Abby Bielski Oct 9 2015

St. Luke’s School, New Canaan, CT.

C: (O:00-5:20)It is October 9th 2015 and I’m in St. Luke’s School near New Canaan, Connecticut, with Abby Bielski. Abby, you graduated in what year from Grand Valley?

A: 2006. (She came back to get her Social Studies certification through the Traverse City campus. She already had an undergrad degree from U of M.)

C: 2006 and this is your fourth school since 2006.

A: Yes.

C: A charter school in North Carolina, a public school in North Carolina, Raleigh, the American School in Rome (Italy) and now St. Luke’s. So let’s start right off. How do you define success in teaching and then the second part of the question, do you believe GVSU prepared you for success in the classroom?

A: I consider teaching to be successful when I hear students are interested in the content. When they are starting to ask questions that go beyond the text that demonstrate real independent thought and not repeating things they heard in class or repeating things from the textbook and when they find history interesting. When they say, “Oh, that makes sense now.” That is a successful moment in my mind.

C: So, the ability for them to apply what they have learned?

A: Yeah. In different contexts and different situations and using the skills that we use in class, for example, to analyze art. When we put up a piece of work that they have never seen before and they use those techniques that we did in a previous class to apply to this new piece of art and it makes sense to them, that’s a pretty cool thing.

C: And I saw some of that in the first class I viewed because they took some of those skills that you taught previously and reapplied it. A couple of them, I think, searched for the vocabulary but at the same time they knew…I mean I could tell what they were thinking, how they were trying to get to it.

A: It would be interesting if you could come back at the end of the year and see how much that they had progressed because this is only the first or second big work of art that we have tried to decode and they get better at it over the year and it’s really fun to see.

C: So, based on that comment, too, then, you look at student growth over time too.

A: Um, hmm.

C: And not just the application but how do they grow throughout the school year.

A: Yeah.

C: Ok. Any other definitions of success?

A: I think there’s little aspects of success. Grades are really not my top priority when I teach kids. I just want them, especially in the 9th grade standard level setting, to find history accessible and to find it interesting and I really feel that there is one thing I do in the class is to get kids interested in history. Critical thinking skills, analysis, writing…obviously those are hugely important but in some ways they are ancillary to just trying to get them to consider history as something interesting and something relevant in the way that they look at other subjects, for example…

C: Right.

A: …Science or math.

C: And we had that conversation about the influence of STEM and in competition, almost, with the humanities. So do you think it’s a ‘hard sell’? Has it been a ‘hard sell’ through your career to get them interested and impassioned about history?

A: Actually, no and I think the way that I try incorporating interesting projects, the video game project, we also made 3D models of little Roman temples using our 3D printer so, in a way, I kind of married technology and history as much as I can because without technology and science we wouldn’t be able to do these cool projects. So I have used that to my benefit. We do all kinds of creative things that get them thinking differently about history and thinking about history beyond just memorization of facts and dates and things like that which very few people find interesting and certainly not high school kids.

C: Yeah, very few people do anymore, actually. So, my gut feeling as I go through this second round of research in this study is it has a lot to do with the individual and it’s going to be difficult for me to parse out what kinds of preparation that Grand Valley did to make you successful but can you point to things in your preparation at Grand Valley that have helped you be successful in what you do?

A: Yeah. In a lot of my classes and certainly in your Capstone class the importance of organization and the modeling of organization is huge. I know some teachers that are effective and disorganized but for me that wouldn’t work and passing back work on time and having a clear plan for the day and keeping your grade book organized and all those small logistical things actually allow you to put those worries out of your mind and really focus on content and creativity but the organization piece has to be there for you to do that first and in all the education courses I took at Grand Valley that was taught explicitly and that was also modeled so that was very helpful.

C: I think the exception is to be disorganized and be a good teacher.

A: Right.

C: Versus…because it certainly makes your job much more difficult if you are disorganized, even if you are really good at living through disorganization. So here are these four different school experiences, in some cases, drastically different based on beginning in the charter school, what have been the biggest challenges to your career so far?

