

Interview with Brenton Fitzpatrick

17 October 2018

START OF INTERVIEW

Cameron Hay (CH): Alright, this is Cameron Hay, interviewing Brenton Fitzpatrick for the Center for Upper Peninsula Studies here at Northern Michigan University. Today is October 17, 2018, and with that, if you could state your name, your birthdate, as well as spelling your name, for the record.

Brenton Fitzpatrick (BF): Sure. Brenton Fitzpatrick. That's B-R-E-N-T-O-N, last name F-I-T-Z-P-A-T-R-I-C-K, birthdate 3/31 of 1988.

CH: Alright, and thank you for that. If you could tell me where you were born as well?

BF: I was born in Boyne City, Michigan.

CH: Lower Peninsula?

BF: Mhmm.

CH: So, being from I guess Boyne City, the Lower Peninsula, what brought you up here to the Upper Peninsula?

BF: Um, I was a student at Northern Michigan University; my decision to come here was very multifaceted, but a large factor to that: both my mother and father attended and graduated from Northern Michigan University, and my football coach in High School. We were actually able to come up here for a team camp for football, and stayed in the dorms, ate at the Wildcat Den, so I knew, you know, that on top of costs and program and area, things like that, that's what brought me up here.

CH: Okay, and you are a teacher now? That is correct?

BF: Yes

CH: How long have you been teaching?

BF: This is my seventh year. I just began my seventh year I believe.

CH: You're in your seventh year now, and where exactly are you teaching?

BF: I've been teaching at Superior Central, a school, K-12 school, and that is for all seven years.

CH: Okay, all seven years at Superior Central was it?

BF: Yup, down in Eben junction.

CH: Okay if you could tell me a little about the district maybe, the students that go to Superior Central.

BF: Yeah! The district was consolidated from I believe it was three separate township schools several years ago. The Eben Eagles, the Trenary Lions, I believe I'm not sure. Might have been the Chatham Comets too but they consolidated the schools together into one. I believe that might have been in the 80's, so some time ago. The district is K-12 all one building and we get students from all townships in Alger County in that regard. We have some students that are school of choice from the Gwinn area or Marquette or Munising area. Are enrollment at the high school, oh I'm trying to think off the top of my head, its, it seems like I've heard the number 125 be tossed out so it might be 125 students, might be 6-12 I think. It might be 125 9-12 I think. 125 9-12.

CH: That is about what I saw on the web.

BF: Okay good! That means I know my own enrollment [Laughs]

CH: Right! [Laughs] Always a bonus.

BF: Mhmm

CH: So what grade level and subjects do you teach?

BF: I have taught a variety of subjects out there. The line I usually give when someone asks me about my teaching experience is, I have taught all of the social studies classes at one point or another for the grades 7-12, which are normally in the 12-grade social studies class, but I have 7-12 grade students. During my teaching career, I have also taught weightlifting. I have taught elementary PE, and I've also taught 9th grade PE. I have had different grades in a technology or computer class from 6th grade on up to 10th grade, and I've also taught a senior seminar class, which is much like a life skills. Kind of financial literacy mixed with Home Ec mixed with whatever getting ready for college. My current teaching schedule is two sections of civics, which will be Econ next semester, I have my life skills for senior's class, my senior seminar, I have a weightlifting class, which is 10-12 grade. I have 7th grade technology and 8th grade technology.

CH: That is a wide range of –

BF: Of Subjects. It is definitely sort of what you expect at a small school. You know the last two years I have had the benefit of being able to have a split section of a subject this year. This year, it's civics, last year was civics, and the year before that, I actually had to split world history, and the reason that its split is because there are around 40 students in the class. So you need to split it in order to. you know, have that be a functional classroom, acceptable class number from the teachers union, from the administration. But because of the dynamic up there we can't, you know, I think of teachers in other districts that it's written in their contract that they cannot have a certain number of students, beyond a certain number of students in their class. That's not an option at our school, we have a cutoff at 32 you know students, with 35 students in the entire grade, you're stuck. So I have many classes that are over 30 or 35 students. It's the entire grade, which, the other interesting aspect of that is also you have a wide spectrum of students in the classroom. You have the lowest low and the highest high. We have the valedictorian and student with special education plans in the exact same classroom every single day all year.

CH: Sounds like it could be a bit of a challenge I suppose

BF: Absolutely! Absolutely, but I've had to and all the teachers out there, we become adept at being able to have a differentiated instruction in a way where we have activity that can challenge our top level students, or as best we can give them the opportunity to basically push themselves to try and get something more out of it and have it still be a functional activity or assignment for some of the lower achieving learners. and if it is, you know, if there are special education accommodations then it's just something, an activity, a lesson, a worksheet that can be accommodated if students have that need as well.

CH: Okay, so you've talked a little bit about the classes and stuff. Do you do anything extracurricular; do you oversee any extracurricular activities as well?

