Learning is a life long process in which an individual acquires information that causes maturity and purpose. This process often leads people to operate as functional individuals in our society. Information acquired in the learning process can come from a variety of situations such as formal education and life experiences. The multiplicity of experiences in my life has surely helped me to mature.

Learning is multidimensional. It is intellectual and what I call heart smart. On one part, there is the mental stimulation that is gained through learning and assessed through many forms of written and performance-based tests. However, one cannot focus primarily on the intellectual. Learning must also be achieved in the areas that affect the choices and empathic intelligence of a person, leaving him or her empowered to make a difference in their lives and in the lives of others. Otherwise the individual is unbalanced and lost.

There is also a difference between acquiring information and being able to understand and apply the information that has been learned. In attempts to understand myself as a learner, I discovered that learning is complex and involves motivation, inquiry, research and reflecting. For me, this involves making connections, discovering and making sense of what is being learned. The dynamics of how I learn are layered with the aforementioned complexities. In this piece of writing, I will frame myself as a learner and the connections to my teaching as well as my expectations for the learners who are in my charge.

Motivation is a direction of energy that plays a role in how I learn. Persistence, direction and intensity are the three main components of my motivation. Persistence relates to how long and hard I work to reach a goal, even through adversity. Direction relates to the choices that I make while in pursuit of my goals. Intensity relates to the degree of desire that I may have toward learning or
accomplishing my goals. Through much reflection and discussion, I discovered that my motivation has become more intrinsic rather than extrinsic.

As a child, I loved learning and being in school. The idea of exploring and experiencing new ideas was fascinating. However, by middle school, I realized that there had been a strong emphasis on grades and test scores from the time I entered secondary education until the time of graduation. My family also put a major focus on report cards. They paid my siblings and myself for good grades. Which leads me to a very important question that I often ponder concerning my students. Do grades and test scores really measure what students know or, more importantly, what they care about? Rarely did my family ask me about my views concerning what was happening in the world and how it was connected to my learning. By the time I reached high school, I focused on getting good grades for acceptance and self-esteem. During this time, I shifted my focus. I was no longer motivated solely for the basic nature of learning and enjoyment but for external rewards such as money and social acceptance. The joy of learning did not return until my undergraduate courses at Michigan State University began to introduce inquiry-based learning and self-reflecting.

In my first teacher education course, my classmates and I spent the entire semester exploring and defining the meaning of learning and knowledge. Within the inquiry of this quest, the course instructor, in order to help us make connections to ourselves as future teachers, challenged us to examine our own learning as students.

For example, in this TE 150 class we explored the question: Why is the weather in Michigan warmer in the summer and colder in the winter? First, I thought about what I knew about the sun and weather. Next, I made an educated guess based on what I already knew. Once I had given my answer, we investigated how I came to my conclusion. As the instructor asked more questions I began to explore what was wrong with my conclusion. Through these questions I figured out where I went wrong without him having to give me the answer. This process helped me understand how effective inquiry-based learning can be. It enabled my classmates and me to resist simple answers, wrestle with
uncertainties and consider multiple perspectives while searching for conceptual understanding. In this experiment we considered alternatives, and further explored ways to figure out why things did not work. For me, this experience set the stage for how I wanted to be as a teacher.

In my upper-level teacher education courses, the emphasis on inquiry based learning shifted to inquiry-based teaching and learning. I was thoroughly challenged as I began to create unit plans and often struggled between the more traditional methods of teaching and inquiry-based teaching. In the midst of frustration, I remember asking my course instructor for help, expecting him to give me an answer. Instead, he answered my question with another question. At first, I was angry because I had not become adequate or confident in planning in such a manner. Therefore, wrestling with uncertainties was very uncomfortable for me as well as time consuming. However, by the end of the semester, through much exploration, reflection and discussions among my peers and instructor, I finally had a sound grasp of what I previously wanted to know. Although inquiry-based teaching and learning is very challenging and time consuming, I felt compelled to use this approach in my first two years of teaching.

During my first year of teaching, I developed a Language Arts/Social Studies unit using multiple texts entitled Exploring Freedom. Although I created several questions for my students during this study, I allowed their questions to guide the unit. I began with questions such as: What is Freedom? Would you risk your life to make changes in the world that you might not live to see? Do you take freedom for granted? What does courage look like? Does adversity have a color/race? As my students began to interact with the texts, they began to ask questions such as: “Does freedom really exist? Is freedom really true? Do we really know the real definition of freedom? Can anyone truly attain freedom? Shouldn’t we explore other types of freedom?” These questions led to some heated debates. I believe this happened because I allowed my students the time to explore and experience the feeling of uncertainty. My students were very engaged during these lessons to the point that they began to research on their own time. These questions also made them reflect on their own ideas, beliefs and
experiences, which led to our culminating project. Students began to do research using technology, newspapers and interviews. This project empowered my students just as my inquiry-oriented projects at MSU had empowered me.

Although this unit was planned to last four weeks, it lasted much longer and the inquiry concerning freedom lasted through the entire year. The most awesome part of this experience was watching inquiry flow over to other subject matter areas like science and math. My students eventually produced a CD entitled “Exploring Freedom” and used their CD to educate other students, teachers and their parents about the slavery that exists today in other parts of our world. My students ended the year writing a letter to the president of the United States demanding that he give some attention to the evils that they had discovered in their research. Thus, I believe my students experienced true learning, that is, intellectual learning and what I refer to as heart smart learning.

I also began to research my teaching and learning during this time. After every lesson, I would reflect on what had occurred. Self-reflection is a powerful tool in the learning process because it allowed me the opportunity to review, assess, document and evaluate my work. In other words, I looked at what did and didn’t work and why. As a result of reflecting, I began to inquire more and develop effective strategies for future teaching.

In conclusion, I believe that all children are born with an inquisitive nature. However, that nature can be squelched if it is not nurtured in a way that allows them to wonder, explore and wrestle with ideas and uncertainty. They need to feel empowered from their learning. Teaching also needs to fulfill both intellectual needs and the need to be heart smart. I feel that I have learned when I am empowered to make a difference and began to care more about the world in which I live. There definitely has to be a connection between what I am learning and what I am living. These ideas, beliefs and influences are the bases for how I teach as well as what I expect for my students to experience as learning.