

# The Learning Plan

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## Personal Narrative

I was born in Iloilo City, Philippines on November 24, 1965. One of the most significant traits of my family was a strong attachment to tradition. This was partially owing to our Roman Catholic background as well as our Filipino heritage. These factors played a significant role in my early upbringing, which affected all aspects of my life. One such aspect was my education. In keeping with family tradition, I was sent to a Roman Catholic private school, Collegio del Sagrado Corazon de Jesus, run by the Sisters of Charity. It was stereotypically Catholic: there was an emphasis on academic excellence, rigour and discipline. Those first few weeks of school were, as a result of being left alone in a roomful of strangers, terrifying primarily because I was a highly emotional and sensitive child, indulged and accustomed to having my own way. I am sure that my teachers were unimpressed. Initially, I came to see them as my enemies: strangers not to be trusted: overly strict and reprimanding. Teachers, however, were well-respected members of the Roman Catholic community I grew up in. Their judgement was irreproachable, their verdict unquestioned. Despite my stubbornness and also out of fear, I too, learned to respect them.

When my family immigrated to Canada in the early seventies and I started elementary school in Winnipeg, a different kind of fear surrounding school ensued. This time it was a fear of the students, not

the teachers that I had to contend with. Being a visible minority in a primarily Caucasian environment meant being ostracized, ridiculed and dismissed by the other students. My teachers became my allies, primarily because I was a well-behaved, hard-working student, solicitous of their knowledge. Hence, I was usually assigned the coveted positions of teacher's marker and lunch purchaser: plum roles that compounded my already flagging reputation with some of the other students.

It was at this point that I thought about the possibility of becoming a teacher, seeing as teachers were seemingly possessed of enviable powers and authority. My elementary school experiences – both in Canada and the Philippines – testified to this notion. All throughout my adolescence, as I my academic life progressed, these early notions of what a teacher's life was like appealed to me. There seemed no question in my mind that this was the profession I would pursue in university. My other interest in fashion design seemed unattainable to me somehow, partially due to the stigma attached to the notion of a boy being interested in a field associated to girls. Education seemed the more practical, potentially lucrative career choice to make.

My first student-teaching experiences confirmed a natural aptitude I had to the profession. I possess a natural empathy to people in general, with a capacity to listen, observe and affirm. For their part, the students responded to me in a way that indicated a natural ability to relate to them in ways that superseded the typical teacher-student roles. Ironically, I never exercised those notions of power or authority I had initially been

enamoured of. There did not seem to be a need to do this. Despite this, however, I felt consistently affirmed by the admiration, gratitude and inquisitiveness from my students.

Most of my career has involved teaching English as a Second Language. It was my introduction to this particular field of teaching that my approach began to change. In this role, I have learned to be even more sensitive to the needs of students than when I was teaching in the public school system. English as a Second Language students have the language and cultural barriers that do not exist for native speakers in the public school system. I have, therefore, learned to consider these factors in planning, evaluating and relating to students in my charge.

Past experiences have taught me invaluable things about teaching in the field of English as a Second Language. Sometimes, these lessons can be difficult ones, such as the notion of keeping promises regarding intended class lessons and activities, which, when foregone on – usually due to a more relaxed attitude towards time management – is regarded as a loss of credibility in many cultures. Similarly, consistency in maintaining equity among students avoiding favouring some over others is another important consideration. Reading about new research into the field as well as attending Teaching as a Second Language (TESL) conferences and participating in professional development sessions for recent innovations in the field also help. During such opportunities, I acquired many new resources, materials and ideas.

Today, the relationships I have with students are what I would deem affable though professional. In the past, I used to cultivate a more casual, sociable and interactive relationship with them – having them for dinner at my home, for instance, or out to a movie. That has changed over the last few years, partially due to the current nature of my job, which does not accommodate regular social activities with students as much as in the past. There is also a lack of inclination on my part to engage in these kinds of social activities. I spend more time away from classes on my personal pursuits, hence, am less likely to interact with students during those times. Recently, I have found it healthy and crucial to spend time away from the educational setting since my intention is to attain a balance between work and a personal life.

From the various contexts outlined, I believe I have come to develop many assets and challenges that may impact on this program. Assets include the many years of experiences in teaching that can act as anecdotal, though realistic, reference points. Self-discipline is another strength that I believe I possess. This is highly evident in my ability to balance my roles of instructor, administrator, clothing designer, and student. Each of these fields embody aspects that have to be independently learned, initiated, cultivated, and completed within a specified time limit. Finally, I have access to resources within the institution I work that could act as a means of support.