BF: Yes. Personally my philosophy is those are very important to one the system of education within our country and also I, those are some of the things I felt the most passionate about when I was in school so I wanted to coach or advise them in order to continue to give my students the same positive experience that I had. As a result of that, I have at this time I am currently and assistant football coach as well as the middle school track coach. I've done both of those almost every year in my teaching experience. At times, I have been a class advisor but for the last 3 years and a 4th year a couple years ago, I've been the student council advisor out of my school. I think that those are the only extracurricular I'm involved in. I advise some students in youth and government, in the youth and government club but that is not in an official capacity. That's just in their government teacher capacity.

CH: Yeah, so you mention that you do believe that these are going to be important aspects of a student's time at school I suppose. If you could maybe expand on that a little.

BF: Sure! The benefits that come from extracurricular involvement can really manifest themselves in different ways. From my perspective as a teacher, it allows me to share some of my passion in life with some of my students and a lot of times they are extracurricular and just as the curriculum is a part of that term, they can actually tie into the curriculum, whether that is I have youth students involved in youth and government and that can tie in directly with their civics work as juniors or in a coaching a sport that can play into their physical education classes and so on and so forth for all the extracurricular. As well, another benefit to me, not only am I able to give them that curriculum connection but it also lets me get to my students in a different setting on a more personal note which then just creates a better dynamic in the classroom, a better working relationship between us. A lot of times too it can give you that insight into a student's experience, a student's personality, be able to reach them better just understand them better and also a lot of times there's just such reward and great experience with those extracurricular. School is important, school needs to be students' main focus, but when you have that championship basketball team that you are either you are either attending that game or being a part of the game, that is something you carry with you your whole life or being able to go on a trip for an extracurricular activity, whether that be a band trip, youth and government trip, a science Olympiad competition. Going on those trips is something that you remember your whole life that you will tell your kids about, you know that's when you form some of the best memories

from your grade school days and just giving students those opportunities I think is really important because that is part of the school experience and it gives them that positive you know perspective on school in general.

CH: Fair enough, thanks for that. I guess too if you could just walk through a basic normal everyday as normal as it gets day at your job.

BF: Sure. I arrive at school, this year I get, I've been getting to school very early. I usually get there about an hour before the bell rings. That's just this year; I have different habits different years. I'll try to get some work done in my classroom for either coaching or grading papers answering emails, things like that. Student start trickling in as they arrive to school, there's usually one or two students that will come in for whatever reason, whether that be they don't want to sit out in the hallways they don't want to go talk to friends, they don't have friends to talk to, I don't think they want to be around me but they just come in anyway. As the bell approaches about 15 minutes before class starts the kids start trickling in. It's pretty much the hallway conversation that follow them in. The bell rings for first hour at 8:15. Hopefully if the kids are ready and I'm ready enough we transition into class. Our class periods are I believe 49 minutes long, it's either 49 or 48 they were adjusted during my teaching career, I can't remember what number we are at right now. Each class gets four minutes of passing time between the two. I normally keep my door locked but I have brick that was made in the Boyne city brick factory that is my doorstep so that is usually keeping the door propped open. So kids will come in and out of my classroom in between hours the seniors will trickle in, they are pretty laid back. I have a civics class that comes in after that is still fairly lively. The dynamics in those classrooms can vary seniors it's a lot of online work, applying for colleges and FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). All my classes have assigned seats because I am that type of teacher where I just always have an assign seat for them one less thing on their plate to worry about and one less factor for something to go wrong. In the civics class it definitely varies, each student does have a chrome book assigned to them in my classroom I have a Chromebook cart that I can assign the Chromebooks out as necessary. Our Chromebook policy has evolved over the years and that's what we are trying out this year. There may be a video clip, a worksheet, something on google classroom; I do use an online platform for all my classes. Going into 4th hour is when I transition into the computer lab. The technology, despite having those Chromebook we still have a full computer lab we were able to get a technology bond passes recently so we have a full computer lab with brand new desktops in it. So I will go over there the seventh graders are in that lab there's a small computer lab behind us that there's an access door for and that is for anytime throughout the day that the student has an online course they will go there to work on that. We have an aid that is stationed there all day for every hour and because of the most recent legislation in Michigan regarding online learning, any student can take an online course so we have quite a few of them, especially being a small school where we do have limited electives a lot of students take advantage of that so there's usually a lot of student working in there. That's obviously all online work. They will put things up on the, I will put things on the overhead at times in there which every classroom has the smart projectors, it's not a smart board just the projector with the same capabilities. Following that, we go into 5th period, which is back in my classroom. 5th period is designed similarly to a study hall but it's not because study halls are now

