

The End Of The Beginning

Better Than Expected

One internet connection, two textbooks, ten courses, twenty professors, thirty credits, about two hundred peers and over a thousand hours of work will reach their successful conclusion this summer. My journey through the Master of Arts in Educational Technology (MAET) at Michigan State University provided me with so much more than expected. There were many revelations and equally as many challenges to overcome throughout the course. I have learned so much but most important of all was learning how to continue learning and become a lifelong learner. Rectifying my many misconceptions about technology use in education and how to be an effective leader were two of my biggest achievements.

I had always considered there to be two types of technology - those that could be used in the classroom and those that could not. Devices that, I believed, should not be used in the classroom included cellphones, music players and cameras. Software that, I believed, had no education use included Twitter, Facebook, social media in general. I'm glad to say that those misconceptions have changed and I look at any type of technology and think "how can this be used in my classroom?"

Initially technology use in the classroom meant having the shiniest, most expensive, new gadget device to me. That is what it also meant in my personal life. Now I ask myself the question "does this new technology do something that I could not do without it?" Whether I'm spending the district's money or my own, this question drives that decision. I have seen the value in using an old fashioned Polaroid versus the highest megapixel digital camera currently available and students learning more from basic low graphic online math games than extravagant, aesthetically pleasing games.

"What makes a good leader?" I could provide many examples of bad leaders and have had the displeasure of having worked for many. I also knew what good leaders looked

like having seen them on a sports field or on a battlefield, from movies. Prior to taking this program I would have named a few character traits that I would look for in a good leader. I thought I knew what a good leader looked like in an educational setting. How wrong I was. There is a lot more to being a leader than telling those who follow you what to do. Being a leader involves things like promoting change and balancing the needs of stake holders. The type of leader that I will be might still be unknown but it's a lot more clear than pre-MAET.

Learned But Still Learning

CEP811: Adapting Innovative Technology to Education was my first real foray into repurposing tech. My perceptions on certain technologies and their use in the classroom changed irreversibly, in a good way. An example is how I thought Twitter was a social media outlet for celebrities to let us common folk know what they are doing such or what is on their minds like this example from Britney Spears. However, it introduced me to great minds in the educational field like Sir Ken Robinson. It showed me that with hyperlinks and attachments there is no limit to what can be said with 140 characters.

I started also started to think about how my students or colleagues could use Twitter for educational purposes. My future assignments started to reflect this new found love of tweeting. An example of how Twitter made its way into my pedagogical toolkit is this Professional Development Activity where the teachers had to go on a Twitter Scavenger hunt for information. Another example is these Leadership Tweets where I had to put myself in someone else's shoes, occasionally someone with completely contrasting view points than my own. Twitter is just one example of my new found ability to repurpose technology. My biggest gain is the ability to look at any technology and start think about how it could be used for educational purposes.

CEP805 Learning Mathematics with Technology helped dispel some of my other misconceptions about technology in education. As mentioned above, having the shiniest, most expensive, new gadget device was what effective use of technology meant to me prior to MAET. There are cheap netbooks available compared to expensive tablets. Certain brands like Apple have a higher price tag than others like Google. I wanted to be the type of educator who knew how to use the newest and the best gadget. Fortunately those ideas have now changed.

Although aesthetics can be important they are not the be all and end all. In my work of evaluating technology tools I realized that some of the better looking apps and games put too much emphasis on appearance that they neglected functionality and purpose. Although cost usually means that you are purchasing the best, sometimes not all the bells and whistles are necessary. Although the newest usually means the best. Sometimes it's nice to have the best camera with the most megapixels but other times there can be a lot to be learned from using the Polaroid. New tech has it downsides such as buggy software and high cost. This course showed me that age, appearance and cost of technology are not proportional to effectiveness in the classroom.

Since taking CEP815 Technology and Leadership I learned there is a lot more to being a leader than telling people what to do. There is not just one type of leader I have learned that there are Seven Transformations of Leadership each with their strengths and limitations. Some leadership styles are more rare than others. For example the alchemist, leaders like Apple's Steve Jobs only come around once a generation and can lead to significant social reform, see the iPhone. While we can all aspire to make such a historical difference, it is often more effective to have more realistic goals.

I am not sure of the type of leader that I will grow to be and I am sure that my thoughts on the subject will change between now and the point that I step into that role. I see some of my character traits in the different leadership styles. I consider myself logical like an Expert, try to meet strategic goals like an Achiever and balance strategy and performance like an Individualist. It is yet to be determined the type of technology leader that I will be in the future but this course and this program have provided me with the tools to be successful.

The list of lessons that I have learned is not limited to appropriate types of technology for education and leadership styles. I have learned about best practices when teaching students online or in other settings. Lesson plans and units were created that incorporated technology to accommodate and engage those students. It emphasized to me that not all students are the same so lessons should be differentiated to embrace their unique abilities.

As a math teacher incorporating literacy, the ability to read and write, into lesson plans is not second nature to me but that was exactly what I had to learn to do and I am a better educator for it. Further to my exploits in literacy I have improved my writing skills. While researching educational practices I learned how to be precise and concise. Having been told to define everything by my professor I had to define terms that seem intuitive to educators, for example 'student growth'.

In the math classroom, literacy is more than being able to read story problems and answer questions by writing in full sentences. For many teachers and students, it is also about being intellectually, culturally, and electronically capable. Newer teaching styles, like the flipped classroom, where students read text and watch recorded lecture videos outside of the classroom, requires a higher level of comprehension than ever before. Due to the Internet, literacy is evolving and our students evolve with it. Literacy is tied to everything we do.

Different But Still the Same

When I started this journey I was in a traditional educational setting and as I reach its conclusion I find myself in a less traditional one. At the beginning of my MAET program I was a substitute teacher in a public school district, hoping to one day have a mathematics classroom of my own. Friends in education told me that I would need a masters eventually so I decided to begin sooner rather than later. MAET combined two of my passions in technology and education into one degree.

Since then my career has changed, I am now the director of a Sylvan Learning tutoring center. My current role involves working more with teachers and parents and less with students. In terms of new technology and leadership, I still have to evaluate any new technology and its purpose within our organization. I have to get the owners to buy into my technology vision in order for them to make the investment. I also have to get buy in from my teachers so that they fully utilize anything I try to implement. Ultimately I would still like to have my own classroom in the future but right now I am enjoying making a difference in students lives in my current role.

Next Steps

The CEP 807 Capstone Portfolio Course brought the whole degree together and provided a logical conclusion. It allowed me to showcase my talents, reflect on past experiences and set future goals. Having an opportunity to reflect on my degree, experiences and growth compounded everything I have learned and hence set me off on my next steps.

I can see the transformation in my mindset as a teacher and the extensive set of skills, resources and learning I have acquired. For better or worse technology is constantly evolving and trying to keep up can be a losing battle. Using my prior knowledge and expertise on current technologies, I will have an advantage in learning new technologies so that they can support education. I can see the extensive shifts that have occurred in my thinking throughout my MAET program and have learned how to become a reflective educator who is constantly evaluating the assumptions that are impacting my students.

The MAET program has set me up for success as I continue through my career. I can use the skills I have learned combined with my passion for teaching technology to help my students to learn. The program has given me the tools to teach many different kinds of students in many different environments. My education and experiences have brought me to where I am today, but I know that will only continue to grow and I will eventually reach my goal of being a leader in technology.