A: The challenges varied with the school. The very first school I worked at we talked about earlier, the charter school, it had almost 100% teacher turnover, very little support and involvement from parents and if there was involvement from parents it was always on the negative, confrontational side of things, underfunded…

C: Poverty?

A: Definitely. It was pulling from intercity Raleigh and intercity Durham so poverty was real and not only that but salary made it impossible to really survive. I had to get a job bartending and teaching outside of my content area so really even though the kids could be challenging at times and I would probably chalk that up to not having a very good structured home environment (6:10). You know they got on board with a lot of things I was doing, especially as the year progressed. We had all kinds of competitions. Competitions and games was something that I came up with as a survival tool in that school that I still use today. So the kids were eager to learn and I really felt bad about leaving that school but the obstacles that were inherent in that situation were too big to overcome. So those were the main challenges in that school. In Raleigh at Broughton High School the biggest challenges would probably be adhering to state standards. The formation and implementation of PLCs, Professional Learning Communities, that was an added time “suck” essentially…

C: Was there a state test at that time in North Carolina?

A: There was definitely an end of course test, which was a huge stressor for the kids, especially in the Econ class I was teaching. We had to organize this binder, a dossier essentially, of documents for each student so if the student didn’t pass we had this binder of work to submit to the state as sort of a recourse, a way to try to get them credit for the class and it was just way too much paperwork. It was way too much bureaucracy and class sizes were too big. I had 35-36 kids in a standard 9th grade World History class and that’s hard to control and hard to engage. So those were the main challenges there. But budget was a huge issue too. For me, I was a new teacher. I had only been there three years, but my mentor teacher and my colleagues hadn’t gotten a raise in 10 years and, in fact, their pay had decreased so they were making less when I left than when they started.

C: Oh, my gosh! Oh, wow!

A: So I was wondering if that school was going to be long-term for me, even before I had the opportunity to go to Rome. In Italy the challenges were very different. We talked about (before the video interview started) how strong the union was so a lot of things I wanted to do and a lot of support I was hoping to get from admin wasn’t there and it wasn’t possible for admin to be in their real support role and offer feedback on lessons because of the union. But I also found that administrators in some international schools only go for a very short period of time. They go for maybe two years. In my opinion I think a lot of unit heads viewed it as a vacation stint and really aren’t interested in the long-term health of the school. It’s very short term.

C: How about the faculty?

A: We kind of had the gamut with that. We definitely had people who had been there for 20 or 30 years. Some Americans who moved over there when they were 24 or 25 and just decided to make Italy their home and they had an Italian spouse and had Italian children and stayed. But the other…I would say that was about 40% of the faculty…the other 60% of the faculty are very young teachers, oftentimes new teachers, that go for two years, much like the admin, because we get a tax break for the first two years. You know America has reciprocity with Italy in terms of income tax so you don’t pay taxes in Italy and you don’t pay taxes in America for two years, but after that two years expires you need to move on, so there’s a circuit of (9:37) international teachers that go from Germany to Italy to Switzerland to France and they do this for 10 years and frankly it’s a pretty good gig, but, I mean, in terms of long term health and stability of the school and consistency and coherency of curriculum it’s a killer. So we had a lot of autonomy in the classroom. Tons. No one really checked in on what we were doing. No one cared about it. You shut your door. You did what you wanted and that is good in a lot of ways. It leads to some really creative lessons and a lot of chances and risks that you might have not have taken but also because of the very transitional nature of the school it can also lead to people taking advantage of that.

C: But, so, you taught AP in Rome. Was the school all AP?

A: The school was interesting. It was a hybrid of AP and IB so we had some IB classes and some AP classes. The AP program was a lot stronger than the IB program. When I left I think there were 8 students in the IB program, collectively, and we had 600 students in the high school but the AP program was strong and that’s because a lot of people in Rome wanted their students to have an American education and the AP credit is what is going to help them in their minds get into college so there was high pressure to perform well on the AP test, although there really wasn’t any pressure from the school to turn out good test scores. There was no acknowledgement or reward for getting all 5s and there was no discussion or conversation if your kids got all 1s.

C: Whoa! How about pushback from the parents?

A: There was a lot of grumbling from the parents, especially our State Department parents, but they are kind of hamstrung because there is not an alternative.

C: Huh.

