Mike Hull May 12 2015

Davison High School

C: Ok, it’s May 12th 2015. I’m with Mike Hull at Davison High School. We’ve already been through his first hour Economics class. I took 9 pages of notes, which is all good. So, Mike, let’s start right off: How do you define “success” in teaching and, similar to the question I asked first time around in 2008, do you believe that GVSU prepared you for success in the classroom?

M: I think success in teaching is to be able to help all of your students better understand not only the material you’re presenting but also how to think but how to go out into the real world and be successful. And sometimes that’s teaching a lesson and making sure everyone leaves with the same set of knowledge. Sometimes it’s teaching some skills and making sure that they have that. And sometimes it’s just trying to help a student deal with their individual circumstance and what they’ve got. As far as teaching the lessons and the skills I do feel like GVSU did a really good job. As far as dealing with the individual issues that students have I think that’s just one of those things where you have to develop an understanding and an empathy over time. I don’t know if you could teach that.

C: Yeah. It’s…I feel fortunate if I can have my students in the Methods class, the teacher assisting seminar and then the Capstone, but I also feel guilty that I know there’s so much more that they have to learn that there’s just not time to get everything in.

M: No, and that’s the biggest challenge is that there is not enough time, whether it’s at GVSU trying to prepare teachers or whether it’s in a classroom and you’re trying to go through your material. There’s just not enough time.

C: What do you view as the biggest challenges? What are the biggest challenges to your career?

M: I’d love to say it’s the job, but it’s not actually. It’s all the extra stuff. It’s all the outside things. Teaching is a weird profession. Everybody had a teacher. Everybody knows how to teach or at least they think they know how to teach because they saw a teacher and so you have parents who think they know what should be going on in the classroom. What’s worse than they parents is politicians. In my experience over the last several years it’s really soured me over the political realities of education. Politicians don’t know education. What they know is how to get re-elected. What they know is what sounds good to the public. And it sounds good to say that, “Teachers are the reason that kids are struggling in school and what we need are more standardized tests.” And it’s not true. In fact, it’s the exact opposite. Teachers over the last few years have been subject to…attacked, vicious attacks. Trying to go after their livelihood. Trying to break down the teachers’ unity with things like “right to work”, with changes to their pensions, with a revolving door of standards and expectations and evaluations. And it’s not that people shouldn’t be held accountable. They should. And it’s not that we want to protect bad teachers because we don’t but nobody’s going to want to do this job if we keep going on the road we’re going. And we’re getting to the point where education is suddenly turning into something that you are ashamed to be a part of and it shouldn’t be that way. This should be the best job. This should be the job that everyone wants to do because of the honor and the nobility and the opportunity to help so many people. And it’s the outside stuff. In the class, dealing with students, that’s never going to change. They are different. They have different technology. They have different issues with cell phones and things like that but 20 years ago there were new things that were coming along and you had to change and adapt to your students and 20 years from now there will be new things. The classroom part of education, that is what it is and if we could get the rest of the world to take their hands off and let us do our jobs, education would be better.

C: So I guess, based on what you said, in terms of the biggest challenge, would you, and you can get to this later on in Question #8 too, what would you say to someone majoring in Education right now? Or like at Grand Valley, a Social Studies major?

M: Well I know a lot of people would say, “Change your major.” A lot of people would say, “Are you crazy?” And I don’t believe that. We need teachers. We need good teachers. We need high quality teachers and I believe that we have that coming through programs like Grand Valley. But at the same time they need to understand the reality of the job that they are going into. That this isn’t what it was 30 years ago where you became a teacher and you taught for 30 years and you closed the door and you were in your own little island and they left you alone. It doesn’t work that way anymore. And they need to know that.

C: And the attacks, like you said, are even more bitter and…

M: Oh, absolutely.

C: and hurtful than ever before. So what methods have you adopted to deal with the stresses of a challenging career, and one of the things, my postscript on that is hopefully nondestructive.