illegal in Michigan so we have what is called F.I.T. period which is Focused Instructional Time. Mondays are designed for planning. We have a google doc, which is shared amongst all the teaching staff and the announcement are read this gives students the opportunity to take some time at the beginning of F.I.T. Period to get their planners update. Each student is issued a planner so they have their bathroom passes and space to write in homework. I will circulate around the classroom check in with students, give them homework help at this time is when a lot of students will go meet with other teacher, go make up test things of that nature. They all should have something to work on. That rotates throughout the week. Tuesday are homework help days as well, that's when we have a lot of meetings that's the time we have sectioned away for that so you'll have student council meetings, class meetings at that time, excuse me. Wednesday we have a mini lesson of the teacher's topic, I've been doing different documentaries that I choose to show them pieces of throughout the quarter. Friday are sustained silent reading time that period is only about a half hour long and then we go into lunch. I eat lunch into my room, just kind of a, what do they call it, kind of a loner I guess. Sometimes I will have meetings during lunch with students if necessary I actually is eating lunch in my classroom some days when their social anxiety is acting up which I gave them permission to do that and check with the admin that they are okay with it. I have to go down to the gymnasium after this to open the door so that way the high schooler can get in there. What's slightly awkward is we have weightlifting class scheduled during the same hour as our sixth grade PE. So I let the PE teacher have the gym, the big gym, because we have a big gym and a small gym. But the sixth graders and the high schools have to change in the same locker room at the same time, which we have run into some issues with that. Nothing documented I guess just sort of rumors of what we hear said or going on in there so I do my best to monitor that with the other male PE teacher. The girl's locker unfortunately is unmonitored for obvious reasons there. I take the class, I walk down with them to the weight room we exercise and with only a couple minutes left in class we head back to the locker room to get changed. I have my prep period after that I usually grade papers, possibly work on things for coaching, I'll meet with other teachers, sometimes meet with students, sometimes meet with the administration about different issues that came up, that's a good meeting time. And my final hour I go back to the computer lab for the eighth grade technology class the exact same format. At this time right now my typical day while it's over at about 3:11 I then go open up my classroom and by 3:30 the football is expected to be in my classroom and they have a mandatory study period for 30 minutes and then I head home.

CH: Sounds like a bit of a long day, a lot of work.

BF: Can be, but that's also very similar to pretty much my schedule every year so it's definitely what I have been accustom too. I've got long legs, I'm use to walking all over the school and going from place to place and its definitely one of those things where, like I said kind of hinted to before or alluded to its what we have to deal with out there.

CH: Mhmm. So I guess given all that what kind of inspired you to go into teaching, what made you chose to be an educator?

BF: There's a couple different things. My mother was a kindergarten teacher my whole life and I've always been around the teaching occupation. Coming in, in the summer knowing that

teachers spend June closing up their classroom getting things taken care of and I've always been a teachers kid in terms of I knew all the other teachers in the school I was always around the school at odd hours so they would see me there. I've always had a passion for social studies, history, government, so that's what's, that is one of the things that drew me as well. Not only being able to work with kids but to share those passions with students and future generations. I initially, when I came to Northern one of the big draws for me I mentioned earlier, the program. The program of study I initially chose was the dual pre law political science program. I had the intention to become a lawyer, as I'm sure you are becoming aware, I have no problem speaking and public speaking has always come easy to me as well. I was going to dual major in that and history. I took one pre law class and no offense to Dr. Nelson whatsoever, he's a great guy and taught a great class but by the midterm I realized this isn't what I was expecting. So I decided to peruse a different route and teaching was always in my back pocket and I chose to go into that profession, I switched my major in the fall of 2008. That is my defense because that is right before the recession hit and some of the negative, how do I want to describe this, some of the negative occurrences that have happened in the field of teaching have happened after 2008, not all of them but many of them so my defense is I jumped on the ship before everyone started bailing off.

CH: yeah

BF: So that was a big push for me at the time before the recession hit and a lot of things have changed financially in the last 10 years since I've made the decision to get into teaching at the time it wasn't the greatest paycheck there were a lot of benefits with it and usually if you put the two of those together it was a worthwhile and noble profession financially that is, I realized the nobility came with the virtue of the profession. I liked the ability to talk about history and these topics every day and to share them with students and try to inspire that same passion in them. I liked the fact that I could wear a tie every day, a suite every day, buy you know if I wanted to wear a sweater and khakis that's fine too, or a polo and jeans on Fridays, it gave me a little bit more flexibility in that regard where I really control what my day to day life is like, it's my classroom environment the way approach it and I realize I wouldn't get that going into some other professions. If you are working in a factory, you are expected to wear a certain uniform and you are expected to do a certain job in your certain spot and you might be there your whole life whereas you know I can change the posters in my room, I can ask for a change in my classroom, I can change what I wear, how I do things, so I really like that.

CH: Fair enough [Laughs]. So you've been teaching in, you've been teaching for several years now I suppose, have you noticed and particular challenges that can be especially associated with being up here in the Upper Peninsula, that make, being challenges, make teaching a little more difficult perhaps?

