Erin Miller DeRoo Oct 16 2015

Winston-Salem, NC

C: It is October 16th we are in Winston-Salem, North Carolina we are with Erin Miller DeRoo and Erin has, as I was talking to my wife on the way down, I’ve been in contact with you more, but mostly virtually, obviously, of any of the persons of the 28 who are in the study. Again, I want to thank you for being a willing volunteer to GVSU in my Capstone class.

E: No problem.

C: So with that, let’s go ahead and start the questions and the first one is a two-parter: How do you define “success” in teaching, and probably more than anybody else in the study, do you believe Grand Valley prepared you for success in the classroom and I say that because there was almost no online training (when Erin attended GVSU).

E: So, defining success as a teacher is boiling down to your actions with students and student success so being a successful teacher is making sure your students are getting what they need out of class and being successful in that. And that’s maybe even taking that a step further and being, utilizing what they learn in the classroom outside of the classroom so, and keeping in touch with my students. They come back and be like, “I just saw this and I connect today with what we learned in the classroom” and that, to me, is success.

C: Yeah.

E: So, just the connections you make with the students and students being successful. And, you’re right, Grand Valley and I don’t think many (colleges) back 11, 12 years ago.

C: Yeah, you graduated in 2004?

E: Yeah. Eleven years ago there wasn’t really the online learning component and I didn’t start (online teaching) until 6 years ago so obviously didn’t completely prepare me for that, but I don’t think…we can back it up to (when I was still in) the classroom and I probably answered this question in the first interview you had with me (I did ask this question) as well. I think this is one of the same questions. I feel like Grand Valley gave me a good base, but I am the type of student who has to be put out in the real world, the real situation, and have situations come up and I may not be prepared for them but I learn from those situations and then the next time that happens and then I grow. So I don’t think I could have been fully prepared anyway, especially in the classroom. There are so many different situations. We wouldn’t have been able to go through every scenario and you really don’t know because even if you had that scenario it’s a different student, a different home life, a different everything that you just have to figure it out as you go, and the same with the online world. So, once I started that (online teaching), we were just talking about how the online program I teach through has really grown over the 6 years I have been teaching there (actually teaching at the table we were sitting at during the interview) and when I first started I was just thrown in and to me, that’s where I thrive. It’s kind of ‘sink or swim’ and I learn how to swim pretty quick so I learned to adapt and I had a lot of great teachers who I could completely rely on to help me. I asked them any questions, big or small, and they were there, and I think that was the key, making sure that…

C: Even when you started?

E: Even when I started and I’m still in contact with those teachers who helped me. They are still part of it. The mentoring program wasn’t really in place when I first started (online) and that’s grown, but I was able to connect with a few teachers who taught and just be like, “Hey, how do I find this? Where do I do this? How do I submit that?” and they were willing to help me so much. They just shared every file they had with me, shared everything that they had, which, I think, is key. I think the main thing when I was at Grand Valley was “don’t reinvent the wheel” and “Help each other out” and I think that is what my online buddies have really done, is just help me. They have helped everyone. Shared everything that they have and I think that’s just wonderful. (Where does merit pay fit into this scenario? If teachers are being rewarded for being unique from their colleagues, will they be willing to share? Is that why merit pay schemes fail, because most teachers are ‘wired’ to be cooperative and not necessarily competitive?) So I think Grand Valley gave me the base but it’s really just getting out in the situation, in the real world that helps me learn and grow.

C: Well, I think anyone really and that’s a constant conversation. When you went through the 25 volunteer hours you needed to get into the College of Education was 25 ‘almost anything’ and now we have tightened that down. It has to be in classroom some place but we are still concerned about and trying to find ways to get people out in the classroom environment for more hours.

E: Right, right.

C: We have been discussing for a couple of years about having a ‘lab school’ within a school district (Harrison Park?) but I still don’t know and I don’t know if there is any good research out there to show until you actually have your own classroom, you really don’t know (what teaching is like).

E: Right. I think, and that’s tough, I think that it’s kind of a “Catch 22” because now as a parent and as a teacher, so you want the best for your child, so you’re going in (to school), “Oh, they are a first year teacher? There’s going to be a lot of hiccups along the way. Do I want my student (child) with a first year teacher or a teacher who has been there five years and knows how to handle things better?” So that’s kind of interesting now as a parent with kids going into elementary school, like, “I know. I was there. I was a first year teacher once and they have to go through that year. But do I want my student, my child to be in that classroom while they are learning and growing?” And I think it helps in an elementary setting because they do have assistance so it helps in that but high school, middle school, that’s tough. (6:06) I don’t know. And I don’t know what the answer is. I think tightening it down to where they have their (volunteer) hours is important. I couldn’t even tell you where I did mine. I’m sure you have it on file somewhere but I don’t…I would assume I probably did it in a classroom. I don’t know.

C: Well, a lot of them, it used to be, not any more, like summer camps, and that experience, you are still working with children but is that the same thing as actually having working with your content and I don’t know.