M: I wish I was better at dealing with stress and I know my wife wishes I was better at dealing with stress. I think the most important thing is to try to compartmentalize. It’s to separate what you do here from home, and that’s hard. That’s really hard. There are a lot of people that at the end of the day, they get up and they go home and that’s it and they don’t think about work and they don’t have to deal with work and they don’t consider work until tomorrow morning when they have to punch in again and that’s not teaching. There are lesson plans to be done. There are papers to be graded. There are emails and phone calls and so it is a job that we do a lot outside of the classroom but you have to be able to compartmentalize and the tipping point for me was where I started missing things for my kids. I started missing soccer games and baseball games and things like that and I said, “that’s not right”. This job is important and my students are important but so is my family and my family is, at the very minimum, as important as what I do, but the reality is that they’re (my family) more important. And if I have to choose between what I’m doing in my classroom and with my students and with my family that’s a very easy choice to make. And I think that’s one of the things you have to be able to do. You have to say, “Enough”. There are so many hours in a day, so many hours in a week and I can only give so much of it to this. I’ve got to be able to live my life. I’ve got to be healthy. I’ve got to be able to do things that I enjoy. I’ve got to be there for my family so you’ve got to draw the line. You’ve got to have boundaries and I know for some of my colleagues, they don’t have that. For some of my colleagues they spend every minute turned on as far as their job and having to be constantly thinking about the next lesson and thinking about the next activity and that passion is amazing and it’s wonderful but it can be destructive. You’ve got to be able to temper that.

C: I’ve seen very few teachers that can maintain that (level of intensity) and I think it’s one of the causes for early teacher burnout.

M: I think so because I think it takes such a commitment that it’s exhausting and I see it where you come in and today is one of the days where you’re really passionate about what you’re doing and how you’re working with kids and everything is going right and it’s just clicking and you get home and you’re just exhausted. You wouldn’t think of teaching as an exhausting job. I mean it’s not physically demanding but it’s exhausting. It’s hard to maintain that and your students see it too. I’ve had those days were you’re ‘on fire’ and everything’s coming together and the students, “Wow! He’s really into this!” And you can’t do that every day. And they can see it. The next day you come in and you’re a little rundown and you’re a little tired and the lesson is a little bit less and they see it too. And that’s tough.

C: It is tough. So how have you stayed motivated over your career to best serve your students?

M: I love what I do. When I was a kid my dad told me to find something you like, find something you’re good at and find a way to get paid for it.

C: Great advice.

M: And that’s what I did. I realized very early on that I really, really enjoyed teaching and I love the subject that I teach, which is helpful, and we’ll talk more about that a little bit about later on, but this is an awesome job. I get to come in every day and I get to have a profound impact on the lives of 150 young people and I’m not going to be the teacher that they all remember. I’m not going to be their favorite teacher and there will be some obviously, but I’m not going to be everyone’s favorite teacher and I’m ok with that. When I first started I wanted to be. I wanted all my students to really love my class and I’m ok with the fact that I’m not going to be everybody’s favorite. But even if they did not like my class, they got something from it and I had an affect on their lives and I think it’s helpful when you run into those kids later on. When you see them out in the ‘real world’ and they talk to you and they tell you, “Your class was really hard and there were days when I didn’t like your class, but I’m glad I was in there and I was glad that I did it” and it’s that sort of affirmation and you don’t hear it enough. You’ll never hear it enough. If you go into this job hoping that you’re going to get the amount of praise and the amount of accolades you deserve, go into a different job because it’s not going to happen. But when it happens, savor it. Because for every student who tells you that, understand that there are dozens more that would tell you that. That’s important and I think that’s really what’s helped me.

C: And I think it helps a lot of teachers. What changes, if any, have occurred in the strategies and methods you use in your classroom?

