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Capstone

The Classes Have Ended…
The Learning Process is Forever

My first year of teaching, I was excited to begin implementing educational strategies that I had learned about during my undergraduate experience at Michigan State University. I was eager to motivate and differentiate each student's learning experience. As soon as the school year began, however, I quickly realized that I was missing a crucial part of the learning process. I was expected to integrate technology into the classroom, prepare the students to use technology tools as they would in their everyday lives, and I had a very basic understanding of its importance myself.

My desire to learn about best practices in regards to integrating technology continued to grow throughout my first year as an educator. Sure, I was able to find enough activities to fill the time in the computer lab, but I felt as though I was doing a disservice to my students by not advancing my education. That spring, I enrolled in the MAET program through Michigan State University. Initially, I had set simple goals for myself such as learning about and becoming comfortable teaching with a variety of technologies. As I reflected on my experience with the MAET program through writing a Goal Statement Reflection, I realized that my original goals had been met through the completion of my first course. In CEP 810: Teaching for Understanding with Technology, I learned about several technologies that could be used for educational purposes and discovered the importance of social networking to pursue future learning. It was upon the completion of this course that my desire to learn more about technology in the classroom grew. After meeting my original goal of identifying technologies, I began looking towards the future. I wanted to better understand the importance of technology in the classroom and collaborate with my colleagues on the best practices for implementation. Participating in the MAET program has pushed my thinking about technology in the classroom, allowed me to learn more about myself as a learner, and better understand the importance of online learning.

My teaching beliefs were challenged and pushed as I discovered new tools and concepts throughout the program. In CEP 811: Adapting Innovative Technology to Innovation, we focused much of our attention to the Universal Design for Learning model. Before taking this course, I had always considered one of my strengths to be differentiating the learning process so that every student had the opportunity for success. I used a standard lesson plan, considered the needs of my students, and altered the lesson each year to benefit all learners. It wasn't until I was required to create a lesson centered on this model that I began to rethink my approach to differentiation. The UDL model allows educators to consider all possible learners when creating a lesson. In addition, the activities included will benefit all learners regardless of specific needs. For example, although I do not currently have any students with hearing disabilities, I still include text anytime I have audio available. Even though every student can hear the words, everyone can benefit from reading them as well. Through this course I was given the opportunity to apply the UDL model and create a Stand Alone Informational Resource that used

technology to supplement content. By adopting this model and using it across the curriculum, I can now argue that I do create differentiated lesson plans that all students can benefit from.

In CEP 812: Applying Technology to Educational Practice, my colleagues and I were asked to brainstorm issues that had occurred in the classroom that could possibly be solved or improved upon using technologies. Until this point, I had mostly used technology as an additional tool, but never as a solution to a problem. As a first grade teacher, I understand the importance of parent-teacher-student communication. In the past, I have had the opportunity to discuss student progress twice a year at conferences. Aside from these conferences, I have the option to call a parent, send home a note, or set up an additional meeting. The problem I found myself facing was that as I began to integrate technology into the classroom, parents were unable to view student work as quickly as it was being produced. My students love creating digital stories to show off their literacy skills, and I wanted to share each story with the parents and allow them to give positive feedback. Through using Wikispaces, I created a place for student work to be shared and reflected upon. This was the first chance I had to integrate and repurpose a technology as a solution to an everyday problem. My thinking began to shift throughout this course as I realized that technologies should not be used in place of teaching content, but rather, adapted to meet educational needs. Suddenly, my desire to master as many technologies as possible began to diminish as I recognized that technology could be repurposed to support learning and should not be the center of the learning process. I was on the brink of identifying a key concept that would change my thinking forever.