E: Classroom management was the one key thing that you can give some tips and pointers and talk about it but until you are actually thrown in there and have the situations arise that’s hard to prepare for. So, yeah, I think that’s where the student teaching helps coming in but you always have that teacher in the background that might jump in and help if there are those big situations.

C: Right. Versus, it’s yours!

E: Right.

C: Back to your preparation at Grand Valley, what are you teaching right now, online?

E: So right now I have one section of AP World History, one Medieval Studies and then I am an Instructional Leader for 9 teachers.

C: Ok, so when you went through Grand Valley the World History component, like basic, two courses, depending on your Emphasis, Major, Minor, all of that, have you had to continue your background (knowledge) in order to feel confident in your content area?

E: Yeah.

C: Or did you feel like, ‘coming out of the box’ you were ok?

E: Um, yeah, I think the content area was ok. I had a pretty clear knowledge about that and if I didn’t I could always refresh with the books and look up the information. I did take a…to be AP certified, so I went and took that course (AP certification course). Now that was a couple of years ago, three years ago, and I’m just now teaching an AP course so a lot of that is gone so again I am relying on other teachers. I am constantly asking questions. I just finished grading these AP essays and making sure the thesis is good and I was, all week, I’m sure these teachers don’t want to see any more messages from me, but they were super-helpful. They were, “Here’s an example of an essay and here is how I graded it and this is what we are looking for” and that, to me, is what helps me grow, by looking at examples and seeing, “Ok, I see what they are looking at. What needs to be there and then I can go into my class and look at my students and be able to grade better, more efficiently, what they need.” (8:56) So, again, I’m relying on other teachers to help me.

C: And, really, when it comes to down to grading AP essays that’s done in different locations around the United States and there is teachers sharing the rubric and being able to come to a consistent grade so to have the process worked into your preparation for actually teaching the class mirrors that final evaluation.

E: Right. Once you are actually there. So that was my tough…this was my week to do that and that took me all week to grade 27 of them, which then kind of put my other classes behind but I think the component of being online versus in the classroom I have a lot more availability of other teachers because an instant messenger online and a lot of teachers are logged in throughout the day and I can pop on and quickly get an answer to, “I need help with this. Where do I do this?” Whereas, when you are in the classroom, you can’t just leave your class and go knock on another teacher’s door and ask for help. Usually you have to wait until the end of the day or if you have a minute you email someone and they might not get to it right away. So I think the component where I’m getting help throughout the day…I mean I have been teaching there 6 years and I still have questions about where things are. They change things constantly. We…Our first platform was Blackboard, then we switched to Moodle and now we’re…we’re still partly in Blackboard and partly in Moodle so I have one (class) in each, and now we are switching this summer…now we are moving to [Canvas](https://www.canvaslms.com/k-12/) so all those courses are moving to a whole new platform so it’s constantly learning. So now I’m going to relearn how to use Canvas™ which will be good because that’s connected to Power School. Do you know Power School?

C: Yeah.

E: I’m not familiar with Power School, which I’m not familiar with because I left the classroom before PowerSchool came out. But now our Canvas will be connected to PowerSchool so the students or parents will be able to check grades, whereas, right now, we have to submit progress reports bi-weekly and go through and put in comments, so that’s time consuming so that will be nice. So it’s constantly growing, constantly changing, which technology does. Even if I feel comfortable, the next semester it could be completely different. So it’s just a growing…constant growing.

C: And a lot of teachers in this study I have found out so far are switching now to Google Classroom. My personal connection with that is my son-in-law is the head of Google Classroom in New York City and he’s constantly looking for, “How can we make any platform work for teachers?” And part of it is what you just mentioned, the way that it is set up right now, it’s hard for the teachers to show work that they want to release to the parents.

E: Right.

C: Because Google doesn’t want to have people see things that they shouldn’t.

E: Right.

C: So I don’t know how that is going to work in Canvas and maybe you don’t.

E: I don’t either. We are going to start a lot of training and that’s a constant part of online, too, is I’m in training a lot for different things. We have learning communities. We have work with other teachers and you have within your class so I have my Medieval Studies Group I work with to improve our course and now I have the AP World and we help work on the course itself, like, “What is working? What isn’t?” We have to check links to make sure all the links are working so it’s a process but it’s a fun one.

C: Yeah. Wow! Question 2: What do you view as the biggest challenges to your career? And you can go back to the beginning or now or whatever you want to do.

E: I think being thrown into anything new in the beginning is the biggest challenge starting off. My first year teaching…my first two years of teaching probably were the biggest challenge.

C: And you were at Carver? Right?

E: Yeah. I was at Carver.

C: I remember that was not a nice school.

