Chris Reichhold Oct 20 2015

Summerville, SC

Concrete Cutter, from 8th grade Social Studies teacher

C: It’s October 20th 2016 and we are actually in my trailer and this is Chris Reichhold and Chris, you graduated in what year?

R: 2007.

C: 2007. And you don’t have to worry about looking at the camera. And immediately took a job down here?

R: Yeah. I graduated in May and took a job in September. So just after the start of the school year.

C: But before you were certified to teach, your job was, you were concrete cutting, right?

R: Yes. That’s right.

C: And that was your full time job?

R: Yeah, I was doing it full time.

C: Ok. Ok. And so you taught for how many years at the middle school down here?

R: I taught for 3 years.

C: At Summerville?

R: Actually it was Alston Middle School in Summerville.

C: Right. And then?

R: And then life happened and I had a child and decided rather than live on two teachers’ salaries and pay daycare, I would go back to work (at concrete cutting) while my wife continued to teach and I went back to cutting concrete just to get our family in a better place. I was going to do it for a couple of years, just to until a point where we were comfortable and then life happened again. And again. (Two more children) So here we are. It’s been 5 years now and I’m still cutting concrete and my wife gets to stay home with our wonderful kids.

C: Ok. Some of these are some of the same questions I ask people who are still teaching, but I hope it all fits and the last question will allow you to expand if you want to or give information in another way. How do you define success in your current job, not your teaching job, and did GVSU help prepare you for success? Whether it was before when you were teaching or now?

R: I think in both, when I was teaching and what I do now, I think there are two important things to success: The first thing is happiness and if you’re not happy then it’s not success. You can make all the money in the world but if you don’t enjoy what you do, you’re not being successful. Success (I think he means “happiness”) is part and the other part is does it pay the bills? And you can have the one and not the other. You can be happy and not make the money and make money and not be happy, but to have both of them together, that’s really the best definition of success that I can think of. I don’t what else I can add to that. I mean there’s so many little things but in the grand scheme of things, does it bring you joy? And when I was teaching, yes, it did. It just didn’t bring in the money. But it wasn’t terrible and it was life happened and I was faced with a choice and I had an offer and the offer made sense at the time. So I made the best of it.

C: And you are good at what you do.

R: Well, I don’t….sshh…keep that quiet. Keep that quiet. I tell everyone when they give me a compliment, “Don’t tell anyone. They will make me do it again.”

C: So did Grand Valley State play any kind of role in either of your careers?

R: Yeah. Absolutely. I mean it definitely affected the way that I live my life and the way I learn to do the things that I am tasked with doing. You can talk about leadership and you can talk about skills and you can talk about so many different things about what you are faced with and how you make decisions every day that my time at Grand Valley, yeah, it absolutely formed and shaped how I make my decisions, so, yeah, absolutely.

C: That’s good to hear because we have more than a few Social Studies grads or History majors with teaching certification, and for whatever reason, they are not doing that. One guy is the assistant manager at the new Cabela’s in Grandville and loves what he does. He was fishing guide before but he just decided teaching wasn’t for him but he loves what he does (The Cabela’s guy is now trying to get back into teaching) and he still credits Grand Valley with his career even though it was a different track than what he did. So like I tell everybody, “You have to be happy at what you do and you have to pay the bills, and however you get there, good for you.” Really.

R: And that’s the main thing.

C: Yeah. How has your degree helped in your career? In other words, what skills and knowledge from your degree have you applied? And I don’t know if you…there are.

R: You know there absolutely are and actually the biggest thing that I have applied is the understanding that in…I hate to use the word “blue collar” work but essentially in the skilled trades and anything like that, there is a lack of training and there is a lack of apprenticeships. 50 years ago the whole system was based on apprenticeships. You came in and instead of college apprenticeships were pushed and you went to school for your career and you were in a job. You had on the job training. That’s gone now. It’s nonexistent. It’s on the job training now and it’s not organized at all.

C: Even like bricklayers and stuff?

R: Yeah.

C: Really?

R: I’m sure there is some places you can go to school and there is still some of the trades that have school that go along with it, but it is by and large, gone. There’s no system to how you train people and so I try to apply what I learned in order to help train.

C: Are you training people?

R: Yeah. I mean it’s not my official title but I have…

C: Do you want that title?

R: I have (6:04) actually talk to him about it before and to be honest with you I would just like to help companies set up training programs for their new employees to…because I mean a well-trained employee feels cared for and learns the trade better. You get a better worker. You make more money. You make a better profit, and you get a happier person. There is this divide between college/corporate America and ‘blue collar’ America and it’s the business owners and the corporations. The ones that don’t require a college degree, and there are so many jobs that don’t require college degrees, they don’t see the necessity of a good training program. It’s just 10 years ago, 20 years ago when I was started doing this, they put it in my hands and told me to go so that’s what I did and so that’s what we do and it’s not the best way to do it so really that’s where I see myself going, eventually, some day. When the opportunity is there, but I definitely use my degree in how I approach how I train people. There is so much knowledge behind how to train someone that’s overlooked. I try to incorporate that to the best of ability in what I do.