A: There are other international schools to be certain in Rome, sure, but none that offer AP and IB and none that have an American, and this sounds silly, but none that offer an American sports athletic program and we played Department of Defense schools and for the Americans that were stationed there it was important for them to have an American high school experience for their kids and part of that is athletic programs.

C: The rest of Europe is club sports.

A: Yeah.

C: That’s really interesting because I know, I mean anecdotally at least, if in a U.S. school, if the students didn’t do well on the AP test there would be repercussions so that is really interesting. How about here?

A: Totally different set of challenges, to be sure. I think the biggest shock for me was just the level of affluence of the community. Something that is brand new to me, and all the interesting social mores that go with that; the idea that we are working for the parents and that mentality shows through in interactions sometimes. But in terms of support from my department chair, my Upper School principal and Head of School I could not be more happy. I wanted to make new courses. I have only been here two years and I have been allowed to roll out new courses. I wanted to go to Iran for my professional development. I brought that to them and they facilitated that whole trip.

C: Facilitated as in helped?

A: As in paid for the whole thing.

C: Oh my gosh.

A: That was mine. Some people go to conferences. Some people go to…our Biology teacher went to the Galapagos (Islands). Another science teacher went to Costa Rica this summer. I mean if you want to go and you demonstrate that it translates to your curriculum, relates to your curriculum, usually you get approved. (13:36)

C: So it sounds to me, internally, this is the best situation you have been in 2004. How good for you!

A: I know.

C: So the other side of this, in terms of staying in teaching, is how have you adopted ways to deal with the stresses of your career?

A: I’m still trying to “quarterback” that. Probably the biggest challenge, I think, is time. Having time to do everything I want in the classroom, especially as you go through your teaching career you ended up taking on more responsibility usually. It’s pretty natural and it’s interesting because I don’t want to be an administrator so doing things outside of the classroom, if you don’t want to go on the administrative path is usually coaching, advising, things like that but I don’t necessarily want to spend all my time doing that either so it’s been really interesting to see how there is somewhat of a ceiling on your growth as a teacher if you don’t want to go into the admin track but I’m a varsity coach, program director of volleyball of the 9th grade team and a history teacher and oftentimes, and I’ve talked to a lot of my colleagues about this, it almost seems like that teaching component ends up going here, (pointed downward) that’s why we are here but yet here I am spending time making volleyball plays, here I am doing practice plans, here I am getting back at 9 PM because we had an away volleyball game and, you know, all these other duties and responsibilities, many of them I chose to take on, and taking time away from what I love to do most and what I am best at and that’s teaching.

C: Yeah. I mean of anybody so far in the study you seem to be plugged into your content the most.

A: Ok. (She laughed.) I love it. It’s fun.

C: And that’s great. That’s something that the History Department would definitely like to hear. It’s not that the content isn’t important to the other teachers but through the process of the interviews, they focused on, and it’s not that it’s not important to you, the relationships to their students, to the point where, one of the principals, who was a Social Studies teacher, said, “It doesn’t make sense to Master in a content area.” To take your Master’s in a content area. That stopped me dead.

A: I would argue the opposite of that.

C: I have my Master’s in History, so, yeah. Some people have taken a Master’s in Administration just because it was the easiest thing to do and it moved them in the salary schedule, but they never intended to go into administration. So I’m going, “Why do it?” “Because it was easy.” Ok. So time is always a press and like you said, you are still “quarterbacking” that? And so you’re finding some ways to “quarterback” that?

A: I find that I’m using, this sounds really bad, but I’m using my time at school more efficiently and even though it is very tempting to spend my free period chatting with my colleagues, and usually academics are involved in that conversation too, but in terms of actual planning, I have to take time during the day to sit down by myself and innovate and plan lessons because one thing that I’ve done at this school and maybe it’s because my personal life is changing too, I really try not to work after 7 PM.

C: Wow! (I could never “quarterback” that, given, that like Abby, I coached and advised throughout my 28 year teaching career at the 7-12 level.) With coaching and how much time does Dean of Students take out of being a 9th Grade (Dean of Students)?