E: No. That was a little rough. It was low performing. The state was involved in it as far as coming in, constantly checking and making sure our scores were where they needed to be and that was challenging because not only were you put in tough situation but you are having people overhead and making sure you were doing what you were supposed to be doing so it’s just a two part stress, stressor, of keeping…I really felt like I was just keeping my head barely afloat the whole time. Never really making ground and getting where I needed to be but that was a challenge and I didn’t feel going back mentor…I really didn’t feel like I had a strong mentor. I didn’t feel like I really had anyone to really help me. There was a couple of people there who might have helped a little bit but I was surrounded by the football coaches in Social Studies and they had classroom management down but I don’t know where they were with the content, but they, what were they going to help me with? They are just a strong presence and that’s what the kids responded to. So that, I think, was really lacking there and it was just a challenge overall. Now the online teaching, the challenge is me being able to prioritize my time to give the commitment I need to my class and my students and everything else. I think that has been a challenge for my husband and I and just our life, figuring that out because I understand he, my husband knows that I have a job and it’s important but when you see me home and with the kids and it’s hard to remember that I also need to make this (teaching) a priority. (15:03) So I think juggling my life with the online teaching has been hard.

C: And some people say…you’re unique within the study, but other people I talk to that teach online, it’s hard to disconnect.

E: Yeah. Because my students have my phone number. They text constantly throughout the day, and that’s ok, too, and I don’t mind, it’s nice to just knock out a quick answer, but it’s Saturday, Sunday, 11 o’clock at night, all day long so sometimes I can’t respond to them right away if I am in the middle of something and then they get a little frustrated so it’s disconnecting that way and just not being available all the time, but, yeah, that is a challenge. And I don’t mind that as much as just figuring out the time. So now that my daughter is in pre-school I have a little bit of time during the day, which is nice, but I still do the majority (of my work) when the kids go to bed at night and I’m usually pretty tired by then, at that point. And my husband wants to spend time with me and I have to work so I’m usually up until about midnight, 1 o’clock every night. I went to bed about 12:45 last night.

C: And then you have to get up when?

E: I get up at 6:30 to get the kids ready and out the door.

C: Oh, my god!

E: But we know that’s going to be for a few more years and then once the kids are in elementary school all day then I’ll have more time during the day to focus on it, as well. Or I utilize a lot of time on the weekends so Sundays are usually, my husband knows he’s taking the kids and I’m going to just plug away at working on catching up on a lot of the grading or a lot of little things that I have to do, like document all my contacts with my students. So I get texts throughout the day on my cell phone but I actually have to go in and log each contact.

C: Whoa!

E: So that takes time.

C: Yeah.

E: It’s time consuming. Each email, each phone call, each text needs to be documented so that is a time-consumer and that is where I always fall behind because I’m just doing that throughout the day and I don’t sit down and…I should do it every night, but I also need to grade and get in and answer emails.

C: Right and you said 27 essays (to grade for AP)

E: I have 57 students right now so I have 30 in my Medieval (class) and 27 in my AP and we are…I think we have 23,000 students right now (in the North Carolina Virtual High School Network) through NCVPS.

C: Holy cow!

E: So they wanted me to have a third section and I’m like, “No, I can’t do that. I can’t do that right now.” I needed to make…I wouldn’t be able to give the students want they deserve, the time that they need. So most of our teachers are teaching in the classroom and then they do this at home, which I do not understand how they have time for any thing else.

C: So they are full time teachers and they do this?!

E: Most of the teachers do that. That’s the majority of them. And they are allowed to have two sections which is what I have and to me that’s full time. I have…that’s a lot of work. But being that I don’t teach full time or in the classroom, I can have 3 sections so I’m able to have 3 and I’ve done that before and it’s a lot of work and I probably won’t take a third section until my little one is in elementary school. But, yeah, so, I really don’t understand how they are dedicating their full amount of time to what needs to be happening online when they are also in the classroom but…

C: Just the record-keeping alone would eat up hours.

E: Yeah. It does.

C: Ok. I have to do this (video) in 30 minutes segments because then it’s easier to upload.

E: Gotcha.

C: So Question 3: What methods have you adopted to deal with the stresses of a challenging career and again your case is a little bit unique, and the caveat I have been throwing in on this is, hopefully nondestructive ways to deal with this.

E: No, I think I kind of answered that with my last question as far as prioritizing my time and figuring out…and it’s really just been figuring out with the children because it’s…making sure my husband, “You need to take them out of the house. Take them to a park” because I work from home. I could always go to Starbucks and that too, but I end up getting a little distracted with people around so I think just figuring out prioritizing time is where my main challenge is at this point for the online setting and we are working on it. I mean we have our (?)…He understands but…it’s a balance so I think that’s where we are at.

C: Ok. And I think that is pretty common is how to have that kind of balance.

E: Yeah.

C: And in terms of stress relief, some people say, “I make sure that I get some kind of physical exercise or workout” and other people say, “I come home and I have these kids that smile and want to hug me and that’s a great stress relief.”

E: Well, I just started doing yoga at the beginning of the year, so in January and I love it and it’s such a great stress reliever and it has me focused so now that my daughter is in pre-school Monday, Wednesday and Friday, I could stay home during that time and get some work done but I also need to…again, it’s a balance…so I went Monday…it’s just figuring out when I can go and when I have time and also I want to volunteer at the kids’ elementary school so it’s just figuring out where I can have my time and so many days I get home and I’m exhausted and I’ve done so much and I just wonder how I would have been able to do any of this teaching in the classroom (21:13) or have a full time job, 9 to 5. I don’t…it amazes me what people actually (do, in reference to the people who are teaching full time and teaching online after their day is over at school). But I’ve been staying home now for 6 years so…

C: And the impetus to do that was to be home with the kids.

