

Unpacking My MAET Experience; A Synthesis Essay

My passion and conviction for fostering a growth mindset at all ages led me to the Master of Arts in Educational Technology (MAET) program at Michigan State University. I earned my first master's degree in education in 2009 and knew it was time, once again, to continue cultivating my teacher growth mindset formally. I applied to the MAET program, hoping to learn more about purposeful technology integration methods and strategies. My second master's degree journey commenced in March 2020 with a seven-week course on adapting innovative technology to education. Before this class and my acceptance into the MAET program, I had no clue how much this experience would impact my professional and personal life. It started as an exciting new journey to hopefully enhance my teaching practices and learn more about educational technology tools; however, in the end, I gained more insight and understanding about teaching in today's world than I ever could have predicted.

On the first day of my MAET journey, I logged into the D2L online platform to begin my initial course, CEP 811; the same day, my school decided to halt in-person learning indefinitely, due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. CEP 811, a class about innovative technologies, taught me much more than technology in education. It taught me to look at my life through different lenses and reimagine all the possibilities, even in unsettling times. My instructor, classmates, and I were all navigating these uncharted waters together; however, the concepts learned in this course helped me shift from "normal" teaching to teaching over Zoom, with effective pedagogy always at the forefront. A couple of the first essential topics we explored included: risk-taking, innovating, and reiterating. I learned that I must establish trusting relationships and safe experiences for my students to feel comfortable taking those risks and be innovative in the classroom, including using digital tools. The first risks we tackled were collaborating and communicating outside the classroom over Zoom. As an educator, I modeled safety in risk-taking and leaving my comfort zone by teaching remotely and not in a face-to-face setting. With purposeful dialogue, I encouraged students to explore something new and not be afraid to fail; they slowly began to warm up to our novel learning environment. I wanted my "new" classroom setting to view failure as an opportunity for growth for my students and myself. When this is the mindset, some pretty exceptional outcomes are inevitable.

Another key takeaway from CEP 811 was Seymour Papert's Constructionism theory. He said, "The role of the teacher is to create the conditions for invention rather than provide ready-made knowledge" (Roffey, 2016). This idea resonated with me, especially during remote teaching and learning. Since Constructionism focuses on putting the learner in the center of the learning activity, I knew I had to provide opportunities for

my students to construct an understanding of the concepts and allow them to be innovative (Udacity, 2016). Inspired by this theory, I encouraged my students to be makers by assigning Project Based-Learning activities, choice boards, and HyperDocs. These assignments strengthen students' critical thinking skills and inspire them to be creators.

CEP 811 taught me that digital tools can enhance student engagement and cultivate an innovative mindset in the classroom; however, many educators are not utilizing educational technology properly, creating a digital divide. The divide is between educators who know how to use technology to reimagine learning and those who use it to digitize traditional learning practices (Culatta, 2013). With this idea in mind, along with elements of the Constructivist theory, such as scaffolding and social participation, I, as a 21st-century educator, must integrate digital tools to close the digital gap and encourage students to be creators. In addition to educators, administrators must facilitate this implementation by providing training that will give teachers the tools we need to utilize "technology to reimagine learning" (Culatta, 2013).

How can we prepare our teachers to implement technology into the classroom purposefully? What is the most efficient and practical approach to doing this? The lessons and information I learned in CEP 810 (Teaching Understanding with Technology) helped me solve this "wicked problem" and have significantly impacted the methods I utilize when integrating digital tools. For instance, the TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge) framework was first introduced to me during this course. This framework is a resourceful guide to help teachers purposefully integrate technology and is highly resourceful, now more than ever. A myriad of schools all over the country have financially invested large sums of money into their technology programs (primarily due to the Covid-19 Pandemic and remote learning). There is a massive push for teachers and students to utilize digital tools frequently; however, most educators are not adequately trained in purposeful implementation practices. This is where I believe TPACK can help. It focuses on three knowledge domains: content (what we teach), pedagogy (how we teach), and technology (tools we use). When all three are combined, teachers can design effective and engaging lessons with technology.

CEP 810 taught me how to apply educational technology tools creatively. I also learned how to recognize when digital tools can assist or impede the success of student learning. This course reaffirmed the importance of first applying my pedagogical knowledge to identify the learning objective. After the objective is decided, I then determine the best tools to help students achieve it. CEP 810 verified that I am a wicked problem-solver and that using TPACK in my classroom will increase the effectiveness of my everyday teaching.