M: Technology. If we could do anything to better prepare teachers it’s exposing them to technology. They need to know the older technologies, the Power Points and the Microsoft Offices softwares and things like that but they need to understand cell phones and tablets and Chromebooks and they need to understand technology. There’s so many different opportunities out there. One of my goals over the course of the next year is learn how to take their cell phones and turn them from a toy into a tool we can use in the classroom. To find the apps and the things that we can use to bring those things that they’ve already got and they’re already playing with and, “all right, you guys want to play with your phones. Let’s make it meaningful.” And it starts simply, “Ok, this is going to be the test date so everybody take out your phone and program into your phone, “the test is this day.” “And set yourself a reminder so you know.” And it can escalate into so much more. This year I’ve started, with my team teacher, Bret Crum, we’ve started a Google Drive account where all our students are linked to it. And every piece of paper that we give them is put into that account. And if they need another copy of it and if they want to review it from home, it’s right there. It’s available. And they’ve got access to that. I’ve been really lucky in Davison. Early on they recognized that I was willing to try new things. I was more than willing to pilot new programs and I’ve gotten to do some really great things, whether it’s differentiated instruction or Understanding by Design. Right now I’m part of a team that is still working on standards referenced grading as something that we want to implement K-12 in the district and last week I had the opportunity to see really neat software that actually comes from the Grand Rapids area that will help to identify strengths and weaknesses of students based on standards referenced grading that the district is seriously considering implementing at least in the high school. We’re going to do a pilot next year with about 6 or 7 teachers and I get to be a part of that and that’s really exciting. So, yeah, you need to stay up on technology and you need to be open to it. You can’t just come in and do what your teacher did. That just doesn’t work anymore.

C: It sounds like…I have two follow-up questions or comments on that. One of the things that also motivates you, it seems like, is you’ve taken advantage of opportunities that the school district has to continue your education.

M: Yeah. I think you’re right. I’ve had a chance to learn a lot of things through some unique opportunities. I’m not a big fan of professional development because I find a lot of that is poorly done. But when there has been small group opportunities they’ve been more successful for me. I feel like they have been more meaningful and I just been fortunate that early on in my career I was able to establish myself as someone who was willing to try these things and so when they’re looking at, “Here’s a neat idea. Who should we have test it out? Well, we know that Mike likes working on new things and he’s willing to be inventive and creative and so on and so I think that’s helped a lot.

C: So, Davison allows for, or at least has provided some time or opportunity for collaboration between the teachers?

M: Not as much as I would like but they have. And I’ve been really, really fortunate. I had a great mentor teacher and we developed a very, very good professional relationship to the point where we frequently designed lessons and activities together. We would just go in conversation and suddenly we would walk out and we would have this neat project that we can’t wait to try the next day. And we’ve got very similar views on education and goals as far as where we’re going to be and that’s made collaboration a lot easier. And there’s always going to be people who are resistant to change. There’s always going to be people that, “Look, I’ve been doing this for 20 years and it was good enough for the last 20 years and it will be good enough for the next 20 years. And that’s difficult and that can be daunting at times. Sometimes you just have to sit back and say, “Know what, they’re going to do their thing and we’re going to keep pressing forward this way and either they’re going to come around to see the merits of what we’re doing or they’re not and they’re going to leave eventually.” With luck, whoever replaces them will be more open to new ideas.

C: How much, going back to something you said before about tech, is Davison, like a 1 to 1 school? How much tech does the school provide to the teachers and to the students?

M: We’re working on it. Over the last 2 years we’ve increased the number of devices exponentially. It’s been crazy. Teachers now when they start looking at purchasing supplies…we’re kind of in an 8 year cycle for purchasing textbooks and so on…instead of buying textbooks they’re pushing for Chrome carts and Chrome Books that they can put in front of the students. That’s actually what I would like. I think in the next two years I will be up for purchasing for U.S. History and we don’t want books. I didn’t want our last textbook. I’m not a fan of textbooks. I use them when they’re there, but if they were gone it would be even better. And so we’re moving toward a 1 to 1 but we’re not there yet. But our assistant superintendent in the last few years has really recognized that we can either be in front of this and lead the rest of Genesee County in the technology wave and recognizing that’s the future of education or we can play ‘catch up’. And it’s a lot better to be in front.