E: Yeah, be home with the kids and to be able to volunteer a couple of hours in their classroom or go have lunch with them or…and getting some exercise is important too. So where does it all balance out? I could just stay home when she’s at pre-school and try to get some work done but it’s all prioritizing time.

C: Yeah. Question 4: How are motivated to best serve your students? Because you could, I mean, like you said, if you’re overloaded, for these teachers that you are talking about that have full time teaching jobs in a regular classroom…I’m at a loss to know how they do that. (Of course I was coaching two sports through most of my teaching career and to say that time didn’t take away at least some time from my classroom preparation and creativity would be misleading.)

E: Yeah. I don’t know. I have a teacher right now that I am the lead over and she’s in the classroom. She has…I think she has only one section right now but she also has breast cancer and she’s going through chemo and I’m trying to, I had to talked to my lead over me this summer because I had been her lead over the summer as well and I’m, “I don’t know what we should do for the best for the students. Is that fair? But then I don’t want to punish her also because that is…”

C: Cancer.

E: Yeah. You don’t want to punish her by not…because this is extra income, I mean it’s not…North Carolina teacher pay is one of the lowest so you don’t want to punish them if they need the income, but where does it lie with the students as far as making sure that they are getting what they need and not punishing her so I’ve been just…we decided that she is going to get one section instead of two and I just go in and check in on her a little bit more and make sure she’s doing what she needs to do and she’s really dedicated, but my heart just goes out to her because she will be like, “I just finished my third round and I might just need a couple of days…” and so that’s been tough, but as far as even the other teachers who are teaching two sections and also teaching in the classroom, is making sure their classrooms are where they need to be or making sure the students are getting what they need because I know…if they are not available, there is a rule with NCVPS that you’re not allowed with the actual public schools, they should not be doing NCVPS work at school.

C: Yeah.

E: Yes and you know, if you’re on planning (period) and you might want to pop in and…you are not supposed to (check your online class during your public school job). So they are not available to their students during the day whereas I am and I get hundreds, during the day, of emails and texts, so they can’t answer those until they get home whereas students in the classroom right now working. Their lab teacher knows that they can text me and ask a few questions about their assignment they are supposed to be working on and I can quickly answer that whereas the other students whose teachers are in the classroom can’t. So is that necessarily fair for the students who might need that help or they might just have to wait to get their answers until later so that is a challenge. I think that’s tough as far as…I think teachers in the classroom, and I don’t want to punish them either, but two sections is a lot. I’m doing it and I think they made need to re-look at that. What’s best for the students is maybe limit them down to one section if they are teaching in the classroom as well and open it up to teachers who can stay home and do more.

C: Back to the question, though, I know you’re not…the money is important.

E: Yeah.

C: But for the amount of work, and you can correct me if I am wrong, for the amount of work that it sounds like you are putting into this, you are way beyond the money drive.

E: Well, yeah, and that’s a teacher in the classroom as well. I mean every teacher works overtime and doesn’t get paid for it, but to me, I get to be home with my babies and that’s priceless, so that outweighs the amount of work I’m putting into it. It outweighs…I don’t have to pay for work clothes. I don’t have to pay for gas to get to work. I don’t have to pack my own lunch. I don’t have to pay for daycare. So, to me, I just factor that into what time I put into it and it all balances out but the most priceless thing is me being able to be home with my children. And I love it. I love being able to still have my identity as a teacher and have that separation of “mommy” to my own identity of what I can do. (26:17) And my kids, “But you don’t go to the classroom? But I am still a teacher. I teach on the computer.” I have meetings. I have more meetings now that I am an instructional leader. We have them weekly and we also have monthly department meetings so logging in and doing that, but I like it. I like being able to connect with other teachers and talk to other teachers and brainstorm and so that gives me enjoyment.

C: The collegiality part of it.

E: For sure. So, it all just balanced out.

C: If you had to balance…I mean I don’t want to throw collegiality out…but if you had to balance the love…I mean I’m assuming…the love of teaching what you’re teaching, the content versus having those relationships and seeing the growth of your students, could you say that is even or what is the primary motivation there? To see the students learn or you really love Medieval history?

E: So it’s two part: I enjoy the content but I do get to know my students quite a bit still even if it is online and they really like when you try to get to know them. They like that connection and a lot of my students have multiple online courses. They like, “I really appreciate that. My other (online) teacher I can barely get a hold of.” And that kind of…I got that message last week. “I just want you to know that I really appreciate all the extra stuff you give us” because we have to send out daily announcements and we have requirements that each announcement has to have three parts within it and you have to hit those…you have to have the daily focus. You need to have a celebration of a student. You have to have extra Web 2.0 tools or links or images or graphics to kind of go in and help supplement the content you’re learning that day. And I always throw in some extra or try to make sure I have a fun little graphic or something for them. “I just really appreciate that. I can barely get a hold of my other online teacher” and that’s where teaching in the classroom and then you are doing this (online teaching) secondary, is not giving them everything that they need. I enjoy the connections with the students. I enjoy my connections with my other teachers, but I also enjoy the content. But it’s all mixed together.

