“What have I learned in this course and how can I apply this information to my teaching?” is the question to be answered.

In order to answer this question, I must reflect over the past 6 weeks of readings, responses, discussions and the Unit Planning Project as well. Initially, I was curious as to “how” Dr. Conley was going to cover such a wide range (k-12) of material in literacy considering the complexity of teaching literacy to a “specific” target age group never mind a span of 12 years. I was pleasantly surprised by his approach and method of instruction. What I considered to be a challenge, Dr. Conley managed to successfully blend a vast variety of informative material that covered every necessary age range suitable for every student in the course. What I found to be very clever and helpful was the inclusion of a “Strategy Glossary” which, upon investigating and researching the definitions of its contents, proved to be very informative. I will readily keep this glossary list available for future reference.

The organization of the course I personally found to be helpful. Each “topic folder” contained articles and websites relevant to a specific “topic” pertaining to literacy that explored different avenues of study, approaches, philosophies, research studies and perspectives. Each folder contained a compilation of information in which every student could create an individualized learning plan based on his or her own teaching level and/or interest. This format not only allowed me to read material and have discussions relevant to my teaching level, but other levels as well. I found it helpful to read articles and student discussions at literacy at the middle and high school levels. I never really have an opportunity to gain insight regarding their struggles, challenges and successes. Those perspectives really made me re-evaluate “how” and “what” I teach in relation to “what will be important to the student in their future literacy education”. It became clearly apparent just how crucial the skills, strategies, and approaches that I teach at the elementary level are in relation to the continued learning of the student throughout their academic career. This experience in itself was very enlightening for me.

To answer my initial question of “What have I learned in this class?” I reflect upon all of the topics we covered. First and foremost, I walk away with the idea of each student learning in independent ways. We read and discussed how each student brings their own personal experiences to their learning process. With that idea in mind, we focused on the importance of a teacher getting to know each student personally and being equipped with varied approaches in their method of instruction. It is essential that we as teachers remember that not all students learn identically nor are their interests exactly the same either. We have to remain focused on the fact that it is “our job” to reach each and every student in such a capacity that affords them the opportunity to reach their highest academic potential and that means maintaining creativity and flexibility. While I always
made attempts in the past to achieve this goal, I am more aware than ever of the vital necessity of this perspective.

The importance of early literacy exposure and education was discussed to establish a strong foundation for children to build upon. We read about the goal of “No Child Left Behind” and how we can make a difference in adolescent literacy. Early intervention was addressed with the focus on learning your student’s strengths and weaknesses to better aid their learning process. One article discussed how methods and teaching practices were what ultimately produced successful achievement, not the materials involved. Included in this article was a list of characteristics held by more effective teachers such as; providing explicit instruction, using classroom routines, challenging and involving students, creating a supportive, encouraging, and friendly classroom climate, engaging in lots of constructive teacher-student exchanges, offering a variety of reading materials, scheduling frequent library visits, crafting stimulating curricular activities, asking many inferential questions, and displaying student work prominently. I felt compelled to implement this list because I believe in its contents and I will work harder next year to achieve the goals contained on this list. We also read about the importance of preparing students through motivation and prior knowledge. Building vocabulary, background knowledge, providing story foundation, how the approach to the text can be critical, and the value and importance of making a personal connection for the students and attaching personal relevance to topics to be studied. We also read about different learning domains and the importance they have when determining an approach of instruction. The article compared knowledge that is highly structured around rules or procedures (such as mathematics) versus domains which are more ill structured because their core principles do not involve routine procedures or set rules for arriving at outcomes (such as literature and history). The characteristics of these academic domains have a direct bearing on the texts used to create them and the way teachers use those texts to facilitate student learning (Jetton & Alexander). I personally enjoyed this article, because I learned exactly where my daughter is coming from, where her learning domain is concerned, and consequently I am better equipped to teach her effectively. I look forward to implementing this new outlook in a classroom as well. We also read about the importance of students leaning comprehension strategies (guided comprehension) in a variety of settings using multiple levels and types of texts. There are 3 Stages: 1. Teacher-directed whole-group instruction 2. Teacher-guided small-group instruction and student-facilitated independent practice and 3. Teacher-facilitated whole-group reflection and goal setting. I think teaching comprehension strategies is a critical skill necessary to ensure continued learning, understanding and applying information for students. Another topic of study covered content area writing, writing assignments and writing assessment. I was particularly excited to read and discuss this topic because I feel my writing skills are weak and I don’t feel I am properly equipped to teach upper elementary writing effectively. I loved the article “Constructing Writing Strategies With Learners” and I really enjoyed the conversations surrounding this topic among the students in this course. This article discussed strategy instruction versus the process approach. Recent research indicates that strategy instruction embedded within a process approach can help achieve a balance in the development of skills and process (Collins, 1998; Englert, 1990; Harris & Graham, 1992; MacArthur, Schwartz, et al., 1991).
Essentially their theory is there needs to be a balance of strategic writing instruction and writing experiences. This makes perfect sense to me. As with most things in life, there always needs to be balance involved. This follows the philosophy of there being no “one” specific method of instruction to effectively suit all learners. This course has made that idea a reality for me. We also touch upon the idea of developing lifelong readers, writers and learners. We as teachers can model and promote this lifelong learning philosophy to our students by constantly challenging ourselves as well. I am a firm believer in “practicing what I preach”. This article shed new light on just how valuable it is to create an interesting learning atmosphere in my classroom as well as challenging myself personally, academically, and professionally. Finally, we also read and discussed the importance of building a literacy community that flows between school and home. Not only is communication between school and home important, but so is literacy. I think any teacher would agree with the contents of the articles covering this topic.

Finally, as I reviewed the “Course Objectives” for this course, I realized I accomplished every intended objective listed. I: better understand and work within the current climate of high expectations and accountability, have a better understanding for assessing students for instruction, have a better understanding of how to motivate students for learning, how to organize myself and students for instruction, how to prepare students by building their prior knowledge, learned the importance of and how to develop students’ vocabulary and language in my subject area, am better equipped on how to promote better comprehension within my subject area, feel more confident in guiding students to reason and problem solve, have a better ability to teach and assess writing in content areas, will be able to better create a community within and outside my classroom, and see the value and believe in promoting lifelong learning for my students and myself.

To Dr. Conley, I hope I did you and this course justice in this paper. I learned more in this course than I can possibly express in writing. I do not think expressing my thoughts in words is strength for me, so I hope I managed to convey just how valuable this course was for me. I will take what I learned from the glossary, our readings, and our discussions and utilize this information in a classroom. I felt you demonstrated by your organization and the variety of material covered, that you also believe in what this course and its contents stood for. Another lesson learned: “believe in what you teach and those you teach will be more inclined to believe in it too!” Thank you for your time and effort. It is most appreciated. Good luck with your book writing, I will be looking on the shelves for your future work! Have a great summer!