BF: I guess some of the some things about teaching in the Upper Peninsula that may make it more challenging than elsewhere is the availability of transportation is one, and the remote nature of the Upper Peninsula. There are areas where there is a lot of culture especially Upper Peninsula Culture our native culture. There are areas that have many venues, attractions, locals in a consolidated space, the Marquette are is one of them and by that I mean probably a 20 mile

radius or so, you know once you get out into Negaunee, Ishpeming that is still fairly close. You have a lot of businesses; you have a lot of metropolitan areas, I don't know if people in the big cities would like me calling it that, but you have a lot of that around here. Down by Escanaba there's quite a bit, you know Escanaba, Gladstone, that general area. You know you even have a l'Anse [or] Baraga situation, Houghton and Hancock. Sault Saint Marie is kind of lumped together with Sault Canada. But for most areas of the Upper Peninsula its very remote, most people are traveling very far, most people, they are from lower socioeconomic status in that, and not everywhere, I'm speaking in generalizations.

CH: Mhmm.

BF: But a lot of times from a teaching standpoint you want to go on a field trip or you want to take the class somewhere, when I went to Boyne City downstate I had the opportunity part of that was my parents socioeconomic status that helped make this a possibility. But I went to New York three years for a trip with our drama club and that money came out of my pocket and that was something where it was not unheard of for that to happen. There were many trips like that. I also did Youth and Government; there are students that Youth and government at my school while the cost of that has been rising recently that is there one big trip that they can afford to go on. I actually spoke to a student recently they were an excellent social studies student, they were very passionate about the subject, they you were not doing Youth and Government and I inquired as to why they made that decision this year, their rationale was the band, our high school band was going down to Chicago on their trip it cost X amount of dollars, Youth and Government was about the same and they would rather go on the band trip because it doesn't happen every year, and that's a family that had to make those choices. Not only that but also where you want to take students it's not even just a matter of whether or not you can go to this event that may or may not cost money but it's a matter of how far you have to go to get to that. There are many events and enriching activities in our local are but that can be a very large factor at times. A byproduct of that I think is the perspective students have on their region, their country, and their world. I see that a lot from a social studies standpoint but because we are so remote they know their local area very well they know their family, their upbringing very well, they may even know the Upper Peninsula very well, they may know Marquette or Munising or some of these other larger towns but they are not aware what life is like in the lower peninsula. They may have traveled downstate and they go as far as Gaylord, Michigan, Traverse City maybe the furthest they've traveled whereas I'm used to traveling all the way down to Detroit. You know and it takes them probably double the amount of time it use to take me to get down to Detroit or to some of those other large urban areas downstate. Now many of them do travel into Wisconsin but in a way that can shift the paradigm in that they are, they don't realize what the rest of their own state is like. Many of these students have been outside of the Upper Peninsula to a larger a city it may only be to Green Bay which is a very, its statically I believe it is the smallest population of any NFL team.

CH: Yeah.

BF: So it's a small big city and it is very large compared to anything in the Upper Peninsula but you know so I guess those are some of the large hurdles that I have come into. It used to be

another hurdle in terms of the remoteness and could be socioeconomic but many factors, the lack of technology, lack of Wi-Fi, lack of cell phone reception too where coming from Northern [Michigan University] where Northern has always tried to be on the cutting edge of technology, tried to prepare their students coming out to be ready in that technology field especially teachers and then I go out to a school that had not had a technology increase for many years. There wasn't even cell phone signal let alone Wi-Fi in the building when I first taught. That has improved, I mentioned we had a technology bond; we have been very fortunate in that taxpayers helped us out, and we have great technology for the students to use. We've been, that has sort of been our goal right now is to kind of effectively implementing that kind of stuff.

CH: So there are some issues but overall it's pretty, you can work with a lot of them?

BF: Absolutely! I mean, and the fact that as technology increases it's becoming more affordable and more accessible not even just because of this one bond our school passed, that was basically our foot in the door or the check that we were able to cash in in order to get, to bring these things in. Utilizing technology can be that avenue, utilizing we were able to purchase some Google Expedition Virtual Reality Goggles. I'm able to you know do, take a field trip in that regard. You know and my school recently took several students down to go see *Hamilton* in Chicago through a program through the Gilder Lehrman Institute. Now our school just had to become an affiliate with that program, with that foundation which we are and we get lots of resources from them. In addition to that my superintendent and business manager were able to secure some grand funding to help offset the cost for some of the those student so it's a matter of, I've come to realize that if you want something done to basically, if you pursue it, it can be achieved, you know that everything does have a price tag but it's, there's nothing that's out of reach.

CH: Okay so there are challenges but you can definitely get around them, you can work with them.

BF: Mhmmm

CH: Is there anything perhaps that makes teaching a little more attractive specifically here in the Upper Peninsula maybe makes it a little bit more rewarding perhaps?