C: It’s all mixed together. Yeah. Question #5: What changes, oh, boy! What changes, if any, have occurred in the strategies and methods you use in your classroom? (I had to laugh because she has probably changed the most of any teacher in the study.)

E: Well, yeah, going from in the classroom setting, face to face looking at my students to online is completely different. I have been able to eliminate a lot of the classroom management which, I think, is most teachers’ not favorite part of teaching and dealing with, just making sure of who is sitting by who, everything like that I can just throw out the window. I still have some group work I have them work on and if they don’t participate they don’t participate and they don’t get a grade, but I do try to throw in some work amongst, together. Strategies. It’s completely new. Connecting with students is completely new. Making those relationships. Building them. Building the trust system. Making them motivated to do the work. I can’t look over their shoulder and tap them on the shoulder and, “Get to work.” It’s…

C: But there is other ways, obviously, to keep track of what they are doing.

E: Yeah.

C: It’s not the same as, “Ok, now we’re going to do a ‘Think, Pair, Share’. I’m walking through the classroom.” That kind of stuff. It’s a different kind of walking.

E: Right. It is. It’s not a ton of collaboration on their part, although they do Discussion Forums and there are requirements to go back and (comment on other people’s Threads) and I read through those and for the most part the students…I’ve only had maybe two or three in my 6 years who have been a little bit combative within the Forums and kind of more destructive rather than constructive in their comments and that’s not that bad. I mean only a couple of them, compared to what they would say in the classroom. I think they are a lot more polite online, which you would think that they wouldn’t be because you can’t see them face to face but they’re very helpful and constructive with each other when they are discussing. “Oh, I see your point with this, but did you try thinking about it this way?” So I’ve been really pleased with seeing that. So, yeah. Classroom management is out the window. Obviously new challenges. If they are not working, what are some strategies I can use to get them to (work) because I can’t tap them on the shoulder. I have a ‘middleman’ so it’s me, their school, them so there is a ‘middleman’ so I can contact their lab (teacher) and, “Can you go check on him? See what he is doing during the class? Why he’s not working?” I can contact their…so they have a lab person usually.

C: Is that lab person is just a lab person, not a content person? (Referring to my article on GRPS and their system with E 20/20 and the three way split of students between three teachers.)

E: Right.

C: Ok.

E: And they may have 60 kids and they may all be taking different online classes so it’s mainly they are just tech (support) and overseeing the room. But they are a good ‘go to’ to get a physical visual on the person, and say, “Hey, why aren’t you logging in? Your teacher is contacting me.” I also have an extended learning advisor so their advisor at the school I can contact and then I have their parents so I have lots of people I have to contact so it takes me a few more steps than a teacher in the classroom to get that kid, sometimes, back on track. Sometimes it’s just a text to the student and that gets them back on track or an email or a quick message but then I have to take further steps, which, I guess you would have to do in the classroom as well if a tap on the shoulder doesn’t work. You have to call their parents. (32:26) And then I have to document it all. It’s learning, it’s growing, it’s constantly changing and I think that’s a challenge but it’s also fun. It keeps it interesting, so it’s not just the same thing.

C: It really sounds like you, at least you, because I can’t speak for anybody else, your instruction is more individualized in many ways than a classroom teacher’s would be.

E: Yeah. In a way. I mean there is the same content but then it’s going in and making sure each student is going in the right direction to where they need to be. I feel like I have more contact with the students now than I did in the classroom. I have more relationships with many of them, not all, some are, “I do my work. You don’t need to talk to me. I’m just going to do what I need to do.” And that’s fine too and they have that in the classroom, but a lot of students like that connection and they like that contact or that text on a Saturday being like, “Hey, this week’s our test. Make sure you need to be where you need to be.” Where I wouldn’t have done that in the classroom.

C: Right.

E: So I think the relationships are interesting and new.

C: What grade levels? Middle school through high school?

E: Well, it used to be my Medieval Studies was open to 6 to 12 and they cut that out because that was hard having a lot of my students who take Medieval Studies are kids who love history. They have already taken a few AP classes and you are having that level of a student with a 6th or 7th grader and that was really off balance so you now have to be 9th through 12th for Medieval and AP World is high school.

C: And that has changed the dynamic then?

E: Yeah. I think that’s helped because even though a lot of my middle schoolers who took it were some of my best students, they were really good, I think it was just too much of an age difference for that class.

C: Do you have a sense of the socio-economic difference amongst your students? Is there a range there or is it skewed?

E: It’s a complete range because it is through the public school system any district can work through NCVPS and a lot of them take it in the school. The district I am in here, which is Forsyth, they don’t participate in it. I don’t know why. Some districts don’t but all the surrounding districts do. So it could be I have a lot of really rural students up north who take it and it’s probably because they are not close to…they probably don’t have a lot of AP classes or extra classes. We do have all the Gen Ed classes, like World History and Math I and English I and things like that and that’s for a lot of students…well, it’s two part: one, if the school had budget cuts and lost a teacher they can put their students into an English 1 class, let’s say, they can fill up 60 kids in one class whereas they would have taken…

C: Two (teachers).

