

If you would have told me thirty years ago that in the spring of 2021, at the age of 51, I would be an adjunct faculty member and educator at multiple universities while also preparing to graduate from the [Master of Arts in Education](#) program at [Michigan State University](#), I would have been certain you had me confused with someone else. Having barely graduated from high school ([literally by a single credit hour](#)) in the summer of 1988, followed by a disastrous summer semester at the [Santa Rosa Junior College](#), a failed move to southern California, another failed semester at the SRJC, only then finally deciding to enlist in the [Army](#) in May of 1989 when I was literally out of options; the last thing I would have been thinking about was that one day I would be earning a graduate degree in the field of education. If hindsight over the past three decades has taught me anything, it is the fact that there is nothing more valuable or important than an education. A quality education is even more important for individuals who serve as coaches, educators, and mentors because of the opportunity they have to shape and guide the lives of others.

This was the sole reason I became involved in teaching almost 23 years ago in the summer of 1998 as a volunteer for the non-profit organization [ByteBack](#) in Washington, D.C. Every Saturday I would make the trek into the city to teach low- and no-income individuals basic computer and [Windows95](#) skills. It was during this time as a volunteer that I experienced an overwhelming feeling of accomplishment and joy in seeing others achieve their learning goals, gaining some new skills, and possibly changing their station in life. This was also, sadly, a time where I would witness first hand the challenges that technology can present for those without a basic education. There is one moment that stands out among all the rest. One Saturday a learner in his 40s asked for help and I told them to click on the menu bar where is said "START". After a brief pause, the individual looked up at me and said, "I don't know how to read." This left me absolutely devastated. I worked in some small reading exercises with the technology lessons over the next few weeks, but it was knowing that in some small way I might be a part of their personal transformation and growth, that I might help them change their station in life possibly or at least make life even a little more enjoyable for them, that was a feeling that I had never before experienced. It wouldn't be until decades later that I encountered a quote by [Boyd Varty](#) that captured this feeling when he said, "There is nothing more healing than finding your gifts and sharing them." I wanted to ensure that I was sharing the absolute best version of myself in my capacity as a coach, educator, technology professional, and lifelong learner. This is what led me to the MAED program at Michigan State University.

Now, with just a few weeks to go before graduation from the MAED program, and what will be the end of my learning journey at Michigan State University in sight, the personal growth I have experienced still seems and feels all a bit surreal. In some ways I struggle with the words to accurately describe just how monumental the shift in my mindset has been. Every semester and every course was like an epiphany of discovery, inquiry and learning which served to light up the path before me as I journeyed from course to course. I decided that I would only take a single course each semester to ensure that my focus would be dedicated to an individual topic and it really wasn't the degree I was focused on. No, it was the process, the learning, the discovery.

Each course also had a very common, and invaluable, characteristic which was the feedback provided by the instructors. For me, this is what added so much value to each course and really made the experience so rich and rewarding. This type of constant and consistent formative

feedback is something I have tried to bring to the courses that I teach and the response from my learners has mirrored my reaction and appreciation. While each course provided its own unique and rewarding learning experience, there were three courses that truly stood out and that deeply resonated around my life's passions. Each of these courses has had a seismic impact on my mindset and transformed who I am today as a youth sports coach, educator, technology professional, and lifelong learner: [KIN-857: Promoting Positive Youth Development Through Sport](#), [CEP-820: Teaching Students Online](#) and this course, [ED-870: The Capstone Seminar](#).