A: It is taking a lot. It’s taking a lot. It’s taking up at least 3 free periods a week. That’s why I eat my lunch at my desk and I work. I don’t really socialize at lunch time. I’m at my desk working and eating and trying to maximize every minute I’m here at school. And when I was in Rome I didn’t do that. I worked to 9 or 10 a lot of nights and it really was adversely affecting my social life and also my overall happiness. “All I’m doing is getting up working and I’m working all day and I’m getting home and I’m working again at night and I’m doing it again the next day.” It’s hard to live like that.

C: I think it’s hard to maintain a teaching career because based on what you are saying so far that the amount of hours, even with a 7 PM cut-off, the amount of hours that you put into your job are still way above 40.

A: Yeah. And if I want to have a family at some point, I envision myself hopefully being comfortable enough in the classroom in my content and in my lessons that 5 o’clock is going to be the cut-off point because at some point if you have family you have to be a parent too. So that’s something I have been wrestling with actually for the last couple of years now that I’ve been thinking about having a family. “How am I going to balance that?”

C: I promise you that I’m going to keep in contact with you. Well, I’m going to keep in contact with all the people in the study but it’s my idea, my “success” is for you not to burn yourself out. So some of the contact may be, “Come on, Abby!”

A: I need that.

C: Question 4: How are you motivated…well, is there anything else you wanted to add in 3? I don’t mean to push.

A: No, that’s ok.

C: How are you motivated to best serve your students every day?

A: Like what I would like to be in my classroom?

C: Like what makes up get up every day and say, “I want to do the best job I can for these kids.”

A: This is probably going to be different than many people’s responses and I’ve been more comfortable really owning this because it’s authentic. Actually it’s one of the cool things about this school because they really encourage you to be your authentic self. Whatever that means. Which I think is really neat but I didn’t get into teaching because I love kids. I got into teaching because I love history and I want to be around history and I wanted to reading and working in history every day and I didn’t think I wanted to get my Ph.D. (Here is where she really diverged from Jordan Beel. He is the one that said a Master’s in the content area was wrong and that if you loved your content that much you should go on to be a professor. It’s not that she doesn’t like working with kids but she does it because of her love of the subject area and the motivation to spread that interest to others.) I didn’t want to be a researcher and teaching ended up being an option. (~19:00) Now that I’m in a classroom with a group of kids we laugh every day. I laugh at my own jokes. They might not, but the kids were an added benefit. It just so happens that working with kids is awesome too. But when I get up every day, at least in the beginning, it was because I wanted to learn more about history and I wanted to share that with other people. I want them to view history in the same way that I do. So the kids were kind of secondary to that motivation when I first started teaching and obviously working with kids every day keeps you young and keeps you energetic and it makes me laugh every day and…

C: You smile a lot.

A: It’s fun. (20:25) It’s fun. It’s a lot of fun but also when I get parent emails quite frequently that say wonderful things like, “You changed my kid’s life.” “My kid loves history now” and the recognition, I think if I’m going to be honest makes me want to do even better. You know when I got that little note from my principal yesterday; I was going into another 14 hour day like we have. I was here until 10 o’clock last night and I was kind of grumpy about it and I got to my desk and there’s that note and my little bottle of wine. She notices what I do and she appreciates it and it makes me want to do better. It makes me want to do better in the classroom.

C: So your passion for your subject?

A: Yeah.

C: The kids are important too?

A: Um, hmm.

C: And?

A: Helping them see history the way I see history and a lot of them are open to it and they do, even if it’s only for 80 minutes a day or even if it’s only for 45 minutes a day they are historians and making them into historians for that time and helping them transform themselves and their perception of themselves as historians, and some of them can talk intelligently about the “Standard of Ur” is awesome. And I can’t tell you how many times that they’ve gotten back from a trip…these kids go all around the world… “Miss Bielski, I was just in the Etruscan Museum in Rome and I saw these piece” and I say, “Oh, my god, we just talked about this in class!” and they get excited about it and they send me postcards when they travel and say, “Look, this is what we talked about in class” and that’s pretty cool, especially with all the distractions and everything vying for their time right now.

C: Right.

A: They’re mesmerized by a piece of art that is 4500 years old.

C: It can’t get any better than that.