C: Yeah. Than being run over. Yeah. What types of evaluations, both informal and formal, are used to assess your classroom teaching and how are these evaluations used to better your teaching? So, I have heard, and you’re the fifth person I’ve interviewed and I’ve already heard the spectrum about teacher evaluations, so…

M: Teacher evaluations are certainly a hot topic in Michigan right now. Davison has been…we don’t want to just change things to meet whatever the state is doing until we’re convinced that the state has reached their final decision. So we’ve been taking our previous evaluation instrument and we’ve been tweaking it to keep it consistent with the law so that we can continue using it. I think in the very near future we’re going to wind up with some serious recommendations from the state. “You’ve got to use one of these tools”, and we’re going to have to make a change. As far as the quality of the evaluation instrument I think there’s potential with the instrument that we use and I get you a copy of it before you leave if you like. I think there’s potential but I think it’s not used consistently. I know there are administrators throughout the district that you very much want to do your evaluation and there are administrators that you don’t at all want to do your evaluation. And they’re using the same instrument and that’s concerning to me. Another thing that really concerns me is the student growth component. I talked to a teacher just yesterday that during the MSTEP testing he had a student who wasn’t taking it seriously, just clicking buttons. And that’s fine it that’s what the student wants to do, but the problem is suddenly that student’s score is going to be reflected upon the teacher. And you can encourage them (the students), “You need to take this seriously. This is in your best interest.” But yet, at the end of the day, they’re going to do what they’re going to do. I’m not a fan of standardized testing and I never will be. I think they are inherently flawed and what’s worse they’re a snapshot. They’re a picture. That’s all they’re good for. You can look at a score and I can say, “On this day at this time, this is where you were and 20 minutes later you’re going to be at a different place.” I had a student last semester, in fact, that the week of common semester exams, everyone uses the same Economic exam.

C: Oh, across the district?

M: Across the district.

C: Ok.

M: And that’s great. A bright student had an A all year long. Hand was up every time I asked a question. Just a spectacular student. Turned in all her work. Consistently top-notched stuff. And she took her exam and did poorly on the exam, which was very, very surprising and that would have pulled her grade down from an A to an A- or B+. And she was very upset about the score. She didn’t ask us to change it. She didn’t ask to re-take it. She was just very disappointed in herself. I looked at that and realized that she had one bad day. And she had 89 exceptional days. And I changed her grade because she had one bad day that doesn’t mean that she should be punished for that. But our evaluation system that we’re using for teachers if those students have a bad day the teachers can be punished for that. So now we’re punishing a teacher for actions and the quality of performance from children. I mean this goes all the way down to Third Grade. These are children. My son took the MSTEP. He’s nine. And his score is going to be used to determine if his teacher is good or not. I know my son went through some of those tests, got sick of the test and was clicking buttons to get it over with. I love my son but I know he did that. I’m really concerned with that. I think that we have got to look at student performance. I think we’ve got to use that as a way to determine if our teachers are doing their job, but we’ve got to find a better way to do it. Because standardized testing isn’t it.

C: So now that you’re a tenured teacher, whatever “tenure” means in Michigan now, how often are you evaluated formally and informally?

M: Well, by the law, formal evaluations have to happen every year and originally the law said that if a teacher was rated “highly effective” three years in a row they would be evaluated every other year. And when they put a hold on the student growth component they didn’t reinstitute that provision which means that every teacher in the state of Michigan gets that formal evaluation every year and that evaluation has to be based on multiple observations. I’ve been around for a while and I’ve had very good evaluations and so they don’t visit my classroom as often as they visit others. The word “multiple” means more than one and I’ve had my evaluator, my administrator in my classroom once already and he’ll probably come back some time in the next week or two and I won’t see him again. And for the most part they leave my room alone. My administration knows my door is always open. They are always welcome to come in. I’ve invited them to come into my classroom to see lessons in the past and sometimes they come and sometimes they don’t. But I’ve been fortunate that when they’ve evaluated me those evaluations have been very positive so I’m kind of on their list of “We’re not going to worry too much about what’s going on in his room.” Unfortunately, in my role as union president, I know there are teachers that don’t always get positive evaluations and they do get more observations and that doesn’t often end well for the teacher. And to the credit of at least the administrators that I work with, they’re committed to helping people who are struggling. Then don’t just, “Well, you’re doing bad and now I’m going to do what I have to do to run you out of town.” They do everything within their power to provide opportunities to improve, to provide training, and supportive feedback and constructive feedback to help that teacher get better. And then it just comes to the teacher to utilize the resources that they’re being offered.