E: Yeah. So it’s budget cuts and it’s also good for students who are seniors and need a couple of credits they missed early on. They can just take it either at home or fill a gap in their schedule. I would say I have a range of every student. I’ve had some who don’t have Internet at home. They don’t have a computer at home. They can’t even get Wifi because they are so rural that they don’t even have the ability to get it so they can only do it at school. And if they are behind, it’s trying to talk to them and…I remember father I talked to, “Well, we don’t have a car right now. We can’t get to the library. She’s going to try to stay after school and get ride home.” So it’s every range, whereas some other parents I call it’s, “Yeah, we have 5 computers. There’s no reason why he shouldn’t be doing his work” so I have every range.

C: Ok. Ok. Evaluations. Question 6: What types of evaluations, both informal and formal, and now that you are a teacher-coach you can see both sides of this, are used to assess your classroom teaching and how are these evaluations used to better your teaching?

E: We have something called a “spot check” and it is done usually four times a year, a school year and if you are a new teacher or if you got lower scores on a “spot check” you might get more evaluations. I will probably be coming up in the next two or three weeks where I will have to go back and do another “spot check” on my teachers. We have like a rubric we follow and we evaluate their grading. Is it done in a timely manner? Are the students submitting work? We are supposed to be grading daily.

C: Can you see what they are doing online?

E: The other teachers?

C: Yeah.

E: Yeah. So, have a…I can password into all the classes. So they are supposed to be grading daily. Is a student turning something in Monday and it’s not being graded until Friday, something like that. So are they grading timely? We are supposed to give very detailed feedback for each assignment which is another big difference between in the classroom where they hand something in, you look it over and “check”, plug it into the computer. We have to give very specific feedback. Now there is a couple of assignments and I’m not so picky when I’m doing a spot check because I know you’re doing key terms. You know how much (feedback)? “Good job. I see you followed everything you are supposed to do.” Something like that is fine, but if it is more of an essay or something, they want details. Something to pull in from the assignment. They want something that they can do better. So they are very focused on teaching through feedback to help connect that because we are not face to face, making that connection. So I am looking at the feedback. Those announcements. (38:57) They are supposed to be done daily. Those are a big component of it to make the students know that we are here daily. We are checking on them. We are supposed to be celebrating students to make that connection so, “I saw that Tristan did really awesome on his essay for this” and kind of give him a little “prop”, a little “shout out” or…and I think a lot of teachers struggle in that because if they are just turning in key terms that day, “I don’t know. Sally did great on her key terms.” I mean you can’t…it’s hard to pull out a few students when it’s the same thing so they want us to get to know them further so I try to pull in birthdays, like “Happy Birthday”, make sure I know my students’ birthdays. Try to get to know them outside of the classroom, like, “Oh, John had an awesome football game this past Friday”. You know, “Way to go”, something like that so we’re supposed to celebrate students so I have to check that daily. They need to give directions, like, “What should you be doing today? What are some due dates coming up?” and then there is also the “Learning through Announcements” so keep pulling in Web 2.0 tools, graphics, images, we talked about that earlier so making sure that they have all those components and they are posted daily. Now they can score higher on the rubric if they post more than one daily. I can usually sit down maybe and I just remembered that section, I need to send out that quick announcement to my students, but if you are teaching in the classroom, you are only going to be able to do one a day. What else is there? There’s the contact. The communication logs that we are supposed to log all of our contacts in and is it up to date. Are you making the contacts? Are you informing the parents? Are you keeping all the stakeholders informed with how that child is doing? And that’s really where we get audited. They come in and make sure that we are kind of covering our butts with the students and making sure we have those relationships, but also if there are bigger issues that we have documented; what we said to them or how we contacted them. So that’s kind of the basis of what I check in the classroom. Make sure they have everything that they have and that they are doing what they are supposed to be doing.

C: It sounds like this is better than what many of the people in the study get from being in the real classroom.

E: Oh, yeah, definitely because then I give each of my teachers…I fill out the rubric. I give them comments for each component and then there is a mentoring section where I go in and I’m, “I really like that I am seeing this. You are doing a great job in this. I like the connections you are making with the students. You are doing great! Let’s try to focus on this one area that you need to…. Or “Here” and I will usually give them links to some examples of some best practices or something that they could do to see what might work better in other classrooms (42:04) because they don’t get to peek in other classes, like I do, which I think has helped me be a better teacher now that I am also the instructor leader because I can go in and see some of these best practices up close and personal and be like, and go like, “That’s a great idea! I’m going to utilize that in my classroom.” So I try to take screen shots and send that to them and like, “Here’s some examples. This is just something that might help or might make it easier for you to be able to be a little bit more efficient in your classroom.” So I definitely think that helps. Now take it back a couple of semesters when I wasn’t doing the instructional leader and I was just checking spot checked, you know I was just…I knew these components and the rubric and I was just kind of making sure I complied with each one, but not really understanding the full role and why we were doing it and what whole the purpose was behind it. And I was just kind of skating by to make sure I was doing what I was supposed to be doing and my mentor just gave me some feedback and my instructional leader would change every semester so you would get to know one person and how they did the rubric and then you would have a new one so you never got the relationship built there. They just switched that. We had a meeting about it this summer so I had some teachers this summer and we made the decision that we were just going to keep them so you would build that relationship and have that growth together.