A: I’m going to check the time really quick. (She gave up her lunch and planning time to start the interview.)

C: Question #5: What changes, if any, have occurred in the strategies and methods you use in your classroom?

A: Oh, man! It’s funny because there are a lot of things that I do now that I did when I first started teaching that I did when I student-taught.

C: I don’t see you as ever being a straight lecturer.

A: No, and my lectures are multi-faceted so we will be looking at a piece of work. We will get into groups. We will move. We will play a 5 minute game. We will talk. I question but there is a lecture plan but it’s chunked so that they don’t know they are getting a lecture. So it’s four minutes of me talking, three minutes of us doing another activity but I do use the basic Power Point. When we are taking notes I follow that Power Point but we deviate from it and we stop and we break it up and we do group work or they play a little game or we do some type of analogy exercise so that’s how I lecture and I think it’s most effective. It’s not the typical university lecture where everyone is sitting, no one is asking questions and I’m talking for 45 minutes. That doesn’t happen and I’m not necessarily opposed to that because I think in some ways if you are a good storyteller and you are introducing a unit or you are wrapping a unit I think it’s something to explore. One of the things I mentioned for the new History wing was, “God, it would be really cool to have a lecture hall.” We could show movies in there, talk about film, but how cool would it be and this would totally blow up the existing schedule if we had all the World History classes meet for 45 minutes on Day 1 to introduce a unit in maybe lecture format. I mean that is the reality of some of their courses in college and I think there is some benefit to that. (Modeling a traditional college lecture hall) But, as it stands now with our schedule it would work but I try and make things happen in a lesson and just straight lecture is not part of that.

C: And like I wrote in my notes and shared with you earlier, I wrote Socratic Method, so, I mean I didn’t put a stopwatch on it but you were constantly asking questions. That time that they had to do “Think, Pair, Share”, group work, obviously not as much, but definitely you asked questions a lot and it’s good and it’s not just…beyond the first agenda warm up question…it’s deeper than that. I wrote “Abby, you are looking for deeper significance.” To me, that’s successful teaching.

A: And it’s jarring to them at first though and I wish teachers would have done this more with me because it took me a long time to be comfortable sharing my opinion in a full faculty meeting. Now, it’s very rare if I don’t speak up in a full faculty meeting and I kind of attribute that to never actually having to do it and not being well versed in stating an opinion and backing it up with facts in a large public setting and I think it starts in the classroom and the more and more comfortable you are doing that, the less and less abrasive it’s going to be when you are in an 80 person meeting.

C: Right, but you are also teaching your students that.

A: Yeah.

C: Find the evidence to back up your argument and then be willing to apply that to life and you cannot do that by not communicating.

A: No.

C: The public speaking part may be another hurdle but just the process provides you the ammunition and maybe the confidence to be able to do that too.

A: Yeah.

C: You are a pretty good historian. Other things that have changed? A lot of people cited technology. Has that changed much or have you always infused that into your teaching?

A: I have always done the (computer) projector. I have always, I guess, the computer in class. But a lot of the projects I have done a long time ago, but now I am animating them and now I have them…

C: Kids programming a game?

A: Yeah. The video game project I did in Raleigh too but I had them just draw out the levels and that’s what I was going to do last year and I realized, “There might be an app for that” and certainly there is. (26:29) So using technology to make my projects more interesting and more relevant, certainly, certainly, but the way I grade is very similar to how I started out. My interactions with parents have changed. The way I communicate with parents has definitely changed. I used to be a lot more submissive and not confident really. I was just starting out. “I’m doing this because I think it’s the best way to teach” but I really didn’t have any evidence or data behind it at that point but now I’m in my 10th year of teaching so if I can’t explain to a parent why I’m doing a warm up every day then maybe I shouldn’t be doing that.

C: Exactly. Any other things before we have to break?

A: I’m using the textbook a lot more.

C: Really?

A: I never used the textbook in the charter school and in Raleigh. I used the textbook in AP classes.

C: Right, because you have to.

A: But when I was teaching standard World History, maybe it was because I hated the textbook. Now I love the textbook so that will be our basal text.

C: And you said that is written more on a college level? So a really good text?