BF: I think that in my specific teaching position by working in that K-12 setting while there are some drawbacks to it, overtime I have definitely noticed some of the benefits are the, how close-knit everyone is that community and in that school because it is so small and I see those same students every year. Most student enjoy the outdoors they have some sort of season or activity that they enjoy and really, what do they always say, its God's country up here, you know it's very; the outdoors is a major draw. I guess for some students it could be or for some families or for some teachers, the fact that it is so remote you don't have those large urban areas. My argument when I went to school, it took me four hours to get to Detroit from Boyne City, took me four hours to get to Marquette, and I use to joke that I would rather go four hours in this direction than towards Detroit and I have been an outdoor person as well. I grew up hunting, fishing, hiking, camping; you know I like to be outdoors to bike, to walk, to run. I've gotten into snowshoeing up here, as well and it's that I think is definitely the big draw and for some people you know if they do have close ties to this area you know there could be family ties. The history

of this area as a history teacher is also very fascinating you know we have a very rich culture of history here in the U.P. and being able to tie that in to my teaching has been very rewarding. Either in the way that students will bring things in or students are aware of things or students family history tie in with a lot of those aspects of our culture whether be it mining, be it Finnish American immigrants, be it the lumber industry or even local history, they may come in and say oh my grandpa was talking to me about the old Trenary School or before they consolidated or about you know some other aspect of U.P. History and culture and that's rewarding too, being able to bring in those local history and cultural ties.

CH: Okay, so, gather my thoughts [Both laugh] so you've talked a little bit, well a fair amount now about what makes Upper Peninsula Schools unique, the challenges, the rewards, just as a generalization how do Upper Peninsula schools compare to a lot of the other schools perhaps in Lower Michigan?

BF: I think most I use that as a generalization and this is probably if you look at all schools in Michigan

CH: Mhmmm

BF: You know because there are a lot of, there are rural pockets all over the state you know

CH: Yeah

BF: And I have talked to many different farming kids from the thumb and there are a lot of small towns down by Boyne city that you know like, the town of Boyne city, population wise is the same size as Gwinn, now if you have been to the two cities you know they are vastly distinct. I think that there is there's a lot of regional pride in the Upper Peninsula where because you have that bridge that separates the two something that students in Rudyard versus students in Iron Mountain versus students in you know Lake Linden all have in common is they all identify as a U.P. School and whether they're playing a team from Wisconsin or a team from the Lower Peninsula there is that common bond that unites all of them and its, there is that competition and varying regions even in the U.P. each school has its own challenges its own rewards its own local culture and experiences but they have that common, we are all Yooper's you know the, and that's something that I feel like is not as present downstate you know coming from a downstate school and a downstate upbringing. My mother's still teaching downstate, my father is, has been coaching downstate almost his entire adult life, I still actually have my youngest sister, she is a junior in High school at Boyne City High School. There's not a, at the same perspective of we are Lower Peninsula Schools, you know when Boyne City plays Cheboygan or Boyne City plays Benzie Central it's not it is looked at as just either another school or distinct, very distinct areas in general. They may look at a school like Newberry the same as they would look at, like I mention Cheboygan or something like that.

CH: Yeah

BF: So I think that, that definitely sets them apart and there are also common challenges that if you look at just the rural nature, some school funding issues, transportation issues, and I mean, you know you can just kind of expand that into society in general, you I think that a lot of

schools in the U.P. are dealing with students being in households that have, that have individual suffering from the opioid crisis and epidemic up here. Statistically the U.P. is suffering worse than any other part of the state you've been down in Wayne County where you just have so many more people down there statistically you should have more of a problem but it's actually worse up here in the U.P. and you look at you know there's other factors in that regard that are just to the rural nature of the U.P.

CH: Alright, and you've also mentioned curriculum a few times now. There are, my aunt is a teacher too, there are certain expectations the state of Michigan has towards what you teach.

BF: Mhmm.

CH: What kind of general expectations do you have to deal with on a more regular basis?

BF: Looking at curriculum wise...

CH: Yeah, curriculum specifically.

BF: Right now the current standards I'm following are the high school content expectations they have been in place since around, I believe around, sometime in the early 2000's and in those expectations at least in the social studies perspective. They, they've split up human history and U.S. History into different eras and are, we're expected to definitely hit the certain themes, concepts, and topics within each one. They are expected to build upon each other I'm able to experience that to a certain degree in my teaching experience which is interesting. Depending of the year of course I may have the opportunity to teach an eighth grade class in their U.S. History and then continue on in that same class with U.S. History in the same year or a seventh grade class, teaching them the basics of world history and getting them up to I believe the high school content expectation at this point is to get them to about at least the post Roman World, maybe into the Middle Ages, I'm not one-hundred percent on that. I believe the Middle Ages are covered in the high school follow up that is.