C: And that’s been cited by several people, too, that the rubric may be the same but there are some people you really want in your classroom because you know you are going to get good feedback and there’s other people who use it as destructive criticism.

E: Right.

C: And you really don’t want to be reviewed by that person.

E: Consistency is one of the main things (in evaluation) so we had, one of our meetings this summer was, “Here is a classroom. Go in and fill out the rubric for it and they are going to compare all the instructional leaders and make sure we are all around consistent of how we spot check that one classroom. And we’re all fairly, if it was a 2 or 3, we gave our reasoning for why we set it, so it was close enough. (Inter-rater reliability). So there wasn’t any huge discrepancies between instructional leaders, which was good. It was nice for me because I was filling in and, “Oh, I hope I’m not being too lenient. I hope I’m not being too harsh.” But that helped a lot, I think making sure everyone was on the same page and making sure we are giving the same or consistent feedback to the teachers.

C: And I’m totally unsure, based on what I’ve heard so far in this study that any of that goes on in the public schools. That whoever is doing evaluation, usually principals, that they have those kinds of meetings that say, “Ok, are we using the rubric the same way? Are we providing the right kinds of feedback?” (45:00)

E: And I think it’s providing training because now…so I had to go through a whole training this summer to be an instructional leader where I got to see best practices and read through Discussion Forums about it and, also, like I have been saying, I have awesome people I can talk to. They are just so helpful and any question, big or small, they are there to help me instantly, which, I think, is phenomenal. So I think that’s a big part of it, but consistency. I’m really impressed with the program with that. So, but, again, I think it’s helped once I became that instructional leader. I don’t know if I would be saying the same if I had my spot checks so when I go back and I wanted Andy to be my instructional leader because he knows me and we’re in the same class so he will give me an easier check, but I think they are tightening down on that making sure there is more consistency. So, I think things grow and change and progress, but it’s kind of tightening down to make sure everyone is where they need to be.

C: It sounds like the changes that they have made have been really positive, logical, rational.

E: I think so. Yes.

C: Which is…

E: Great.

C: Great. Really, Question #7, I think you have provided a ton of ways you have been mentored that, is there anything else that you want to add? I mean to have that kind of support, to have that kind of feedback, to have that kind of training, at least on the online thing, how about…and you also mentioned at Carver there wasn’t much.

E: I didn’t have…I felt like a fish out of (water). I was just thrown in and it was not…I had someone I could talk to but it was mainly just ‘cry on her shoulder at the end of the day’ type of situation. She is there but she is not going to really help me with what I need. She is just going to pat me on my back as I cry.

C: And it’s good to have that too.

E: Yeah. I mean that’s good to have, but, also, I know we go back and I got the job and it was like a week later I had to move down here and start teaching in a whole new state, in a whole new city, in a whole new school and a whole new environment. So that probably played a big part in it. It was not like I knew the area. I didn’t know anything that was going on, but, no, I definitely did not get the same mentoring that I…or support. It was right off the bat (with the online position) that I could contact anyone within the first week of getting a section online where I felt like I could ask them or they would help me. It was, “Hey, I have questions about these… How do I set up this classroom?” Five emails later of files, left and right, “Here you go, here you go, here you go.” It was just amazing the amount of help and support they have given me from the beginning. Which I think is awesome.

C: Yeah.

E: So it’s great!

C: Question #8: Have you pursued continuing education, either in the form of a graduate program or professional development, and I think you have really talked about the professional development part, and how has this education influenced your success in the classroom?

E: There is constant professional development online. I’ve taken on my own an AP course or to be able to be certified for AP and they provide a lot of information for continuing ed online. So, like, “Here’s a program that is going to be in Charlotte. Here’s one in Raleigh.” I took one last year, last fall, on the Holocaust down in Charlotte. It was on my own and it was free so I went to it and it was just a continuing ed which I like to do that as well. As far as furthering and doing a graduate program, that is all, ‘when my children get a little bit older’. Right now my focus is on them and then also the teaching component. So I am doing my continuing ed, teaching online and when they get a little bit older we will probably re-focus but I will continue doing the online (49:12) teaching as long as I can.

C: It sounds like you could teach a graduate program on online teaching based on your experience along.

E: Yeah. And it’s continuous and it’s growing and it’s a great program. I don’t think you could quite convince me to go back into the classroom at this point compared to my experience there versus the online.

C: The only thing that I would add to that is I think the tools and skills you have developed…and I thought you were a good teacher when you left Grand Valley…

E: I appreciate that.

C: But I think you would be a great addition to a public, real school.

E: Yeah.