C: It’s interesting your answer here because the guy who was down here before in St. John’s Island, he’s back in the military. He was a Marine and now he is in the Army Reserves or Guard and I asked him, he’s a Sergeant, and I asked him, “What you doing now?” And he said, “Actually I am teaching recruits.” He didn’t say “training”, he said, “I am teaching recruits.” And in his grand scheme, he’s got like 9 years left and he can retire from the military and he said, “As soon as that happens I am going to go back to the classroom.” He said, “Except, if the military lets me teach.” Then he said, “I’ll stay.” Another woman who is on the east side of Michigan, she is a college advisor now, and same question, I said, “How do you use your degree?” and she said, “Advising is teaching.” So they still see application of their degree even though they are doing something beside in the classroom.

R: There is so much more to that degree than just teaching in the classroom. And that’s the thing, I don’t look at it as just a teaching degree. I look at it as I have my History degree, my Geography degree and then I have an Education degree along with it and everyone just classifies it as a teaching degree. “You went and got your teaching degree.” “Well, no, that’s not actually what my degree states. I have a degree in education and we talked about psychology and we talked about curriculum and we talked about all these different things, and I have my degree in History and that’s two separate things.” Now there is some overlap in order for you to make it through in a reasonable amount of time, six years, and there is overlap, but still they are separate degrees and separate things you have to do to get them and it’s not…there’s a lot more to it and you can apply it in different ways. It is surprising…I’m trying to think how to say it…it is surprising how much you learn and how you learn how to deal with the situation. The History degree, that’s what I think it was. Yeah, you learn a whole lot of facts. But really what you are learning in a History degree is how to take apart a situation and look at it.

C: Hopefully.

R: And that’s…in my eyes, that’s the main point of a History degree. That’s what a historian needs to do is take apart a problem and say, “Here is what the cause is. Here is what we need to do.” And the education degree comes in and “How do you apply those principles to a classroom or whatever it is that you are doing?” So that’s…my degree has definitely helped my career and it definitely puts me in a better place having it.

C: That’s good to hear, Chris. I mean worse case scenario is “this thing has been totally worthless.”

R: I mean I wish I didn’t have to pay for it. (Laughing.) I’ll be honest. I wish I didn’t have to pay for it, but in the grand scheme of things I could have…what I do now I started doing before I ever stepped foot on Grand Valley’s campus. Well, that might not be true, I did a tour (of the campus) before I started and I started within a week out of graduating high school (cutting concrete) and I could still be with the same company and I could be still making good money, but I am a better employee, I am a better…you know I could throw a whole bunch of jargon out there about what I do, but I am better at what I do because I have a degree. It puts me in a better place for the company. It puts me in a better place for the management of that company. It allows me to communicate more clearly with them. It allows me to relay a message. It allows me to manage my time and my skills and whoever is working with me in a better way.

C: That’s a great answer.

R: Ssshhh. Don’t tell anyone.

C: Don’t tell anyone.

R: We talked about this.

C: Sorry, Chris. While, I think actually you have covered this but if you want to say anymore, what factors led to you leaving your original teaching position?

R: I’ll go over it again.

C: Ok.

R: I told you before we started (recording). I was teaching. I loved my job.

C: And they thought you were…I mean, your principal, when I talked to him individually…

R: They liked me.

C: They liked you a lot.

R: They liked me. Found out we were having a child and so that’s great. Had the child and it was planned. It was perfect. The world was good. We were very blessed and our world was spinning and things were good and we had it, we had the child and it’s great, great, and then we started doing daycare and it wasn’t so great. You know two teachers’ salaries on daycare and you can imagine, so after a few months, I started cutting concrete the first summer after teaching just for some extra money (12:11) and the owner of the company really wanted me to stay. He kept making offers and he kept making offers and I wasn’t going to do it because I enjoyed the teaching job and that’s what I wanted to do, but finally I went to him and I said, “Look, on two teachers’ salaries, make me an offer” and he made me an offer and I said, “Well, let’s do this” and he met what I wanted which was, hey, it made me happy. I was good. Like I said, life happened and we had a child and I made a choice to go back to what I was doing because it paid better. It paid a lot better. And then we had another child and my wife ended up staying home because it wasn’t worth daycare and so the main plan was for me to go do that a couple of years and put aside a little bit of money. Still try to live the same life and try to put aside a little money and so a few years down the road, I think we had talked like three years, but that was two years ago, gone, and so that’s what caused me to leave. I couldn’t make the money. But, no, I was sad leaving and I actually went into the principal and we had to sign a paper every year stating whether we would come back or not and I actually took it straight to him and said, “Look, I can’t just put this in the envelope and let you find it so…” He talked…he said, “We actually thought you were going to be in administration and all this…” and I said, “Y’all should have told me that before I agreed to this.” But no, he was very graceful about it. He completely understood and I was sad to go, but I didn’t just quit. I finished out that year and some day I would like to go back. I didn’t want to burn any bridges. So that’s what made me leave and then just, like I said, after having a second child, we were in a position for my wife to stay home and raise our children. So as long as we can continue to do that we are just going to stay where we are at and keep moving forward.

C: You didn’t have any family or any connections in South Carolina before you moved here?