A: It’s really stretching the kids’ ability.

C: And because of the way it’s authored that’s why you are using it more. That makes sense to me.

A: And a lot of the things that they have put together in the unit and things and themes that I have been trying to do to but I haven’t been able to tie it nice “with a bow” and the textbook is doing that and the outlines that the textbook provides and the Power Points that the textbook provides, and this is one of the ways that I have been minimizing my time and allowing myself to stop at 7 o’clock, is that I am more open to using things that are published. Before I thought I had to innovate all my own stuff and to a large extent I still do. I always make my own assessments. But just categorically rejecting ready-made materials, I don’t do that anymore. I give them a chance now because they are getting better and better and better because I think more former teachers are going into that field and really publishing some good stuff.

C: Yeah.

A: I never thought I would use a textbook. I never thought I would use anything that was pre-packaged.

C: Well, good teachers know how to steal good ideas.

A: Yeah, and there’s a bunch of them with this Pearson book really. I love it.

C: Well, that’s excellent too. (Switched locations to a classroom) “…and what types, evaluations, people have said that they use student evaluations. They have a formal evaluation process and, again, since you were in four different schools, how you were evaluated may have seen some wide differences. (29:15)

A: My very first school in Durham there were no evaluations whatsoever. The school was just in survival mode and if there was a body in a classroom that was good. So you were definitely on your own. When I moved to Raleigh there was a formal evaluations process that was based heavily on your mentor and your mentor’s guidance and your mentor’s evaluation of your growth as a teacher. So there would be mandated meetings. We ended up meeting much more than what the requirements stated.

C: Now was your mentor also your evaluator then?

A: A component. One of the evaluators. The department chair and the principal would get reports or get write-ups from the mentor. We would also get observed periodically, not very often, by our assistant principal. I think in the three years I was there, once a year, but it was pretty formulaic. It was really big school and there was a lot of teachers on staff so it was very much, I felt, like checking the boxes. So in terms of feedback from upper level admin it was pretty sparse in Raleigh but my colleague who had been a teacher for 10 years at that school and had maybe 15 years of experience was my best form of feedback in informal evaluation. Nothing that would effect my status in terms of employment but things that helped me innovate and make my lessons more effective. My mentor was really responsible for that. In Rome, again, very much on your own. We would have one evaluation a year by the principal and it was ‘check the boxes’ type thing. Here, we have a very systematic program for evaluation called the “Faculty Growth and Renewal Program”. So we essentially set goals for ourselves and we have one goal for each role we fill at the school so I have goal for varsity coach. I have a goal for being a dean. I have a goal being a 9th grade World History teacher. Your “FGR” partner, which is one of the admin team, so I’m really lucky because my partner is the Head of Upper School, Liz, helps you set these goals and then when she comes to observe, she comes maybe three times a semester, helps keep you on track in terms of attaining those goals and she sits through your lessons and watches the lesson with the lens of the goal you had in mind and then really sits down with you and crunches the lesson chunk by chunk, so “Here you did this. This is keeping in line with your goal. When you transition from this activity to this activity one thing you might consider is doing this instead” so it’s very tangible feedback that you can implement the very next lesson. Supposedly, although I’m not 100% sure on this, your ability to meet these goals helps determine the raise and salary package you negotiate for the next year.

C: You negotiate? Individual negotiation? (She nodded “yes”). Which, I’m assuming, was that similar to the American School or…?

A: Oh, no. No. That was step scale and…

C: The same thing as Raleigh.

A: Yeah. So here when you have that conversation with the Head of School your “FGR” partner has a lot of input and feedback to give to the Head of School in terms of your salary package. I mean it is…

C: Do you feel it is fair?

A: I do. I never feel like it is punitive and it is always with your best interest and the students’ best interests in mind. It is never critical. It is constructive and it just so happens that our Head of Upper School, Liz, is a tremendous teacher. She is an amazing teacher and she works at the Klingenstein Institute in the summer. I think it’s at Brown, for developing teachers. I mean she is someone who is not only a fabulous administrator but also a great teacher so when she gives me feedback it has a lot of weight.

C: Wow! So this has been the best experience for you in your four different schools then?

A: Um, hmm.