CH: Okay

BF: Within each one there are definite general geographical thinking, problem solving, looking at local issues, critical thinking skills that are expected to be taught a lot of times those are woven into the curriculum that a specific district follows currently. I get a lot of leeway in my district to basically choose my own curriculum and that just needs to be approved by my Superintendent Principal who thankfully is a former middle school social studies teacher which is a great teaching position to be in to work for a person like that.

CH: Mhmm

BF: Following the old Michigan citizen collaborative curriculum, the MC3, although most people call it Atlas or Oakland or Scope right now. That is, was designed following the high school content expectation so that is all woven together. You know I'm not expected at the, within the district to specifically cite the nation history standards or national council for social studies standards not even the C3 framework that is becoming very popular right now. There's nothing stopping me from looking at those and I would be encouraged to do so, if I chose to by

my superintendent but I think he's definitely been looking at the Michigan standards at this point. Then the, in my position the common core is not really factored in, just we've been talking to our school improve team meeting about writing across the curriculum so I think that plays a factor we'll see how this changes their currently working on updating the Michigan history standards, the social studies standards I should say. I was just at a talk back session kind of a listen and learn they called it at the local ISD the RESA, the Regional Education Service Agency. They are working on updating those which I support the intent, it has been ten years or so maybe more even that they updated those most recently so I think they can be an update. It's political, they always make everything political.

CH: Oh yeah.

BF: Hard to avoid it.

CH: Yeah. But it does sound like you do have a fair amount of leeway, you said that a few times.

BF: Yes and I think that's fairly, I would hope that that's common throughout the state, or the country for that matter. My superintendent principal he's a very laid back guy and a very no nonsense kind of guy though as well and he's has that social studies background and I've had the benefit to go to my superintendent/Principal, I like to say superintendent because it sounds more dramatic, but got to my superintendent and say, "hey I'm trying to do this in my social studies class" and he either gives me insight sometimes from his own experience and will often times give me approval or disapproval or be able to help me work around that and come up with a the way to do whatever it is I want to do. Another great thing is that I'm able to go to him and say "Hey boss I'm doing this thing in my classroom" and its some type of you know 'social studies' activity and I know he thinks that's cool so he comes in to check out and he's like oh this is so awesome you know we are just doing like a simulation, and online simulation the other day and I knew he would want to come in and see it you know we are sitting here on the chrome books and all the kids are running you know a simulator from the I Civics.org which is the website that Sandra Day O'Connor helped get started where it's got all these games and simulators for students to use, really anybody to learn more about the political process and the civic process, the legal process. So I've got eleventh graders that you know struggle to get a worksheet done or may need their test modified or extra work, extra time on their homework but they're just sitting here and they're you know operating a constitutional law firm or clients are coming in and they have to decided is that a violation of the Bill of Rights or is it just a dumb situation and then if it is a violation which lawyer do they send them to because each lawyer has a specialty and a specific amendment and a specific area of the amendment and then you know then they basically so it's kind of a life skill on top of learning about the Bill of Rights. You know I've definitely invited my boss in for that so he could see that and you know partially it was me showing my teaching and covering my own butt in that regard [Both Laugh] but also letting him come in to see something I knew he would enjoy. So I do have a lot of leeway basically as long as I'm following the standards I think his philosophy is you know we're all good teachers you know. He wouldn't hire us if we weren't and he evaluates us every year and if there's any problems he lets us know and tells how and what he wants us to work on so he has faith in all of us so it's just a matter of you know we just need to make sure that were following those standards is all.

CH: Alright, and then the other thing is that you've mentioned technology a few times, the technology grant the simulations you have your students for the civics class.

BF: Mhmm

CH: Just how do these technologies, the chrome books as well, how do these change how you teach, whether it also be the virtual class - ?

BF: The online class

CH: The online classes and stuff

BF: It's interesting to try and think about that because its, I have to take a second to differentiate between when it has enhanced learning and when it has changed learning. You know there are ways and whether or not it's enhanced, it may enhance some aspects of my teaching and the student learning and fortunately, it may have some other side effects. An example for that is when we first were able to get the chrome books, during that same year I was able to attend the MACUL (Michigan Association for Computer Users in Learning) Conference, the Michigan Educational Technology Conference downstate and learn about open source textbook designed by Michigan teachers called the My Open Book Project. These are free textbook, digital textbooks that students can use very interactive in terms of videos and activities and charts and practice assignments embedded within the document if you open it on an iPad you can edit it, you save it, you can highlight it, you can have it read it to you, very very fantastic. There's people that, there one guy I should say that's the manager of the project I can email him and say this isn't working this needs to be changed and usually its changed within the day. The kids are able to access their textbook anywhere where they are able to get on the internet at any hour of the day, but the downside is, and the English teacher in my school cites this chapter in verse is there's been, its statistically shown that on average the retention rate is about 85% versus 100% when you go to a screen or hard copy.