R: No, no.

C: So do you still like it?

R: We love it here. It’s a great place. Don’t get me wrong. It has its issues, just like anywhere else but it’s a great place to raise a family. The people are friendly, for the most part. I mean, obviously, not everybody is friendly every day. We are all human, but probably one of the best stories I can give for just the friendliness of people in the area is my parents came to visit and my father went up the gas station to get gas for car and he comes back and he says, “You would never guess what just happened.” I said, “Well, yeah, Dad. What’s that?” He said, “Well, I was just pumping gas and a guy just started talking to me.” And I said, “Yeah, welcome to the South.” But I mean that’s really what it is and it’s a friendly place and I said, “It’s got issues just like anywhere else, but it’s a great place to raise a family. There are events all the time. There are parks. There are beaches. There are…a few hours away we are in the mountains. Thirty minutes we are at the ocean. There are things to do. It’s relatively warm most of the time. A little brisk this morning, but…

C: You are telling me!

R: …my blood’s thinned a little bit. I won’t lie. (Native Michiganders don’t seem to want to return to the cold winters.) But, no, it is a great place and we would like for more of our families to move down. But do we plan on going back? Not any time soon. It’s not out of the question but right now we are happy. It’s a great place. We have good friends. We have…we are very happy with our lives right now.

C: That’s good to hear. That is good to hear. How might the History Department and the University improve upon advising and career counseling? Every 5 years we do a departmental study and we try to come up with a new plan or strategy, and one of the things we are looking at in this round, is how can we do that? Above and beyond what career counseling services do, like as a History Department what can we do to work with advising? And I know, I can remember when I was down here last time in 2008 you said, “You know for all of us leaving the state it would be good to have a history (course) of all the states so we know… I remember that distinctly.

R: I remember that. I got dumped right into the History of South Carolina. I mean, wwhhewww. Talk about a compass. All I was given was a Swedish compass. You know what that is?

C: No.

R: A Swedish compass? (16:53) That’s a little snuff box with a mirror inside of it. It doesn’t tell you where you are going or where you have been. It just shows you who’s lost.

C: I like that.

R: I stole that. It wasn’t mine but I have heard that before, but I mean that is what it was. (teaching South Carolina history without any background) But it was great. It was a learning experience. I learned an immense amount about where I live and that’s one of the other things that is great about here is history. As a history major, I can go…with what I do now I actually worked a month ago I worked at [Drayton Hall](http://www.draytonhall.org/) build in like 1730 and I got to go tear it apart. But…

C: Are you kidding me? Oh, my gosh.

R: Yeah. To see these things that people just read about in textbooks is what I do so it’s great. I get to go into these areas where it’s all the old English brick from the 16-1700s and I get to see it and put my hands on it so…but as far as this question though, I mine that’s a hard one. That’s a curveball right there. I think one thing the History Department could do is (17:56) focus on careers that you can use a History major for. I think that was one thing that was very overlooked. I think a History degree could be very much more relevant in the business world, trying to, you know we talked earlier, about using your skills for decision-making in the way, in the way I was taught to approach (18:20) problems in history I think would be immensely beneficial to companies and that is one area where it’s overlooked and I think it’s not just Grand Valley. It’s everywhere and businesses don’t even recognize that there is this plethora of college majors, people out there with no jobs, probably, I mean it’s a tough time right now, they can take apart the problems they are looking at and can’t find solutions to. (In other words, history majors have the skills necessary to find solutions to problems.) That’s one thing. As far as advising, looking back at it, at the time, I loved my college time. It was great but I think advising could be more hands on. I think advising was really at my own leisure. If I wanted it. There was only a couple of times I had to go in because I asked to and I don’t really remember if I was asked to or I had a question. It could be more of a ‘hands on’ thing. Really, as a university, if you were looking to form an individual into a product, essentially, I mean you are forming them into a graduate of your university. They are carrying your mark out into the career field and out into life. I understand you can only tax professors so much with advising but there might be some way to make it less of an informal situation and more of a formal, “every so often we are going to sit down and talk” and you would have to have just one advisor. You could have a couple that you rotate through, just to get a path and then use the information from there in the career counseling part. Like you were speaking before, not everyone sticks with teaching and there are a lot of options out there but I think a lot of people are unaware of the options they have. And even if they are not, it’s so hard to find a way to capitalize on the opportunity. (That a history major might provide.)

C: And it maybe a two way street, now that you are talking about this. To take what you say about what a history degree does for problem-solving and realizing how to attack a problem and understand what it is, and for us, as a faculty, to go out to the business world and say, “Hey, we are turning out people who have these skills. They may not be business majors but they can do these things. We can show actual examples of people who have been successful, even though they are a history major, even though they are a Social Studies major, they are successful doing other things besides teaching or law or law enforcement or whatever. (21:16)

R: And there’s a way, there’s a divide there because that’s not a professor’s job. There has to be a system set in place where it would be ideal where there was someone was just an advisor rather than an advisor that does the duty of a professor. I believe that’s how it works. You have professors there whose duty is to advise students as well, correct?

C: Right.

