a decent time.”

C: And then trying being head JV football coach, and assistant varsity football coach for 20 years. So you’ve got game night twice a week and then all the other stuff. Yeah, that was crazy!

R: Doing all that helps build relationships.

C: Without a doubt.

R: For sure, whether you’re a coach or not, if you just show up at a kid’s event that means a lot to them and our principal does a great job at that. He’s bringing his kids and his family with him and that makes people seem human. “Hey, here’s somebody who cares about me. They care about me outside of 7:30 to 2:30. I think that makes a big difference, so…

C: It does. Without a doubt. Last question: You have a chance, once again, if there’s any information you would like to add that wasn’t included in the questions, and, of course, like I said before too, if something strikes you, any of the things that you said today, and you would like to send that along through email or something, then feel free.

R: I can’t think of anything off the top of my head that I want to expand on.

C: That’s ok.

R: Or anything that you missed or I guess I would say, get involved in extracurriculars as a teacher because that’s going to help build those relationships. Get your foot in the door anyway you can as an assistant coach, as an assistant play director, whatever. That’s going to make a world of difference in what you’re doing. Start a club. You know, start a ping pong club. Start a chess club. Start something that you are passionate about. Find students who will jump onboard. That’s part of the fun. When I think back to high school it was all the non-school stuff that made school fun. So include that as part of your day to day life as a teacher. What are the things that you enjoyed about school outside of school? That could still be part of what you do on a daily basis. You might not get paid a lot for it but it will still be fun.

That’s about all I can think of. How long did we go? I’m just curious.