C: And she sounds like she’s an amazing person to be able to do that and have that kind of experience. That’s not common at all. And definitely not a checklist here?

A: No.

C: It’s sort of…I mean it’s a little sad. I mean I’m glad that you were able to get to this point in your career but sad that it wasn’t front-end.

A: Right.

C: And not in the situations that you were in but at least you’re here now.

A: I am and I had a lot of experiences that I would never have.

C: Well, that’s true too. Good and bad, I guess. But, hopefully take the good from it.

A: Um, hmm. I feel like I did. I took the positive aspects from each job and now I’m really benefitting from all of those experiences and have left the negative and really maximized on the positive aspects. Even the charter school there were positive aspects. I had to fend for myself. I had kids who were out of control in the classroom, swearing, kicking, flipping out. I can manage that. It was ‘trial by fire’ but it helped me take those classes those classes of 35 at the Broughton School in Raleigh…there was always something positive with every job but I feel like this is going to be where I’ll be for a long time. I could have made the school in Rome my home except for personal reasons, my family and my partner were back here so it would have been very difficult to do that.

C: And you make it back to Michigan every once in a while I know.

A: In fact I’m going tonight.

C: Are you really? I think the weather is going to be ok.

A: Yeah. I think it will be fine.

C: Question #7: What types of mentoring, and I think in a way we have covered this pretty good, both in the last question, but the question: What types of mentoring were provided for you and how would you characterize the results of the mentoring that was provided for you? Overall, it was incrementally improved and now it’s the best?

A: Um, hmm.

C: And the best model is what you are under currently, I think, in that you are getting constructive, healthy, fairly complete types of feedback to help you with your teaching. And I’m assuming that you are probably getting more visits or whatever…

A: Observations.

C: …Observations here than before too.

A: Yes. My department chair has been in once and the Head of Upper School has been in once already and it’s October. (The automatic lighting cut off.) So I’ve already had two observations which are really helpful and the fact that we take time to (I was laughing because she was trying to get the lights back on by waving her arms through the air) talk about it afterwards is important. (Echoing Pam Wilkins’ comments about de-briefing at Hamilton, which was reinforced by Kim Kocsis comments about Hamilton.)

C: Well, yeah and that’s very, a common aspect of people talking about the positive parts of their evaluations and their mentors. It happens often and there’s good feedback. In the worst cases, hardly any visits and a checklist. (36:46) So that’s building evidence toward that (finding in the study). I know you have pursued continuing education because you have your Master’s now in International Relations, correct? Either in the form of a graduate program or professional development, and those two words have received all kinds of comments, and how has this education influenced your success in the classroom?

A: Well, the International Diplomacy class, I had taken a step back from, it seemed like, academia, for a while, even though I was teaching an AP class I really missed reading things that were challenging for me and thinking about concepts that were challenging for me so going to grad school helped to reinvigorate my own need for some type of rigor in my life. That was awesome but the professional development opportunities that I have done throughout the last five years have been great because even in Rome I presented at two conferences. I went and presented at a conference in Amsterdam about a cross-curricular unit, collaboration with Physics and History. We broke down the Hundred Years’ War in terms of military development and technology and how it affected the nature of warfare and how that affected the development of the nation-state. So that was amazing and the school supported me 100% on that. I presented at the AP National Conference in San Francisco about motivating students and the American School in Rome paid for that. They counted it as professional development. This school sent me to Iran this past summer. I think I’m going to try to go on an archaeological dig this summer and I know this school would definitely support me in that so professional development has a different meaning at the last two schools I have worked at. They are moving than happy to support and facilitate travel that is outside the normally delineated professional development. It doesn’t have to be a conference. It doesn’t have to be a class. It can be anything, really, that you think is going to benefit your classroom, your teaching or your content.

C: And it sounds similar to like my sabbatical proposal. As long as you can justify, in a way that other people can understand, why this is important for your own development or your research area then they will support it. That’s really great, Abby. I’m really happy for you. I mean this sounds so great.

A: I’m very happy here.