R: Somewhere in-between a career counselor and a professor advising where the History Department would have advisors who could sit down and actually work with them (the students) because you don’t want that guy who taxes a professor’s time. It would be like, “Hey, do you want to sit down and talk again?” There is a fine line there between good and abuse and you don’t to cross that line. I don’t ever feel, I hope not, that I crossed that line. I don’t think I did. I hardly ever went to be advised, just a few times I can remember and maybe that was more like begging for forgiveness. Realizing mistakes is the whole learning life thing. There is a fine line there where I think if the university is looking to improve there is a spot there where there’s a segment there where opportunity is lost that could be addressed. Because not everyone is teachers and especially from what you are saying it sounds like it is getting hard (to get a teaching job) and there is something you can still do with that degree. It’s not just, “Hey, I have a teaching degree. Let’s go teach summer camp.” That’s really what I can say about that one, as far as improving. You know it’s, as far as the program, I thought the program was great. Everything about the program was great. So I can’t complain at all about the program. I can find individual pieces here and there but the program was wonderful and the program really prepared me for what I was doing, especially in the classroom. It obviously applied to more of what I was doing in the classroom than what I’m doing now, but certain aspects of it I thought Grand Valley prepared me better than many of my colleagues (in South Carolina).

C: That’s what we get, I have heard repeatedly from everybody who left Michigan, that when they went, whether it was North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Texas, you name it, they feel like that they have had a better preparation than the people who have been in the state.

R: Well, I can give you the aspect of it that I think that really was been the extra step and that was the aspect of reading comprehension.

C: Really?

R: That whole aspect of the teaching field is lost in some areas. Some people don’t use reading and try to figure out the comprehending because we have become such a society based so much on test scores. When I was teaching I would give something to read and a way for me to see whether or not the kids got it. It wasn’t about if they could pass the test. “I don’t care if you can pass the test. I can pass almost any test you give me.” Give me 5 minutes. I was always decent at taking tests, even if I didn’t know the information. I was always, somehow, by power of deduction or something, I could figure out what the answer was. I am not saying I got 100s every time but I could pass. Passing still, I mean passing, what’s a passing grade? Down here it’s a 70 percent. I could do it. There’s all these bits and pieces, but the reading comprehension part was the most valuable part, minus the hands on experience in the classroom, and just the knowledge that goes along with it, but the reading comprehension, that class, even though I can’t remember the professor, but I did not enjoy going to that class, but looking back…I mean you tell she was an elementary teacher and I was not…I did not enjoy that class but I used the materials from the class more than anything else I had and it was great, and people would come up to me and, “How are you doing this?” and look at the results we get from it and what the kids were doing. I would have kids come in and for the same project some would draw a picture and some would write a poem, some would write a story, some would do something on the computer and if I could see they understood what they were doing, that’s all that mattered. That came from that reading comprehension aspect of the program. I think the university did a great job when I was there. It’s been quite some time now. I don’t want to age myself.

C: Well, the good thing, Chris, is that everybody in the study is about the same age.

R: But, no, they did a really good job. I really can’t say a whole lot to improve upon other than finding a way to make the advising part because looking back the advising part was a critical part and I know personally I overlooked it. I went when I was required to for x amount of visits per semester or x amount of visits before you had to, to get a degree or whatever it was, but it wasn’t something that I took advantage of. Just like a college student today. I’m sure there is so much out there that the university does that it is a two-way street. You have to take advantage of it. They are not going to force you to take advantage of something that they are offering for free. So we are included.

C: But we could be a little more proactive, maybe, in trying to reach out.

R: I think so because I think you could really form some character through it.

C: And I think, going back to a couple of minutes ago (27:25) I’ve been at Grand Valley since 2001, and knowing the people in the History Department, I think they want to see our grads be successful and they take pride when they hear they have been successful in their careers, and I think more people, depending on how we phrase it and what it would look like, they want to be invested in trying to find ways, to make sure people, once they graduate from the program, that they find their way in life. However that we could reach out to make that happen, I think, the vast majority of the people in the History Department, and maybe I misspoke, maybe all of them, would want to be invested some way in that. So I see that as a great suggestion on your part.

R: It’s just little things, though. It’s not just like one grand big idea like, “Hey, I’m going to tell Grand Valley what they need to do and it’s going to change the world.” It’s, that’s what life is, it’s all the little things. It’s the little, “Hey, let’s sit down and talk about this and let’s see where it leads.”

C: Ok. Question #5: What types of evaluations, both informal and formal, were used to assess your classroom teaching and how were these evaluations used to better your teaching? And that’s going back to your teaching career.

R: They had…I can’t remember what the program was called, but they had a program in place in which they would come observe and then?

C: Would they come for a whole class period?

R: Yeah. A whole class period, I believe so, a whole class period and then x amount of times during the year, whatever, and it was the principal or vice principal and then I was actually in the “GATE” program, which was the Gifted and Talented Program and so I had a…I’m trying to remember what they called her…but she would come and observe, as far as that aspect of it and so I would get observations and feedback from there and the district at the time had positions where there were, for instances, I had a gentleman who observed all the 8th grade in all the middle school Social Studies classes. So I had lots of evaluations and lots of observation.

C: With good feedback?