C: So evaluation form or instrument and the process isn’t just a checklist?

M: It’s not. It’s more evolved than that. Now ultimately the form itself, when they come in, they’ve got nine different indicators that they’re looking at and each of those indicators has a number of criteria listed and I don’t think even in two observations you could effectively rate a teacher’s performance on all of those indicators and so a lot of this is based on things that they’ve heard from colleagues and from student conversations and just the general feel that they have of the teacher. If they’re hearing good things and they’re not getting complaints then I think they err on the side that they’re probably doing a good job. If they’re getting emails from parents and phone calls and if they’re hearing from students that there is something wrong then they are going to do more observations and be able to have a stronger feel for each of those criteria on the checklist. But even on the checklist it’s not just “present” or “not present”. They evaluate whether the performance on that indicator is exceptional, if it’s average, if it’s below average so that they can provide feedback on, “You’re doing this, but you could be doing it better.”

C: So there’s a decent amount of feedback beyond the indicators?

M: I think that there is. There’s an opportunity in each of the nine categories and then at the end of the document itself for individualized comments and then a narrative component and I think that helps the district to be able to offer more constructive feedback then just, “Well, you’ve got a minus score on this indicator because you weren’t doing it on the day I came in.”

C: And like I said, I have heard the whole spectrum so far, from just a checklist with nothing written on it and it’s “check, check, check, check, check” whatever the checks are, to a full scale evaluation instrument and not only are the different areas checked off but then there’s written feedback for the teacher to respond to.

M: Right. And we have written feedback, like I said, and it’s really helpful. It does certainly add to the workload for the administrators with the evaluation. There’s no doubt about that. We’ve got 282 teachers. We have around 15 administrators. So that’s a lot of work for them, but I think in the long run it makes us a better district. That they put in the time.

C: Thanks, that’s a really good answer. You already mentioned part of Question #7: What types of mentoring were provided for you and how would you characterize the results of mentoring that was provided for you. And it sounds like you had a good mentor.

M: Yeah. My experience worked out really well. I think that some of it was luck. We just happened to have similar views on education and we were able to cultivate those views and really have the opportunity to expand upon that. My mentor is a little bit more progressive than I am. And so that’s been interesting that I can see the direction that he’s going and I can follow him but I can also see some of the challenges and struggles that he has had and modify that for my classroom for what works for me. What I’m a little disappointed in is that I have not had the opportunity to mentor another teacher.

C: Aw, that’s too bad.

M: We haven’t done a lot of hiring in my department and we try to have the mentors be in the same department and be geographically close (to the new teacher’s classroom) [that makes sense. You can hear what’s going on and it gives you time between classes for informal talks about what is going on in a day by day, hour by hour situation]. In just the physical layout of the building I’m surrounded by special education teachers so I haven’t had the opportunity to mentor others but I think that I have had an impact on other teachers because of my participation in various programs and pilots and things like that where I can talk to people about some of the ideas that we’re trying and the “goods” and “bads” about them because not every idea is a good idea. But to help them appreciate the value of some of the things that we are moving forward with. So I think that I’ve been able to impact other people, but I’ve never really had the opportunity to work directly as a mentor for a new teacher. And I think I’d enjoy doing that. I think I have got a lot to offer. And I’m sure that I will before the end of my career, it’s just up to this point the opportunity hasn’t fallen to me.