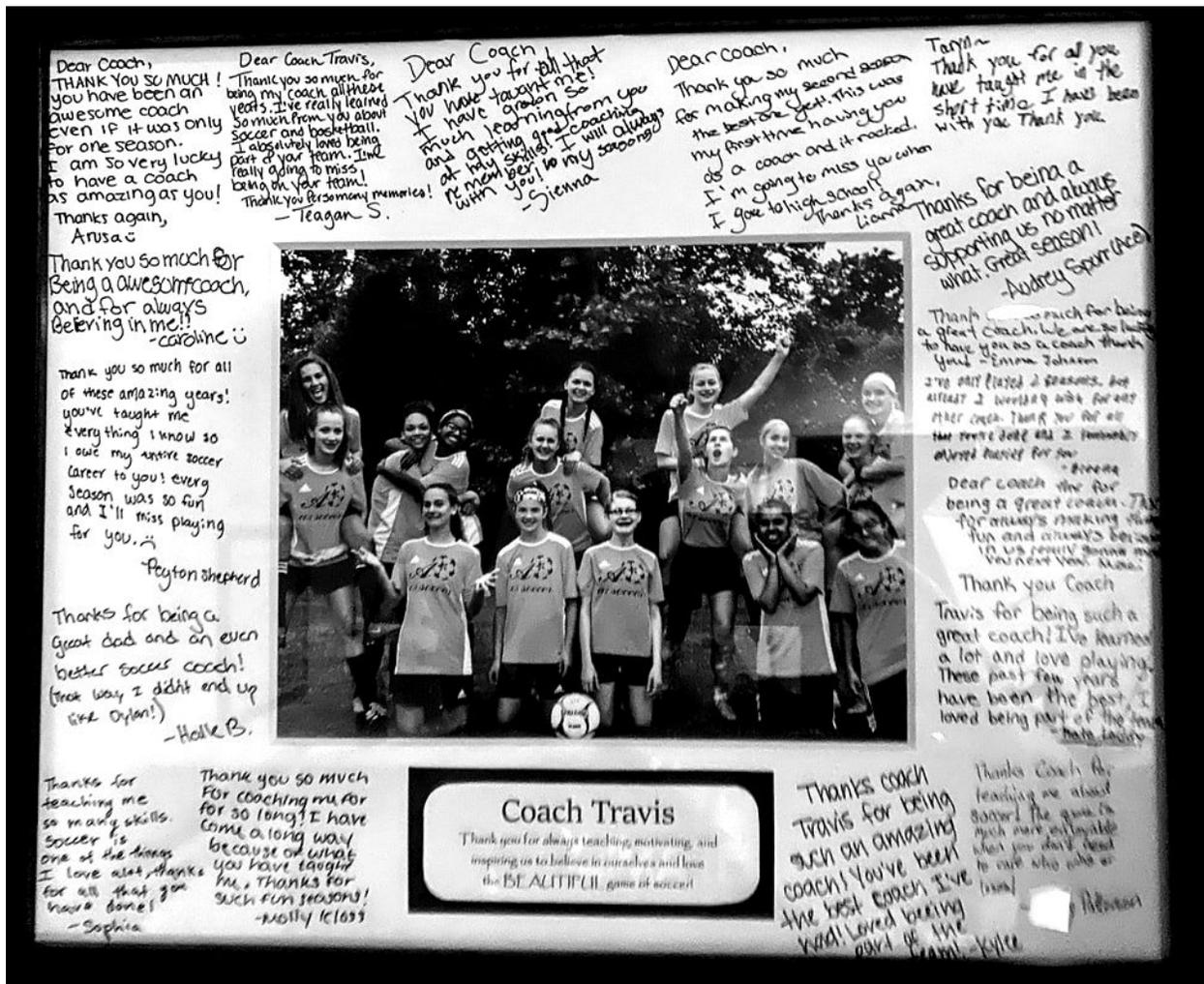
KIN-857: Promoting Positive Youth Development Through Sport (Fall 2018) was the first of several kinesiology courses I would take during my time at Michigan State University. When you hear the word "kinesiology" you might think sports medicine, but the field is about so much more than just that. This course, and specifically one of the major reading assignments we had to complete during the course, would turn out to be one of the most transformational experiences related to my passion and mindset as a youth sports coach. During KIN-857 we were asked to read the book [InSideOut Coaching: How Sports Can Transform Lives](#), by former professional football player [Joe Erhmann](#). Ironically, the high school where Erhmann coached, and around which the story of the book is centered, [Gillman](#), is just a 30 minute ride from where I currently live. In the book, Erhmann describes an end-of-season team building ritual that he would ask the seniors on the team perform. The activity consisted in having those seniors reflect, write and then read in front of the rest of the team a [eulogy](#). It wasn't just any eulogy however. It was their own eulogy. Erhmann was asking the seniors to pen their own eulogy that they would like to have read at their funeral service. In other words, they would be creating a narrative of how they wanted to be remembered by the ones they love. They were describing their legacy in advance. They were beginning with the end in mind. However, it was Erhmann's sharing of his eulogy that triggered something deep inside me.