CH: Mhmm

BF: But you know I'm also kind of a neat freak and the fact that by being able to utilize Google Classroom and online lessons it saves me time and paper from making copies myself, having to walk down to the copier, I told you I walk all over my school. The students are able to access those assignments at any point, they can type it in a Google Doc, they are not going to lose the paper at all it's all right there, they just need to upload it, they turn it in, there's no more kids trying to sneak it in into the, I have a homework drop box in the back of my classroom, there's no question when did they put that in the box because its timestamped because it's on the computer. In the past I've had students, it's actually enhanced inquiry, you know while yes students now have that desire to have that instantaneous gratification because so far because of the society we've created and we leave in but when it comes to inquiry I've actually seen students have a question about a topic, what does the weights and measures part of the constitution mean, does it actually refer to real weights and measures? And they can actually open their Chromebook and google it right there and in a matter of probably ten seconds we have that question answered and we can use that new information that we literally learned ten seconds

ago build upon it in our classroom discussion. So it's definitely enhanced it in those regards we're also getting students to be technologically fluent in order to use those skills in a real world setting and be, and have the skills to know how to continue to adapt and learn technology because technology is going to keep growing. I've heard someone be quoting once saying technology has the shelf life of a banana [both laugh]. You need to always be looking for new things and that's why I keep attending the educational technology conference. I've attended several years the organization actually does, it's a big three day conference downstate, well a couple months later they do one day conference in the U.P. which is awesome because they know there are a lot of educators up here that want to utilizing technology, they do utilize technology but if you're driving from Ironwood or Baraga to try to go down to Lansing, that's a huge haul.

CH: Yeah that's –

BF: You know as opposed to going from Mount Pleasant or Gaylord or something like that or Alpena that is a long drive for them but not like it is from us, they come up here, I've had the opportunity to present at the U.P. MACUL Conference several times, I try to collaborate with educators in that regards so its definitely opened up a lot of doors and possibilities like I've said before, being able to bring in any sort of video clip that I could think of, I don't need to have the actual DVD with me or something like that. I can upload assignments, make up assignments online, kids aren't losing stuff, I don't have papers in my room, I'm not making a whole bunch of copies, which is a huge cost to the district. I know the big districts downstate or some of the districts up here are not allowed to have color copies, you are only supposed to have so many copies. Things happen more quickly, now unfortunately the internet goes down we got to bust out the old books.

CH: Oh yeah.

BF: We've got to be prepared for that you know you can't put all your eggs in one basket in that regard, but it definitely has the ability to enhance. Enhance student learning, it gets them, when I'm able to bring in something like an online simulation that's actually very well designed they have an iPad app, I downloaded it I actually probably wasted too much of my own time when I first discovered it, playing that in the evening and spare time but it's something like that, that definitely get excited about it, and I've had students kind of calling my bluff today and saying no wait that game we played, that like, that kind of actually ties in what we're talking about, and I said yes it does, and we're probably going to play it again as a review game before your test. You know so able to present that information in a new exciting familiar way for them, that this is they're use to utilizing this technology all the time so its teaching them how to use it responsibly not to use just for social media purposes not just to, for that instant gratification but basically to you know use their powers for good so to speak.

CH: Yeah! So you've talked about a lot of the ways it has enhanced, but at the beginning you also mentioned that sometimes it's just changed the way you do things without necessarily enhancing it.

BF: Yeah I, and that's what's interesting is you know I may give out the same assignments I do before but now instead of, for instance just today in class in the civics class we introduction to the topic of federalism.

CH: Okay.

BF: On the constitution, and I have a worksheet that I have given students every year I have taught civics and it comes from the Michigan Citizenship Collaborative Curriculum and MC 3-Year Scope, Atlas, Oakland, whatever you want to call it. The worksheet it, was provided by them in the past, I printed out a hard copy and it had a Venn Diagram on the back side of it and the kids would read we would read the worksheet as a class and then they would complete the Venn Diagram comparing federal and state powers and concurrent powers on their own. Today I uploaded the document on google classroom, I put it on my overhead so I could see it from the back of the class, I position myself there so I can see all their computer screens to make sure they were all on task, and then I had them open up to google classroom as well and have the same document in front of them that way they can read off their screen. We are still reading the same worksheet, still reading it aloud in class; I just had them make their Venn Diagram following that on scratch paper, you know just lined paper. So it's just changed the way I did it, it hasn't really enhanced it other than just you know saving me a little bit of time in preparation I guess.

CH: Change for the sake of change sometimes.

BF: In a way it can be, and I'm, its, and it can be a dangerous road to go down you know. I try to be very cognoscente of that in that you know just because it has bells and whistles doesn't mean it's any better so that's where I try to look for those opportunities when I can use the technology to enhance my teaching and student learning, but sometimes you know just even what I did today you know, saving myself that time theoretically, that should give me that time to use those for my energies and focus those on improving a different part of my teaching or it's also while it just might be a different way to do it, it might be a better way to do it in that regard.