R: Yeah, roughly. It was never negative. But as far as good feedback.

C: I mean more than just a check mark on a list?

R: It depended on who you got.

C: Ok. (Sounds like what many of the other respondents have said. Evaluations are subjective.)

R: There were…it’s coming back to me now…it’s been a while. The school had little forms where the principal and assistant principal would sit in and they would check some stuff off, and depending on who you got, you would either get some feedback or you would just get the form, and, “Hey, good job.” You know, just a little comment, but there were other times where you would sit down and they would actually sit down and you would talk about it and you would actually hash things out. “This is what is good. This is what we see here. Here is where you might be able to do something.” And, you know, take it with constructive criticism and a ‘grain of salt’ and you would use it to better yourself. There was informal, formal and I had lots of it because, like I said, I had one, two, three assistant principals, but I think I usually only dealt with two. I think the last year I was there we were down to two assistant principals, and a principal and then I had the gifted and talented director…she wasn’t the director, she was one step below, but she would come and observe on a regular basis and I would have the Social Studies curriculum guy who would come in and observe on a regular basis.

C: So four to five different people?

R: Yeah and it wasn’t all the time. It was…I hate to say sporadic at best because I don’t want to make it look bad, but it was a couple times a semester for the Social Studies guy and maybe a couple times a semester for the gifted and talented person. I think the school district might have done an informal one once a month and then a formal one that went along with the requirements for the state for teacher induction process.

C: Right.

R: They were all there to better us, but some of them, like the one from the school district so you could move on to the next step, you could go from the…I’m making up words here, but I think one was “induction” and the next one was something else, up until where you were considered tenured teacher…it was overwhelming. The process you had to go through, it was just overwhelming. Unnecessary. But, I mean, you had to have a way that you were doing something so I see the necessity of it but some of the parts of it were just completely…too much.

C: Overdone?

R: Yeah, I mean as a teacher you don’t need to overwhelm…or I mean as an administrator you don’t need to overwhelm the teachers with redundancy. I’m kind of ‘old school’ like that. “If I’m doing it, let me do it. If I’m not then talk to me.”

C: Right.

R: You know it just felt like paperwork.

C: But for the most part, what you did get was constructive then?

R: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. I can’t ever remember…there were a couple of times when someone would come in and they wouldn’t say anything and it’s like, “Seriously? You are going to come watch me and not say something?” They were like, “Man, you are doing a great job!” (He clapped his hands twice as a form of applause.” I mean I poured my heart and soul out in that lesson. “It’s not because you were here. It’s because that’s what I did it for and give me something better than that. I didn’t just make this lesson because I knew you were coming. I made this lesson because I thought this was the way I thought the kids would learn.” That was one thing that used to bother me was that you would have someone who would come in and evaluate you and that would say, “Man, you are doing great!” and “That’s great! What can I do to make it better?” (33:32) If I am great I want to make whatever is better than great. I think that all comes down to, we talked earlier about how being a teacher is so subjective. There is not this ‘cut and dry’, “Here, you can do this. You can do this.” It’s not like you are a plumber. “You know how to put this fitting together with this one so the toilet doesn’t leak.” It’s subjective. It’s all about what someone else thinks about what you are doing. So the only way for a teacher to learn is for you to sit down and say, “Look, this is what you are doing good and this is what you need to work on.” I think one of the first things when, I can’t remember what it was, there was a big group of students that the teacher program starts. You have a big old meeting and I think one of the first things that should be said is, “Look, man, we are going to give you some criticism” and I think the criticism needs to be right in line. “Here is what you are doing good and that’s great. Keep doing that, but here is where we need to see something else.” If you really want to make the best teachers you have to tell them what they need to work on, not that they are doing great. And that’s what I noticed even in my career that, very fast, “Oh, man, you are doing a great job!” but when it came down to the ‘get down and dirty’ “this is what you need to work on” because I wasn’t perfect. They all said I was doing great but I knew there was stuff they wanted me to work on. Tell me what it is so I can get better. I even go to my boss now and say, “Hey, what do I need to work on?” “Nothin.’” If you don’t tell me something I am not going to get any better than I am today, and that’s the truth of it.

C: Do you tell him that?

R: Yeah, I tell him that. The truth is truth, even if it hurts, but really, if you want to make better teachers you have to tell them what to work on. If they can’t handle it, then you need to take that whole advising thing and be like, “We are not telling you this because we think you are bad. We are telling you this because you are right here and if you want to be good in your career you need to be right here. And you will get there, but if you keep doing it like this, it is going to take you longer than if you would address these things right now. Let’s work on this. We’re going to do this again because that’s the only way to get better.” You can’t get better if you are not told what you need to work on. Because in my eyes, in their eyes, in whose ever eyes, we are the best thing that ever happened. That’s how people look at themselves. It’s not, I’m not trying to say we think too highly of ourselves, we esteem ourselves too much, but when you work as hard as a teacher does to come up with a lesson and you think that’s the best thing you can ever do, and you realize sometimes that you could have done something a little better on that one, and other times that, “Man, that one came out way better than I thought it would! I threw that one together last night.” But you have to be willing to accept that you need to learn. It’s a career in which you must learn because the kids are only going to learn to the point where they know you can appease you. You are going to have a few stand-outs who are going to try extra hard and you are going to have other ones who don’t try at all but the vast majority of students, they are going to figure out within the first…I’ll be generous here…the first 3 weeks of school what it takes to appease you, and once they can meet that, they can sit back and coast the rest of the year. I actually work with a guy and he’s dating one of my old students…it’s awkward…but she said something one time, “Man, I love that class but we could just go in there and have fun.” “No, you couldn’t!” The thing was, she met my expectations. She wasn’t the best but she was actually a pretty good student. The kids will figure out what your expectations are. If they are low, they are going to meet your low expectations. If they are high, they are going to meet your high expectations and you have to figure out what you want to do and in order for you to define your own expectations you have to understand what you do well and what you need to work on. (37:44)