I still remember where I was (lying in bed) when I read this chapter from the book. The idea of writing your own eulogy and what you would want others to say about you was something that I had never considered. I had also never given any thought around what I wanted my legacy to be either. When I stopped to think about what I would write for my eulogy it led to a very long period of reflection and introspection of the last (at the time) 49 years of my life. In fact, I was so moved by the question that it was the first thing that I thought about the next morning upon waking up. I had never stopped to consider what others - youth athletes, parents and other coaches I had come into contact with over the years - would say about me if asked. While I have always tried to do my best there were also some epic failures along the journey. More importantly, what the life lessons that I was teaching my players and would those lessons make a difference in their lives after sports.

Looking back on the early years of being a coach I knew, shamefully and regrettably, that the answer would be a resounding, 'No!'. I still carry a lot of guilt for the coach I was and some of the decisions I made. Winning equaled good and everything else was failure. If you didn't like how things were going - just walk away. I just didn't get it. I didn't have the experience and scaffolding needed as a coach to truly understand that youth sports should be about so much more than just winning and championships. Youth sports is about transforming the game into a vehicle for the teaching of life skills like leadership, teamwork, resilience, and sportsmanship. Skills that will actually make a difference later in life. That is far more important than winning. Success for youth sports coaches should not be measured in wins or championships, but in the

percentage of players who want to come back and play the following season because they are having fun, making friends and learning new skills. These are the lessons learned from KIN-857 that have forever changed how I approach my role as a youth sport coach.

KIN-857 is the course that would set the tone for all the other courses that would follow and lead me to ask the same question for all of the different roles and passions in my life: What do I want my legacy as a technology professional to be? How do I want to be remembered as an educator? Once I started applying this question to all aspects of my life I found answers to questions that have been haunting me for decades. Today, as a youth sport coach, my definition of an undefeated season is one where all my players come back the following season and these are the only trophies that matter to me now:



CEP-820: Teaching Students Online (Summer 2018) was another course that deeply resonated with me as an educator and adjunct faculty member who teaches in a primarily online or hybrid capacity. It also reminded me of the saying, "You don't know what you don't know." and what I was starting to realize is that I had no idea what I was doing when it came to providing rich and rewarding learning experiences for my online learners. Up to this point in my career I had been teaching primarily in an online or hybrid capacity for

almost two decades, but I had always focused my efforts on the technical material and making sure that I would appear to be that 'sage on the stage'. I gave little to no thought about the overall learner experience. I can still remember looking over the student opinion forms (that get filled out at the end of each semester around the quality of the course) and skimming over all the feedback with the exception of the feedback that dealt with the category of instructor expertise. Learner experience was more of an afterthought at that time and my feeling was that if the learner was struggling, it wasn't something caused by my lack of wizardry in the course. Don't get me wrong, as the instructor you certainly need to be the Subject Matter Expert (SME), but it is how you use that expertise that matters most and this is where CEP-820 provided crystal-like clarity.