C: I would be beaming. “Pearls of Wisdom”: And I don’t know if you remember what you said before in 2008 or not, but here’s your chance to expound to current and future Grand Valley students, now that you know what you know, and especially all the experiences you’ve been through, what would you tell somebody, and what I do, too, and if you are interested in this I can set this up, I’ve been video-streaming students from all over the world, Grand Valley students, into my Capstone class to talk about their experiences and how what the current students should think about as they go out into their careers. So what advice would you give to them? (40:06)

A: First of all the way the class is structured I would definitely have a routine. This is something you went over, I think, in your Capstone class, too, is the importance of having, it used to be called ‘bell work’ or ‘do now’ or something that the kids know to do that signals the start of class so you don’t have to waste time yelling at kids to start the new activity. So having a set routine, but also within that routine being flexible to different ideas, different activities, different games. Even though you didn’t really get to see it today, normally we do a lot of different things and it keeps class moving pretty fast so having an arsenal of activities in one class period really helps students stay engaged, focused and interested, but in the parameter of that class it’s important to still have structure and routine. I would make sure that everything you do and everything that you collect is graded and turned back as soon as possible. That goes a long way with creating legitimacy for you in the classroom in the eyes of the kids.

C: One of the kids in those mock interviews (I volunteered to help Abby and her school with mock interviews. Her 9th grade students were practicing for student-led parent conferences and I was a “practice parent”) mentioned that, he said that in all his classes but one he had multiple assignments so he had a real good feel for where he was at (so far in the semester) but in one of his classes he only had 3 major tests and they were three different results so he didn’t so in that time in-between (major tests) he didn’t have that kind of formative assessment to understand where he was. He said he thinks he learned the lesson now. He’s going to be better organized in his homework but he said, “I’m still concerned.” So that’s a good point to raise about ‘get it done, get it back and…’ You mentioned before organization, too, was very important, beyond just organizing the classroom. I mean the class lesson routine. So have you been buried before so that was a painful lesson or have you always been pretty well organized?

A: You know I’m not really organized in any other aspect of my life, except class and my units and my curriculum which is pretty bizarre but I guess I just know myself and if I weren’t organized it would just be a disaster. It would be stressful. I mean if I kept papers instead of grade them immediately and pass them back I would probably lose them. They need to be graded and passed back immediately.

C: Yep. Me too.

A: So I would say routine, structure, but chunk your lessons and have lots of different activities that allow the kids to be successful, have fun and become interested in history. I use a lot of visuals in class. That helps keep kids engaged for the most part. I think that’s it for now.

C: Ok. That’s fine, and the thing too is I’ll type up my notes in the next couple of weeks and send you a copy of that but when I finish uploading these (videos) I will send you the link to the video and you can watch yourself and if there is anything where you say, “Well, maybe you should edit that” or “I would like to add to this”, especially if you would like to add to it then you can just shoot me an email or something like that. Ok?

A: Ok.

C: Last question is: Is there anything you would like to add that wasn’t covered by any of this (these questions in the interview)? And, again, if you need time to digest this whole process of the day, you can send that along later.

A: Yeah. I might do that. I would to mention all the other extra things that teachers do besides teaching.

C: What are all the extra things? I mean you’ve coached what?

A: I coach volleyball.

C: But in the four schools…

A: Yeah, in the four schools.

C: What are all the extracurricular things that you have done?

A: Here, just at this school, so in the fall I’ll do volleyball. In the winter I’ll do Speech and Debate and in the Spring I’ll do Speech and Debate and those tournaments are long. They are all weekend type deals. I am also the advisor for M.U.N. (Model United Nations). Of course with the Deanship so that takes up a lot of time very quickly. In the past, student government advisor, again volleyball coach, Model U.N. advisor, but it’s really only been only in the last two schools that I started taking on all these additional roles so trying to balance everything and still be a great teacher is definitely a challenge and I think that speaks to Question 2.

C: And you mentioned before, getting into your Master’s work, do you still have time to read?

A: I make time. I’ve been reading a couple of really good authors and sometimes, even though I probably could be doing something for school at 7 or 8 (PM), I really just want to read this book. So I do.

C: I think that’s part of the balance too. It’s not just investment and time in your content area, but it’s doing something different with your mind so you don’t get burnt. Thank you.

A: Thank you.