This course also afforded me the opportunity to put these ideas into practice with my 21st Century lesson plan assignment. I revamped an old lesson plan and applied 21st-century thinking with the TPACK framework at the forefront. I learned that to create a 21st-century classroom environment, I must practice flexibility, encourage creativity and critical thinking, promote student-driven learning, and help students develop problem-solving skills. The previous lesson plan was teacher-centered and not very engaging. With the help of the course readings and instructor input, I learned how to make it more relevant, student-driven, and cultivate active learning. My pedagogical thinking and choices also concentrated on digital literacy and which digital tools I should use to help students achieve their learning goals. CEP 810 confirmed that in a 21st Century classroom, I must always apply technology tools creatively and purposefully. This philosophy is something I practice daily with my students.

Another course that transformed my way of thinking was CEP 815, a class on technology and leadership. Honestly, this course was not one I was planning on taking. I was nearing the end of my MAET journey and needed one more elective class. I had already taken most of the spring classes, so it was either a course on math or leadership; I chose the latter and am so grateful that I did. CEP 815 changed my outlook on effective leadership in teaching and technology. I was challenged to examine the question, “What do teaching, learning, and technology look like in my present context?” I am proud of the direction my school has taken regarding technology in the classroom; however, CEP 815 has helped me realize we have a lot of room for growth and improvement, and I can help make a positive impact.

Much of this realization came from a movie. The Netflix documentary, *The Social Dilemma*, was part of a larger CEP 815 unit focusing on the affordances and constraints that arise with technology and teaching. This documentary so moved me that I immediately watched it a second time and also told coworkers and friends to do the same. After viewing it and processing the information presented, I started to reevaluate how I utilize technology, both personally and professionally. Technology and social media are powerful tools and have the potential to transform education and learning for everyone when implemented purposefully. There are, however, serious concerns and consequences this documentary addressed, that I will forever carry with me. For example, there is a lack of protection for children on social media. Regulations to protect do not exist for all media advertisements, such as YouTube. Youth depression and anxiety are exponentially higher today, and many people are pointing the finger at big tech and their manipulation tactics. Also, unregulated news information is a huge concern since that type of reporting travels faster and makes big tech more money. These issues are now at the forefront of my pedagogical thinking. As an educator, I must ensure students are safe while using digital tools and know how to make responsible decisions. I plan on integrating lesson plans into my curricula that teach students how to

make smart choices, stay safe, decipher facts from fiction, respect others, and be held accountable for online behaviors.

CEP 815 also encouraged me to think about the future of all schools and presented the need for organizational change. I believe technology leaders in schools today must champion digital literacy and the formation of healthy technology habits for students of all ages, and administrators need to be a significant part of this movement. It is essential Chromebooks and iPads are not just thrown at teachers and students without proper and valuable training. To successfully generate a transformation, I learned that technology leaders must prepare, implement, and follow through with their plans for a successful organizational change. This course challenged me to look at myself as a leader and determine the changes I want to see in schools. These ideas were shared in a vision plan for technology and schools I wrote in this course. The ideas I included represent who I am as a technology leader and my core beliefs about what purposeful technology integration looks like. I discussed the importance of student-centered learning, innovative learning opportunities, digital literacy, and digital citizenship. This vision plan has already guided me to make informed decisions regarding how I use technology in the classroom and has helped me cultivate purposeful and responsible technology integration practices. I hope one day I acquire a leadership position that affords me the opportunity to work with many schools and help them create this organizational change.

As I wrap up this synthesis essay and my Master of Arts in Educational Technology journey, I cannot help but feel emotional. As the teaching world has turned upside down, I am forever grateful to have been part of a program that showed me how to be innovative, take risks, look at the world through multiple lenses, be a leader, and teach effectively with technology. I am walking away with much more than a diploma. I am a transformed educator. My passion for purposeful learning and technology integration practices has been reinforced. I am enthusiastic about taking the ideas I have learned and applying them in my classroom. My program might be almost over; however, I will continue to practice what I have learned and cultivate a growth mindset for both my students and myself as pedagogical thinking and digital tools continue to unfold.

References:

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