C: Question #8: Have you pursued continuing education, and I know you have, either in the form of graduate program or professional development and you’ve already made some comments about professional development, and how has this education influenced your success in the classroom?

M: Two or three years into teaching I decided to get a Master’s. And, honestly, mostly it was because I needed the money and it would enable me to move across the pay scale. But when I made the decision to get a Master’s I didn’t want to do a Master’s in Education or Educational Leadership or something like that from Marygrove. Not that those aren’t good programs, but I wanted what I consider a “real” Master’s. And as fate would have at the very same time the University of Michigan-Flint introduced a Master’s in Social Studies. I was part of the very first group that took that program. And it was great. I loved grad school. I really did. I enjoyed being able to go to classes and have discussions with people who were knowledgeable about the material and just as interested and passionate about the subject as I was. That was a lot of fun. But one of the things that I found in doing the program is that there were a lot of classes that I took where I could take the lessons and sometimes the exact material straight from class into my classroom the very next day. I took a program that strongly correlated and I found that my teaching changed. Prior to me being in grad school I had not taught economics. I was teaching U.S. History and Government. I actually went into teaching to teach Government and since found out that I don’t really like teaching Government. But I took some more economics classes in grad school and I took economics history classes and it changed the way I taught history as well. And I started looking at it (History) as less of a military history, less as a social history and more as an economic history. I think that’s been a benefit to my students. I think that’s offered them a perspective that you don’t see outside of the classroom (or, in many cases, even inside the classroom). That’s not going to make it on the History Channel and things like that. I think it also helps them to look a little more bit at the events that are going on and try and look at the backstory of why these events are taking place. In that regard I found grad school to be really, really great.

C: And you already made your comment about professional development.

M: Yeah. Professional development. I think there are ways that it can be better than what we offer and I’ve been trying to work with the district on ways to improve that. I think our district agrees that our professional development isn’t what it could be and they want to make it better, but that’s a really difficult thing to resolve. There are requirements by the state as far as school improvement and these sorts of things and so you’ve got to do that and that chews up a lot of our professional development time. Unfortunately most of that is just a paper chase and it doesn’t improve schools at all. That’s certainly an issue, whether the district agrees with me or not, we still have to push those papers. The goal is then to take the other professional development we do and make it more meaningful. And we’ve looked at changing the structure and changing the length of professional development opportunities as ways to make them more meaningful and I’m encouraged by what we’re looking at. (camera timed out at 30 minute mark based on how I am recording and uploading video).

C: Is there anything else that you want to say about continuing education besides professional development and your own grad program?

M: I guess as advice to future teachers I would say that continuing education looks like a burden when you first start it but it’s up to you on what you do and how you utilize it. You can do an Educational Leadership program. You can do a Curriculum Development program and maybe that is something that will benefit you. Maybe that’s a direction you want to go, but if it isn’t don’t do that. Do a program that you’re going to be able to benefit from personally and you’re going to be able to utilize in your career. Otherwise you’re just wasting your money.

C: And I know some of the students, nobody in this study, but other grads from Grand Valley, they think there’s a disincentive now to pursue graduate credit because of the way the schools…I think there was more of a push to get a Master’s and now they feel the money isn’t there. The backing for doing it isn’t there so they’re questioning whether or not they’re going to pursue it beyond the contract.

M: Well, yeah and the other concern is if you think there’s a chance that you might be looking for work the more continuing education you have the harder it’s going to be. It’s very difficult for a district to hire a teacher that’s got a Master’s or Master’s plus because they’re more expensive. So if that’s something you’re worried about then that’s a serious concern.

C: “Pearls of Wisdom” question: What would you tell current students, and you already touched upon this a little bit, to make sure they know before they start teaching? In other words, what do you wish you knew before you left Grand Valley?