C: I tell all my classes that I teach, but especially in the Capstone class, if you are going to challenge people you have to push them to the point of failure. You don’t have to push them to the point where they are going to give up, but they have to know what failure is in order to improve sometimes, and that can be hard. It can be hard for you to say, “You are not making it”.

R: Yeah, you don’t want to watch them fail, but…

C: But if at the same time if everything is, “You are doing great. You are doing great.” But there is no… “yeah, you are doing great but how about doing this?” then I think you will ‘skate’ (by). I mean you will what the expectation level is and then that’s it.

R: Don’t take it that when I was observed that I didn’t get constructive criticism. I did, but I think there could have been more. I think a lot of it, too, if you really want to get down to the whole program, you need to talk to your cooperating teachers. I knew I would think of it. That’s what it is called, right?

C: Yeah.

R: Whew! My mind is still there. I think because both of my cooperating teachers were great. I mean just downright great.

C: Now, where did you do your student teaching?

R: Student teaching was at…I’m getting them mixed up…it was at…

C: Black River was…

R: Black River Public School (actually a charter) with Brent Rowe and I was with Scott Tenhagen at Lakeshore Middle School in Grand Haven. And they were both great, but as far as the criticism, it was of, “Hey, man, that was great. That’s great!” Tons of encouragement. And you need that, but there could have been more criticism. I’m not trying to say either of them was bad. They both helped me immensely, but I think the criticism part of the program needs…there is more that can be beneficial in there. You don’t want to take it to the point where you are beating people down, but we need to provide a means by which people see where they can improve and there is a…I think it can be brought up a little bit more (more constructive criticism). I think a lot of times you don’t want to go too much because if you go too much it’s going to…they need to be ready to put on their ‘big boy’ (or ‘big girl’) pants. They (need) to be ready to go out into the real world so it’s…

C: You have to challenge them.

R: …once they are out there so we might as well do it while there are no ramifications (on the future students or someone’s immediate career). You have got to meet the expectations (and demands on teachers in the profession).

C: One of my former students went to the Air Force Academy. This is when I was teaching back in New York and I saw him after his first year at the Air Force Academy and he said all the hell they had to go through out there. And I said, “Didn’t it feel like they were just trying to tear you apart?” He said, “Better to wash out of the Air Force Academy as a freshman than to wash out with your finger on the “Button”. I said, “Yeah!” So, better to face that (criticism) before you are in charge of 30 kids in a classroom and do something to mess up any of those kids. (41:05)

R: I can give you stories. There are things I regret, but things you don’t know. You are going to be faced with situations that you don’t know how to handle. I remember one time a kid was talking behind me. I turned around, “You have got to stop talking.” I go back to doing what we were doing, right? Talking. “You have got to stop talking.” “I’m not talking.” “I can hear you. I know your voice. You have been in this class for 8 months now.” “I’m not talking.” Threw a big fit. I grabbed hold of his desk with him in it and walked him out in the hallway. He didn’t come to school for like 3 more days. He wasn’t suspended. I think he was embarrassed. I felt terrible about that but he stopped talking. You are going to be put in a situation as a teacher where you are not going to know what to do. Do you call to the office and wait for 5 minutes for them to send someone down and come get this person and say, “You need to stop talking”. “Well, I wasn’t talking. I don’t know what he is saying.” We make mistakes and that’s just one thing that I can see that in order to prevent failure a more productive criticism might be beneficial.

C: Ok. “Pearls of Wisdom”: What would you tell current students before they start their careers, whether they decide to go into teaching or not? In other words, what do you wish you knew before you left GVSU? And I will be upfront with you. I will get students, whether it’s in the Methods class or ED 331: Teacher Assisting or even the Capstone and they will say, “I don’t know if I want to be a teacher anymore.” And they look at me like I am supposed to get down on them. And I say, “If that is what your decision is and you really don’t want to teach, for whatever reason, that’s a good thing. If you can find your way and enjoy what you are doing, then I’m a happy man. I don’t want you to be in a classroom if you are miserable, and I don’t want you to do something that hurts you or your family or anything like that. I want you to find your way in life.” Just saying those words doesn’t get the job done either. Just anything…in the wisdom of what your career has been so far, if you could tell our students…and of anything else in this (research) I share this with the students. I will go back this winter and I’ll say, “This is what this guy said in South Carolina.” Stumper?