There is no doubt that challenges will present themselves along the path to completing this program. These include the time factor. I work full

time, in a field whose time parameters are indefinable; one completes one's work when it is done, and not necessarily at a prescribed hour. In addition to full time work, there are other pursuits I am engaged in, which have similar restrictions imposed on them. These may act as obstacles to completing this program. Having maintained this kind of lifestyle in the past, however, I have become accustomed to the pressures it entails, even thrive on them. I have become adept at time management, ensuring that work is prioritized according to schedules and degree of urgency.

Within the field of education I currently find myself in has come much knowledge culled from years of personal and professional experience. In the past, I used to be reluctant to inquire about that which I had no knowledge. For many of those questions, I felt that I should have already known the answer. I have since come to realize that the acquisition of accurate knowledge is more important to me than appeasing egotistical notions of correct behaviour. Past experiences, both positive and negative, place me in the position of anticipation, ready to rise to the challenges of the work ahead.

### Program Goals

In the twelve years that I have been working in the field of literacy and language acquisition, I have become interested in assessing whether learning as a whole may be measured relative to individual instructor style, and how much learning can be attributed to instruction as opposed

to a student's autonomous initiative. The question I have now focuses on how much autonomous learning plays in successful learning.

Part of what fulfills me as a teacher is the highly discernible progress that students make from the time they start a course to the time they finish. The distinction between the ranges in vocabulary and sentence structure and usage, particularly in verbal communication, is intriguing to me. How does this happen? Is there a difference, between individuals in the time that it takes for them to learn a new language? Is it simply a matter of motivation? If so, what motivates one to learn? What are the mechanisms that allow one to learn? Does instruction play a great role in whether one learns or not?

Specifically, I would like to focus on the area of self-directed learning, which to me is a more independent, critically-thinking approach to learning as well as to education. It is an interest in discovering approaches or methodologies that encourage students to learn for themselves and to enjoy the learning process. In so being, self-directed learning presumes that learning can be achieved through self-motivation. I am uncertain as to how to assess such an approach since learning something new involves complex interaction of personal and social factors.

It is the fascination with how one is motivated to learn that is my focus in future career development because doing so would attain a level of humanism in teaching that may have been previously lacking.

## Research Project: Possibilities

In the last few weeks, I have had the opportunity to read about the area in adult education known as self-directed learning. It is an area that has fascinated me for many years, despite being unaware that such a phenomenon even had a name. Liberation and affirmation are two aspects of learning that I plan to expand on in this program because it is these experiences that conventional education still lacks. I have recently read “Learning to Listen Learning to Teach” by Jane Vella (2002) and it is her designing and implementing teaching methodologies that employ a humanistic approach to learning, in addition to addressing social, political and economic issues, that I am inspired by. Vella’s approach, which has as its foundation, a belief in quantum theory – that is, the belief in the universal synergy that interconnects all – assesses the learning involved from a specific context. The approach she takes is compassionate as well as effective. I would like to be able to implement a similar approach to the classes I currently teach, as well as to future prospects of working for humanitarian organizations. Other examples of literature include the works of Paulo Freire, specifically his book entitled “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (1972), and the seminal work of Malcolm Knowles and Alan Tough. There is much for me learn at this stage and I am certain of the existence of other inspiring writers on the subject. For now, I am tentatively focused in this area of adult education.

At no time has the notion of self-directed learning been more significant to me than today. I have been teaching in the field of ESL for over 12 years and as a result, have been fascinated with the myriad ways that adults learn. Unlike the kind of learning I was subjected to in my early academic life, the field of ESL is more accommodating of a self-directed approach to learning in contrast to other fields that adhere to more conventional forms of education. For example, the ESL program I teach in – a non-credited program through a continuing education division of a liberal arts university – acts as a conduit to regular university classes. In choosing this option, learners are engaged in linguistic skills that can familiarize them with North American university life: essay writing, reading, discussion groups, oral presentations, and note taking. Lessons often utilize multi-media presentations – video, audio, newspapers, guest lecturers – that not only develop listening and note-taking skills, but also provoke thought and incite responses. Such exercises can be intimidating to the learners in my program because they are not accustomed to a student-centred approach in teaching. Such exercises, however, can be liberating and affirming of these same learners. It is these latter experiences that I want to expose learners to more of. It is these that I want to learn more about.