M: I wish I knew that nobody actually writes a lesson plan the way that they teach us or the way I was taught at Grand Valley and if Grand Valley could stop teaching people or requiring people to write lesson plans that way that would be helpful. No one writes a formal lesson plan the way you’re taught in your program. If you did for every lesson you teach that would be all that you would do is write lesson plans. So give that up. You have to do that in order to satisfy your professor so make your professor happy and the moment you don’t have a professor then look at what you actually have to do, what really works and what you need to have available and go from there.

C: Now for your formal evaluations, is there a format the school wants you to follow?

M: They do look at lesson plans but there isn’t a specific format. What I have to do is I have to have the standards that I’m teaching to. We, in Davison, have identified we go with, “I Can Statements”, which I believe links to the Common Core.

C: Right. Saw it on your board.

M: And those are supposed to be on the board, right. And then assessment. How are you going to determine if the students have learned what you are trying to teach them? Now, for me, personally, I type up my lesson plans, they take about a page, but I re-use them year after year and so I have “Day One, in this unit, this is what we’re going to do.” And every four or five years I update them because I’m constantly adjusting what I’m doing as I’m going. You develop a feel for your students. When they’re understanding, when they’re not. And to take the time to write up your lesson plan every day and stick to it, that’s detrimental. That’s not in your students’ best interest. You need to be flexible. You need to recognize that every student is different and they’re all going to carry their own different baggage. For some students their baggage is going to be frustrating. It’s going to make it difficult for as a teacher and you’ve got to be flexible then. And going along with that is you’ve got to be willing to do things different if you want them to do things different. You’ve got to be willing to get out of your comfort zone and experiment with things and try new things and if you’re willing to do that your students will be willing to do that. One of the things that I’ve been a strong supporter of for the last several years is differentiated instruction. I give a lot of assignments where there are multiple ways to accomplish the goal. Whether it’s writing a letter or making a graph or drawing cartoons and explaining them, there are a lot of different ways to me you understand it. I don’t care which way you show me. All I care is that you understand it. And having that kind of flexibility with your students and letting them feel like they have a ‘say’ in their learning process, it’s going to make it a lot easier for them to learn. It’s going to make it a lot less frustrating for you because not every kid wants to write a paper. In fact most kids don’t want to write a paper, but not every kid is good at writing a paper. For some kids, they’re more artistic and if you let them draw you a picture and explain the picture, some kids are musical. Let them write a song, let them write a poem. There’s all kinds of ways to get at what you want and that’s the end result, “Do you understand the content? Do you understand the concept? I don’t care how you do it.” We need to re-evaluate the way that we grade. The traditional way of grading, you give the homework assignment and they do it or they don’t do it and they get so many points for it, and all of those points equal a grade. You’re punishing kids for practice. They shouldn’t get them all right on the homework assignment. They shouldn’t know all the answers and by taking points away from them and lowering their grade because they practiced. They goofed up. It doesn’t make any sense. You’re hurting them for not knowing things that they were not supposed to know. And we’ve got to re-evaluate that. Homework has its place and you should give homework from time to time.

C: The activity sheet, that’s homework, correct?

M: Yeah. Absolutely, that’s homework. But it shouldn’t define their grade. Their projects where you’re giving them a lot of time, you’re working on the content through the unit, those should define their grade. Their tests? Those should define their grade, if their test is good. And that leads me to my other concern. You need to know how to write a test. You need to know how to create an assessment. That’s hard. And I don’t feel at Grand Valley I was taught how to do that. (Grand Valley now has an assessment class.) It’s hard to write a worthwhile multiple choice question. Because you can write a multiple choice question that really gets down to, “Do you really understand this material?” It’s doable, but it’s hard to do it. And if you have never been taught how to do it you’re going to write a lot of bad questions first. And you need to look at the value of your questions. One of the other things that we’ve been doing at Davison a lot is depth of knowledge. When I score a test I don’t care how many questions the students got right. That’s not what I’m interested in. What I want to know is which questions they got right and I break the test down into three different categories: the really easy questions all the way up to the really hard questions and there are more easy questions on the test. But I want to know are they proficient on each of those levels? Did they get the majority…78% is my cut-off. That’s the state cut-off and we give the same test in every class so that’s what we’ve adopted. If they can get 78% of the easy questions right, you know what? They get the easy stuff. If they can get 78% of the medium stuff right then they know the medium stuff. Same thing with the hard stuff. You can write assessments that way and you can evaluate students that way but it’s harder and it’s going to take more time. But it’s also worth it.