C: But I can certainly understand, based on what you said…

E: Going back into…they really have eliminated…I mean I still have the upper management coming in and checking but it eliminates so much of the classroom that I didn’t enjoy. But, again, I had a tough situation where I was teaching versus if I went into a different school. I have been getting a ‘peek back’ into that, going and volunteering in my children’s classrooms. It has given me that little…I don’t know the right word for it…but it gives me…

C: Well, you have a different perspective.

E: When I am in there with them, helping, hands on, one on one, it gives me that little charge that I got when I knew I wanted to be a teacher, but then I walk out of there and I’m, “Ok, I got it. I’ll go back to online.”

C: “Pearls of Wisdom”: Boy, you have so many different…a range of experience…from an at-risk school, under state investigation or guidance…

E: It was pretty much.

C: to this. (51:11)

E: I think just reaching out. If you need help…there are going to be people…and maybe I needed to do that more when I was in the classroom and I just didn’t know. But, then again, it’s hard. With this (online teaching) it’s so easy to pop online and instant message, “Hey, I need help with this. Can you help me?” Versus face-to-face, like, “I’m lost. Help me with this.” And they are busy. They are running around doing what they need to do so they can’t just help you as easy as they can online. I think, maybe, just making sure you ask for the help, and I don’t know if I just didn’t do that enough or I was scared to or if “I need to learn this on my own and just figure it out” but I think the main key thing is ask. You never know what you are going to get. You may get a plethora of advice and tools and, “Here is all my stuff. Here you go” or you might get a teacher who will be like, “Ehh, no, sorry, I can’t help you right now.” But you never know, so I think, asking can’t hurt.

C: Right, and I know some, even some experienced teachers, they see that as a sign of weakness. It’s like, “Ok, I don’t want to admit that I don’t know.” I found that out in my doctoral research about how teachers are dealing with technology back in the ‘90s and it was scary to them to the point that they didn’t want to admit the students were knew more than they did in how to manipulate the software and the hardware.

E: Which is the direction we are going. I think that’s one of my challenges, too, is making sure I am one step above the students, which I’m sure I’m not most of the time. They are so tech savvy so staying above them is a challenge. But, yeah, you’re right and I think it’s also the newer teachers who come into me and, “I got this. I can do this” and it’s just you have got to support each other. I think that’s the key thing and I don’t understand teachers who wouldn’t want to help but I can also see, “I worked so hard to get all my stuff together. I don’t want to share it.” But you have got to help one another, I think that’s the key and you just have to ask and that’s where I have really grown is asking and by teachers helping me has made me more likely to ask more and ask different teachers and make sure I am getting all different views and so that’s my key “Pearl of Wisdom” is just making sure you are getting support but you are asking for support because sometimes people don’t know you need it. And a few are like, “Ok, she’s got it. She’s ok.” You have got to ask.

C: I think the worst situation and I had some of those years and times in my teaching career before I came to Grand Valley was when everybody feels like they are “siloed” in their classroom and they are just trying to survive, but in the process the whole system is hurting.

E: Yeah. Right.

C: Versus, if it is a team effort and “What can we do to help each other out, whether we are teaching the same subject or not.” Just that communication and, “Hey, I have this great idea I want to share with you” or “What great ideas do you have?” that can help you be a better teacher.

E: Right. I think that is key, so, I wish I had seen more of that, maybe, in the classroom, but…yeah.

C: At least you’ve got it now.

E: Yes. I do.

C: Last question and, again, you don’t have to add anything if you don’t want to, is there anything that you would like to add that wasn’t in the first 9 questions? Would you recommend what you are doing to anybody else?

E: Oh, yeah. I would recommend it hands (down). It’s such a great program and I love North Carolina. Unfortunately the classroom experience in North Carolina was not great and I feel terrible…it’s really discouraging with the politics in education in North Carolina right now too. And it’s so different from my experience (in the classroom) and I’m loving it and I’m really enjoying it and I’m getting…I feel like I am getting paid decent for what…we talked about balancing…I still get to be home with my babies so to me that adds in to what I’m getting paid so I would definitely recommend it. I think it’s been a great situation and maybe adding in some sort of teaching online education program into Grand Valley, like “Here’s another option” because I think that’s the direction that a lot of schools are going to be going in. So maybe doing that.

C: Well I know they have a graduate program and there are some bits and pieces that are being done right now, but not the focus where, “Ok. Here are the skills that you need to be able to do this and here are the differences.”

E: There are a lot of different skills you need but I think that is a big direction that a lot of schools are going. A lot of districts in North Carolina are requiring students to have at least two online classes to graduate high school.

C: Really?

E: So, a lot of my students take two, three, four before they graduate so it’s moving in that direction. With this…I think I told you we are 22-23,000 students taking an online course and that’s the highest it’s ever been. We have…I think our biggest course right now in history, I don’t know about the other ones, but our AP classes are just booming. I think we have 23 sections of AP Human Geography and 8 or 9 sections of AP World History so it’s just huge amounts. So they are booming. Yeah.

C: Ok. Thanks Erin.

E: You’re welcome.