

## Masters of Our Own Domain

By [Nancy Flanagan](#) on February 8, 2011 11:07 AM | [20 Comments](#) | [Recommend](#)

I have a master's degree in education. Like many career educators, I accrued credits for my advanced degree mostly in the summer, when there were lots of teacher-courses to take and it was easy to find a parking place on campus. It took about five years. I was prompt in notifying my district every time I collected another 10 credits, because it meant a modest salary bump. The first time I jumped a "lane"--to B.A. plus 10--I was able to give up my second job, because I could now afford rent for my one-bedroom apartment on my salary alone.

Did my master's degree make me a better teacher?

It certainly made me a more informed and thoughtful teacher. The core courses in educational foundations, philosophy & research enriched my thinking about my work. They are, of course, the very subjects that are scorned as mere useless theory--as if it weren't important for a teacher to understand the history or purposes of education in America, or develop constructive tools for inquiry into their own practice.

But did the master's make me a better--more effective--teacher?

Depends on the definition of "more effective." Does a master's degree help educators understand the disciplinary content teach at a deeper level? Will a master's degree fill teachers' pedagogical toolkits or push them to see the big picture of education in America? The best graduate programs in education do exactly that.

Can a graduate degree help teachers leverage increases in student achievement, based on standardized test data?

Ah. There's the real question. And it's a genuinely important question, because that's the way teacher effectiveness is currently measured. As VAM proponents are constantly saying--hey, our tools are not perfect, but they're the best--and not forget cheapest--means of measuring learning ([and evaluating teachers](#)) right now. If we're going to pay teacher advanced degrees, they should be yielding tangible, numeric results (a word I have come to loathe, in edu-speak), not just more knowledgeable and professional teachers.

Or [so says Arne Duncan \(who doesn't appear to have a master's degree\)](#). [Michelle Rhee \(who does\) thinks](#) so, too:

*We're spending billions of dollars nationally for master's degrees in education for teachers. There's no correlation between having a master's degree in education and student gains. So why would we pour money down there?*

My favorite part of the interview with Rhee is the comments. I particularly like this one:

*It's a hoax, repeated by teacher organizations to justify higher pay. More education doesn't make better teachers.*

**More education doesn't make better teachers?** Kind of encapsulates our national ambivalence about the value of education, doesn't it? It's no wonder that we're always looking for cheap, short-cut answers to the persistent, looming question of how to better educate kids in poverty. If only we could do it without those annoying and expensive teachers, schools and resources...

How did I learn to be an effective teacher, master of my own educational domain? First, I fell in love with teaching. I paid attention to the results I was getting in the classroom. I read constantly, and became part of a lively, networked discourse around critical issues. I took classes and went to workshops. I also sat for National Board Certification, which was the single most productive professional learning experience of my career.

Most good teachers develop an effective practice that way: part formal learning, part collaboration with colleagues, and a whole lot of personal initiative.

Does a degree in Public Policy make one an effective policy-maker? Does a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership make one a leader? Hardly. I know this from unpleasant personal experience. But college degrees are how we confer distinction, and universities are places where we study the important questions. Including critical questions about our education system.

Reducing teaching to a technical job, one that can be done with minimal "training" in how to raise test scores, says some  
distasteful and shallow about our social values. Improve graduate programs in education across the board? Absolutely.  
Re-think the way we compensate teachers for graduate coursework? Sure. But let's not throw the educational baby out  
bathwater.

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