C: They (GVSU COE) actually added to the program an assessment class.

M: Good.

C: Since you graduated and I will be honest with you I don’t know all the information that goes into that class but it seems from seminar discussions the students have at least a better understanding of what goes into it.

M: Well, that’s good.

C: But it’s still a question because I’ll see the product and number 1, the types of assessments that they have to use because they’re with a CT (Classroom Teacher) and then we will have discussions in class about what they think about that (the evaluations) and sometimes those discussions are pretty in depth and they will say, “That’s dumb” or “Ok, that makes sense to me” or “That’s just the way it is”, and it’s obvious from the discussion that they are still trying to grapple with “What is the intent of the evaluation and how does it really show what my students are doing?”

M: It is really, really easy to identify a bad assessment.

C: Yeah.

M: It’s really, really hard to make a good one. And that’s going to come with practice. Having a class that to address that. Having a class trying to teach some of the fundamentals of that is fantastic. But you’re never really going to get it until you start doing it.

C: And then it’s going to be hard.

M: It’s going to be hard. There’s no doubt about it.

C: Is there any else you would like to add?

M: Don’t give essay tests the day before Spring Break! I did that my first year teaching. None of my co-workers told me not to. I think they all just figured, “He’s the new kid. Let him learn the hard way like we did.” Don’t do that! (The laughter was because we both knew that now he had to grade all those essays over Spring Break.) That’s a terrible, terrible strategy. Yes, essay tests can be awesome, but not before vacation.

C: You’re not supposed to murder yourself to the cause?

M: No.

C: Last question: Was there any information you would like to add about teaching career that’s not covered in these questions?

M: I think a lot of people go into education because they love their subject. They’re passionate about math or science or history and that’s great. That’s awesome. That is not a reason to go into education. It’s a reason to teach a certain course but it’s not a reason to go into education. I love history. I love social studies. And when I went into education I learned very, very quickly that I’m not the starring character in this play. It’s not about me. It’s about the students in the room and you have to love the students. You have to love working with the kids that you’re working with. And that can’t be taught to somebody. There’s no amount of methods classes or college courses or any thing. That’s just in you. You have to love helping young people. And there are days where we don’t touch the content. We don’t get there because they’ve got other things going on. They’ve got other issues and concerns that need to be addressed and you have to be prepared to do that. It’s got to be about the kids. And the teachers that struggle, they’re the teachers that they went into this because they love their subject. They went into this because they expected something different. If you love working with young people, whether it’s teenagers or whether it’s little elementary kids, and God bless you if you want to teach elementary, you’ve got to love working with kids. And that’s probably the most important part about what we do. And I know you know that and you felt the same way and that’s how you got through your career and why you’re still doing it after having already completed a career but that is the paramount thing. Have a sense of humor. Laugh with your kids. You’re going to do stupid things. You’re going to say stupid things in front of them. It’s going to happen. Laugh. I sat down in my desk chair and I leaned back and the chair went over and I was laying on my back with my feet sticking up and bless my students, they checked to make sure I wasn’t dead before they started laughing. Laugh. Enjoy your job. There will be bad days. There will be days where the boss comes in and he tells you you have to do something that you don’t want to do. There will be days when the boss yells at you because of something stupid you did and you will do stupid things. That happens. There will be days where you just have had it with this kid and there will be days where you seriously question, “Why am I doing this?” And take a deep breath and come in tomorrow and laugh and love what you do. And if you don’t, it’s time to do something else.

C: It’s time to do something else. Thanks Mike.