In CEP-820 I was introduced to terms like synchronous, asynchronous, and flipped classrooms. While it might seem odd, these were all terms that I had never heard before in the context of online learning. I discovered myriad pedagogical approaches to enhance the online learner experience through targeted feedback, the use of varied New Media Text and Tools (NMTT) like [Kahoot](#), [Camtasia](#), and [Popplet](#). This was also a course that would introduce me to the amazing work of [Robert Bjork](#) from the [University of California at Los Angeles \(UCLA\)](#). Having never really looked into the cognitive science of learning I was blown away when the following video was recommended to me by the instructor of CEP-820: [How We Learn Versus How We Think We Learn](#). I still remember watching the video below and just being blown away by the fact that every approach to enhancing long-term retention and transfer of knowledge that Dr. Bjork pointed out, I was doing the exact opposite in my teaching. My focus was always on blocked practice, not interleaving. My focus was always on attempting the chapter quizzes and exams AFTER the reading, not before. My focus was always on the grades and not the learning. My focus was always on the leaving no spacing between studying of the material. My focus was always on making things easy for the learner and avoiding 'desirable difficulties'. It was after watching this video that I sat down and started my own version of a [pedagogical creed](#) to create a roadmap of who I wanted to be as educator.

The other part of CEP-820 that was absolutely invaluable was the linking of all the NMTT and theory into a built-from-scratch [Desire2Learn \(D2L\)](#) online exemplar course. Little did I know at the time, but this would turn out to be one of the most valuable activities for when the pandemic struck in the spring of 2020, and all courses were moved online, I was able to help other instructors transition their material into a fully online format. I could see the change in learner satisfaction almost immediately after changing my approach to online learning. As an educator, there is no greater feeling than receiving feedback like the kind below to remind you that all of the hard work, evolution and learning was worth it. This unsolicited write-up was posted to [LinkedIn](#) by a learner from one of the [University of Maryland Global Campus \(UMGC\) Cisco Networking Academy](#) courses I taught in the spring of 2021. Had it not been for my experience and exposure to CEP-820, this would have never become a reality. CEP-820 completely transformed my online pedagogical approach and taught me how to build engaging and rewarding online courses that result in feedback like this:



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Finishing up my last week of CCNP class and I'm quite impressed with what I learned! I initially went into this class nervous I wouldn't understand a thing. However thanks to **Travis Bonfigli** awesome tutorials, curriculum, and Packet Tracer crashing a few times, I am comfortable with terms and concepts I never thought possible! OSPFv2/3, eBGP, GRE!! So thankful to have chosen UMGC as a school that embraces labs and projects versus essays and memorization.

It is no coincidence that my final course of the MAED program is also the final course that I wanted to highlight as being truly transformational for me on so many levels. ED-870: Capstone Seminar (Spring 2021) might seem like an odd course to include among one of the most transformational of all the courses I have taken at Michigan State University, but there is a very good reason for its inclusion here. For a number of years I have wanted to do exactly this: create a single location that reflected my life's work up to this point in my career. This course has presented me with an opportunity to do exactly that. I not only have the opportunity, but the support, to present the curation and celebration of my life's work (to this point anyway) through a single pane of glass. I have been able to gather all of the artifacts from my coaching, education, and technology I had no idea that ED-870 was going to provide me with this opportunity and when I found out that this was what my final course at Michigan State University was going to be all about, I could not have devised a more fitting assignment had I been the one designing the course.

ED-870 also provided me with what I consider to be the missing link in my pedagogical approach to being an educator. During the very first instructor video in the course Dr. Koehler mentioned the book, [Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning](#). The irony is that the book wasn't even part of the class, but when I saw the title I had to dig deeper and so I picked up a copy on Amazon. This was the final piece to my pedagogical puzzle as an educator and I immediately implemented a number of the approaches to move away from grading and to move closer to learning. I could not think of a better way to close out my three years at Michigan State University than discovering the aforementioned book and producing a personal and professional portfolio as a celebration of my life's work.

It is truly hard to believe that three years have all gone by in what seems like the blink of an eye. With the end of my learning journey at Michigan State University now just weeks away there is already an ephemeral sense of accomplishment and a realization that, while this learning journey is at its end, this is also the start of a new journey to now seek out new educational opportunities to continue along my path of a lifelong learner and to continue to do everything in my power to be the best version of myself possible.