The following summer, I signed up for the MAET Summer Cohort: Year 2. The cohort was a combination of CEP 800: Learning in School and Other Settings, CEP 815: Technology and Leadership, and CEP 822- Approaches to Educational Research. I had enjoyed the previous courses as I learned about technologies and how to apply them to education. I had never considered that my thinking about technology integration would be shaken to the core by the end of the six weeks. Up until this point, I was confident that the technology I had introduced my students to was engaging and motivating. It wasn't until I learned of TPACK that I began to reconsider my educational technology beliefs. My professor for the cohort, Punya Mishra, introduced the TPACK model as a framework to consider when integrating technology. He stressed the importance of finding the "sweet spot" between technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge. It was through the creation of a grant proposal that I learned just because a technology is engaging, does not mean it is essential or should be included in a lesson. Educators should first identify the pedagogy and content, and then search for technologies that support learning. Before this course, I had fallen into the trap of learning about a new technology and creating lesson plans centered on the tool. I was convinced that because the technology was so intriguing, the students would automatically be more engaged, and as a result, increase their understanding of a topic. Sure, a student might become immersed in a game or a web 2.0 tool, but as his/her teacher I have to think about the outcome and the purpose. It is my responsibility to choose technologies that support learning.

I have experienced online learning as a student and I have created a website for my first graders. Online learning is wonderful opportunity for students to work at their own pace, collaborate with others, and take courses that many not be offered if taken at school. As I created a First Grade Phonics website for my students through CEP 820: Teaching Online, I found myself focusing on the elements necessary to create an online course. I learned the importance of setting goals, considering the technology background of each student, providing feedback, and openly communicating with colleagues and instructors. In a way, this experience solidified everything I had learned throughout my time with the MAET program. To be an effective online teacher, I needed to consider finding the sweet spot of TPACK, determine the most effective way to assess student learning, and keep the communication lines open. I also discovered the benefits of synchronous and asynchronous sites and how to effectively assess and evaluate students. I realized that by taking the key ideas from each of my courses, I had the potential to create a wonderful learning experience for my students. I can remember this assignment being my biggest fear at the beginning of the program. I knew that I would need to ultimately have enough skill and confidence to create a site that would benefit my students. I worried that they would be too young to take part in the activities, and that I would have a hodge-podge of links that were loosely tied to the topic. By combining my knowledge of the UDL model, repurposing technologies, and considering TPACK, I was able to construct a site that my students will benefit from. Creating this site allowed me to focus on the needs of all learners and integrate technologies to support the learning process.

I will never again approach the process of integrating technology the same way that I did three years ago. Through the courses I have taken as part of the MAET program, my thinking about teaching and technology has shifted dramatically. I now consider the needs of every learner when creating a lesson plan, whether or not a student with that specific need is in my class that year. I understand that I have a bank of technology tools that I can reach into and repurpose to supplement my lessons and I do not have to abandon an old technology simply because a new version has been created. I will always consider the pedagogy and content knowledge of my students when integrating technology, rather than constructing lessons based around a new, exciting tool. These are insights that I may have never gained had I not embarked on this MAET journey.

As I look back on my experience in the MAET program, I can't help but reflect on myself as a learner. For as long as I can remember, I have always been the student who feels the need to master each concept. This was, perhaps, my biggest challenge to overcome in my graduate courses. As mentioned, my initial goal for the MAET program was to learn about as many tools as possible that I could use in the classroom. Just like the concepts I learned about in previous classes, I wanted to not only be introduced to each tool, but I wanted to master each one. By doing this, I assumed it meant that I had done well in my course and been a good student. I soon realized that I could never conquer every technology available to me. Then, I began to question the purpose of learning about each tool. I thought: "Why should I learn about so many different technologies if they can become obsolete? What is the point in mastering a tool if a new

version will be created in the future?" It is the MAET courses that have reshaped my view on learning and teaching with technology. Of course, any tool that can support the learning process has value. I now understand, however, that my learning experience is just beginning. To be the best learner I can be, I must continue to reflect on my teaching beliefs and challenge my own thinking. Alvin Toffler once wrote: "The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn." Technology is constantly evolving and it is our job as educators to never stop learning and always consider the educational purpose.

I have not mastered every technology, and I don't believe that I ever will. I am comfortable stating that I am a life-long learner. I have a wealth of knowledge from my experience with the MAET program and it is simply a springboard to my future learning. While I no longer will have access to instructors who provide insight and educational resources, I now have a professional learning network. My educational journey is just beginning, and my thirst for knowledge grows stronger each day as I consider the unlimited educational benefits to integrating technology into the classroom.