CH: Mhmm

BF: Rather than a copy for them and what's also important is I'm not abandoning the old ways either. If it ain't broke don't fix it you know and there's students if they don't like to learn in that online environment I do whatever I can to mitigate that and to try to give them accommodations. I have students, all of my test are online now which does save me a crap ton of time, it changed the way I make test but probably for the better because now they are almost entirely multiple choice whereas before they were varied in their structure, but they can be graded instantaneously by the computer or there are just a couple short answer that I grade maybe when everything else is graded automatically. There are students that require accommodations and have test read, I print those, I print a hard copy for those students.

CH: Mhmm

BF: I have students that just want to take it on a hard copy, I allow them to do that. Any assignment I tell them, any assignment at all there's a student that said they really don't like reading on the computer I would print a hard copy of that Federalism worksheet that we did

today and hand that to them. I have no problem with that whatsoever but we have actually we have some students that in their accommodations they have the opportunity to use a Chromebook whenever possible. I've also with those test not only is it all online but I'm able to click a button and it automatically shuffles the questions which is something you can't do with paper copies, so you know I think in sometimes in the same instance I can be doing things just differently or for the better hopefully not for the worse, that's the goal.

CH: Yeah! [Laughs] So that's going to be one of the main big things that have changed and is changing, is there anything else in teaching that is really - ?

BF: It's hard to pick one point, the you know the two biggest things that have changed for me personally is, are teaching staff has changed which changes the dynamic of the school and our staff dynamic which can have, which at least feels like is a huge change and the other one is just the fact that as each grade comes through you know we either, I have the benefit of seeing the same grade multiple years so I see them grow and develop and mature as young people. It's harder for me, a lot of times it's the same kids in the same classroom so I don't see a whole lot of change in them or in the way things happen in my classroom. In terms of the whole what is happening in teaching you know I think that just technology has been the big boom you know there's a big push, it's been happening for years to include several of the alternative perspectives on historical events Howard Zinn is a great example of that I know he's been, his writings go back decades but unfortunately I'm almost noticing that the pendulum may be swinging back the other way whereas the book *The Lies my Teacher Told Me, Peoples History of the United States*, other publications of that nature were sort of on the upswing. They were, you know the cool thing basically to be teaching I'm worried that now it's going to start swinging back the other way, hopefully not, hopefully there's enough advocates for social justice out there that will still push for that. You know the big things with teaching when I first got into teaching, you know no one had any money, everybody's worried about emergency financial managers coming down from the state. It's a very tense situation between unions and the administration in almost every school. I've seen that cool a little bit in terms of economy has improved, which has basically lets everybody chill out a little bit more, our current political environment is getting people pretty riled up on both sides of the fence so that, we will see how that kind of plays out, I think it's a bit early to judge how that affects you know the teaching environment. If anything, it just gives me a lot of discussion points in civics. Yeah so I guess that kind of covers I guess how teaching has changed, I don't know if I went into any of those in any great detail but just kind of, I thought about it aloud for the last couple minutes here.

CH: [Both laugh] Yeah! So things are changed.

BF: Yes. I tell my students their only two things that are guaranteed in life, things are going to change and we are all going to be dead someday.

CH: There you go.

BF: I don't think I'm wrong.

CH: Yeah I think there's a decent chance of that.

BF: Yeah, I think I might be right, I don't know, we'll see.

CH: Alright, I guess as you see things changing is, just quickly do you see any direction you think things may go with technology or with anything else, just give a little prediction.

BF: Yeah I certainly hope that our classes aren't all taught by robots or all online setting in the future. I think that, I think we will see more of a user-controlled world coming up. So much of the technology and the field right now, is giving the user as much control over their environment and over their devices and over their life as possible. You have Alexa, you can tell Alexa to do anything you want, shell turn stuff on in your house, it's giving you as much control over your immediate environment which you have just as much control going up and turning on the radio yourself but, you know and I think you know the push with the recent law of the online education, giving kids as many opportunities to take any class they want, you know and their school of choice right now where they can go to any school they want within the ISD (Intermediate School District). You know there's a push, a lot of people support project based learning or pick your topic of your project and set that up how you like. You know utilizing technology is getting them so many more options in terms of places to get information, ways to collect information, ways to present information. I don't think we will completely abandon the public school model and the Socratic Method in going to like a Montessori setting or anything like that but I think that just like I said, the more user focused student focused personalized learning environment influence I think will definitely continue to spread and grow.

CH: Okay, well I guess if there's anything you would like to add the, to top everything off

BF: I think we covered pretty much every topic we could there.

CH: Yeah we covered what I want to cover

BF: Yeah so I think, I don't think there's anything else I need to add.

CH: Alright

BF: I appreciate you having me in here today.

CH: I appreciate you coming. Alright and thank you.