R: Yeah. It’s tough. You are asking for something that could affect someone. You are asking for something that someone who hears this…but, I mean, if it doesn’t bring you joy, you are not going to be able to make you happy from it. I can sit here and drone on and on about all the things you have heard about teaching. “Well, you have to love to teach because you know you are not going to make any money.” “You know you’re not going to be able to read any books or watch any movies at home because you are going to be grading papers.” I mean you’ve all heard those kinds of things, but if you have gone through the program and you are not happy doing it, you are not going to be happy when you get a job just because you are getting paid for it. It’s the same job as what you are doing (in college) essentially…well, you are paying to do it right now. Don’t tie yourself to it. If you have gone through the program and you are at the point where, “I don’t think I am going to enjoy this but I still want to try it” don’t tie yourself to the career. Go. Give it your all. Don’t do a bad job because you are not enjoying it. Give it your all and if it brings you happiness then you are in the right place. And if it doesn’t then you need to come up with a backup plan. I was blessed with one and it worked out but you have to look at what you do and don’t be tied down by that name “teacher”. Look at what else you have learned in your program. You have stockpiled a list of abilities that you can apply to so many different careers. You just have to go out and find a way to sell yourself. Putting together a teacher’s resume, there is not a whole lot of resumes you have to put together that sell yourself any more than that. I know especially when I was up there (in Michigan) it was up to 4 or 800 applicants per opening?

C: It’s still is. The better schools.

R: Essentially all you are doing with a resume is selling yourself. Instead of putting that in for a teaching job you find something that might bring you happiness but you have to keep your eyes open but don’t be tied down to it just because you went through the program. There are other options out there. I am a story of it myself. I went through it. Loved doing it. Would love to be there now but I just can’t make enough money to support my family with it. That’s where I am at. (46:29) If they would pay me to teach what I make right now I would be back there in a heartbeat. Well, I mean there are some other stipulations. They would have to find some way to keep me from getting sick all the time. Other than that I would go right back but the best thing is just trust yourself. If you feel like something is not right then something is probably not right. It doesn’t mean don’t try.

C: No, right.

R: I mean you’ve invested all this time you might as well try. If you can get a job, great! But just because you get the job don’t feel as if you need to stay there. The world doesn’t stop because you quit and go somewhere else.

C: Yeah, and I think, unless they changed it recently, at least 5 times in your life you are going to change careers. In an average lifetime of working, you know, anybody…I’ve talked to some people in the study who said, “I thought when I was going to start my teaching career I would be doing the same thing for 30 years.” And I said, “I hope I didn’t tell you that because I would feel bad.”

R: No, you never said that.

C: Good.

R: It is just standard ideas that people have this Utopian view of a career. That, “I’m going to college...” I’m going to get myself in trouble here. I used to tell the kids when I was teaching, “You don’t have to go to college.” And that was like, “You said what?” Their eyes would drop (out of their heads). I had 3 of my 4 classes I taught were gifted and talented kids. They were on the college path but they were not all college kids. You can see it. You can see that it doesn’t make them happy to sit in a classroom. You can see that it makes them happier to go do something with their hands or makes them happier to do something in a different form. Their eyes would just drop. “You don’t have to what? Did you seriously just say that? My momma and daddy are going to come talk to you.” And I’m like, but it’s true. You can make just as much money without a college degree if you apply yourself.

C: I know a whole slew of electricians and plumbers who love what they do and they make a hell of a lot more money than I do.

R: It’s sad. It’s sad that that is the case, but that is the case and it is not going to change because it is a government job. As we were talking earlier, there are so many teachers, you would have to raise taxes so much, in order to pay teachers a living wage, it’s not going to happen.

C: Right.

R: I hate to be so negative. I’m usually not so negative.

C: I don’t think that’s negative though, Chris. I think that is realistic.

R: And that’s good. That’s what I am shooting for.

C: There you go.

R: But, you know, if you look at the core of the problem, it is that we have so many kids. You can have only so many kids per teacher otherwise it becomes unmanageable.

C: Right.

R: That’s one thing that drives down the wage. You need to have more teachers and the amount of money doesn’t go up and if you start to raise it then the people who pay those taxes are going to start to complain and it’s not just teachers. You have to add in firemen and police officers and public servants, and they all come out of the same pot. You start to add up the number and an average high school has how many teachers in it? 60? 80? And a middle school has what? 30? 40? Elementary school, what? 20? 30? And how many of those per district? Here in the district I taught in we are up to 3 high schools. I think we have 8 or 9 middle schools. We have like 10 or 12 elementary schools and they are building more. I mean you think about those numbers and you do the math, and they paid us better than average for the districts around here. I was…as far as a teacher goes…I was doing pretty good for the amount of time I had in. It just wasn’t enough to support a family. I won’t drone on and on about everything and beat a dead horse. It all goes back to that first question we had, “How do you define success?” Are you happy? Does it bring you joy? And are you able to make your obligations? There are two parts to it. I win the lottery, which I won’t because I don’t play it, I mean I very rarely, every once in a while I used to get scratch off tickets, but I was in a gas station a couple of years ago and this guy, he was holding up the whole line buying lottery tickets and you could see that this line, I was the third or fourth person in the line, there was probably 6 or 7 people behind me. He was buying lottery tickets and you could tell the clerk was getting frustrated because there was this line of people that wanted to get something or get gas and go home, eat dinner or whatever. He’s buying lottery tickets and, “Oh, man, you have got to play to win.” And finally the clerk looks at the man and says, “Why, I don’t play the lottery.” And the guy says, “What?! You know if you never play you will never win!” And the clerk, this is just the calmest, most precise response, “Well, that’s true, but I will never lose.” And the man buying the lottery tickets, he looked and these years of money just out the door, he just realized that was all losses. You just got to know what you are getting into. Look at it. If you are happy, you are happy. If you are not, you’re not. I’m not trying to turn you away from teaching. I think you should go. We need good teachers. Go. Give it your all for a year. If you are not sure, try it. Don’t throw it out because you are not sure unless you are really not sure. You will know after dealing with the kids if you want it or if you don’t. You just have to trust yourself. (5:57) You are having second thoughts, entertain the second thoughts. Don’t sit there and say, “Well”. That’s how I wound up down here. I was doing what I do now, until we got jobs. My wife and I were both looking in western Michigan and we went and work slowed down, we hit a little bit of a slow spot, right, and my wife is like, “I want to move down to the South.” I’m like, “That’s great. I don’t. We’re married so if you go and I’m not going that presents a problem being married and it came down to it and I wound up with one week of work that was 4 hours long (on construction). We had a real short slow spell. I looked at her and I said, “I’ll go wherever you want. Just find a spot.” And we did. Within a week we had interviews. We had offers at four different places. So we had our pick and choose of wherever we wanted to go so we picked what looked like the best one. We love it here. It was great, but you have to trust yourself. If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have been here and who knows where I would be now. Maybe I would be still teaching.

C: I don’t know.

R: Maybe not. It’s…it is life. You don’t get second chances, but because you don’t get second chances you don’t ruin the chances you get waiting on something.

C: And I know some…I think the record was a guy who subbed for 6 years before he finally said, “I still want to teach, but I know I am not going to get a job around here” (West Michigan) and then he moved to California and last I heard he is still out there. (-4:21) He kept on contacting me and saying, “What’s going wrong?” and I said, “Nothing is going wrong.” I said, “They just aren’t hiring.”

R: Yeah.

C: And I said, “The problem is you don’t want to leave where you are at” and I said, “It’s not working for you, is it?” And he said, “No, but I don’t want to leave” and it took like 6 years and finally I get this email and he said, “Moved to California. Got a great job.”

R: It’s life. You are given opportunities and you do something with it. You take it or you leave it. If you leave it you are going to get another opportunity. It might not be what you are expecting. Something else will come along. You can’t look at this path laid out, this map of a diploma you have and (-3:33) say, “All right. Here’s where I am going to be” because you never know. You will have an opportunity here. You will have an opportunity here and then it is just you are going to have to figure out where you wind up and you have to be open to it.

C: Is there anything else you want to add, Chris, beyond what you said.

R: I don’t. Not that I can think of.

C: Ok. Well, if anything comes to you, you know my email address and when I send you the video if anything strikes you like, “I would like to add to that” or “I really didn’t mean to say it that way” then I will revise what you said today.

R: The only thing I would like to say is thanks for doing this. I think this is great. Just looking at progress and how things change and how you can use that to better a program and even the fact that I am not teaching anymore, you are willing to drive down here and see what I had to think or see what I had to say.

C: Well, yeah. The History Department is definitely interested and the University is too. They want to see what everybody is saying and I think, I know, talking to other university professors in Michigan, they think it’s a good idea. I think more should be done, both within Grand Valley and other places about following up with their grads because…I guess the biggest negative I have gotten is, “The only thing I hear from Grand Valley is from the Alumni Association asking from money.” And that should not be.

R: That’s the truth of it though.

C: But that should not be the only contact.

R: Some of the organizations I was in, I hear from those guys, but as far as the actual university, you are the only professor that still contacts and other than that it is just the Alumni Association. “Hey, do you want to be part of this fund?” “I’d like to but wait until I finish paying for my first one.” Come on, give me a break. I think it’s great what you are doing. I hope something comes of it. Really, as far as the whole university, I think it would be great if they started something to help set up training programs for…you could find…really, when I was talking about that earlier, I don’t know if it was part of this (recording) or it was beforehand when I was talking about what I would really like to do, I think you could take a bunch of people who have teaching degrees and you could send them out as consultants to businesses and set up training programs that would completely revolutionize the way we do training in America. That’s really where I think it is and I think the university might be able to do something like that. You are looking at these people with degrees in how to mold minds because that is what essentially it is. Let’s be awesome here. “We mold minds.” That’s what you are being taught. You are taught psychology and curriculum and all these different things and aspects and you can take that and apply it somewhere else. You just have to understand that. I hope they get something good and I hope your work pays great rewards for them as the university, as the future teachers that come out of it and I hope it reaches further and it affects on a larger scale. I think that it really has the opportunity and ability to do that.

C: Well, thanks, Chris.

R: No problem.