

A Life Changing Journey

Synthesis Essay

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When I registered for my first graduate level class at MSU, CEP 810 Teaching for Understanding with Technology, in the spring of 2009, I had no intention of pursuing a Master's Degree in Educational Technology. I signed up at the urging of my friend, colleague, and then teaching partner, Becky. We both needed credits towards our certifications, the class was conducted completely online, and it would be over in eight weeks. We would get through it together, she told me. I was not a complete novice when it came to computers and technology, but Becky was definitely the more tech-savvy of the two of us. With more than a little trepidation, I agreed to take the class with her and completed my online registration. Little did I know then that I was the one who would develop a passion for educational technology and continue with the program while Becky took the first three classes, completing the Certificate program, and then changed her focus. She is certainly still very skilled in technology and, in fact, has become a blogger and has started her own store on [Teachers Pay Teachers](#). She is now completing her Master's in Educational Leadership degree. I now think that this path is the perfect choice for Becky because she saw in me the qualities necessary to continue and complete the MAET program long before I did, and she urged me to do so. The journey certainly has not been easy, but it has been full of rewards and experiences that have made me a better teacher and a more well rounded person.

I took many courses that impacted me during my program. One of the most impactful was CEP 891, Online Literacy and Reading to Learn in the Digital Age, which I took in the spring of 2012. The main focus of this class was learning about how the act of reading material online is different from reading traditional texts such as books, newspapers, magazines, etc. Every topic we discussed, every article we read, and every assignment we completed in this class was interesting, impactful, and relevant to me as a teacher and an avid Internet user. The textbook for this class was written by Nicholas Carr and is titled The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains. This book was fascinating to me. Prior to this class, I had never considered the fact that reading online requires different strategies and skills than reading traditional texts. It turns out that online reading, as well as other online activities, actually changes the way our brain develops and works. This was a defining moment of realization for me. It made me instantly realize that we (teachers) can no longer teach the same way we used to. Our children today are growing up with technology, so their brains are actually wired differently than ours are; therefore, we must change our teaching methods in order to effectively reach them.

In addition to changing my perception of digital literacy within the classroom, CEP 891 was also the class that introduced me to screencasts. We used them for many purposes during the semester, but one very memorable assignment was to record ourselves reading something online and to actually verbalize our thought process while we were reading. Though this wasn't an easy task, it was very eye opening. I

realized how truly distracting online reading can be, and how we must be more purposeful and teach our students how to deal with those distractions in order to be effective and skilled online readers.

Our major assignment for this class was to develop a website that would address some area of online reading and gear that website towards a targeted audience. I chose to use Weebly for my website and focused on one of our major science units in second grade: the life cycle of plants. In addition to the scientific content, my website also addresses the online reading strategies of skimming text, looking for key words, and ignoring the many distractions we find online. I have now had the opportunity to use this website with my classes twice. We study plants in the spring, so I used the website in the spring of 2012 and again in the spring of 2013. Both groups of students did well with this online format and enjoyed the variety of activities, games, videos, and reading material on the site. You can view my Second Grade Plants website at www.secondgradeplants.weebly.com.

Every class that I took during my MAET program was full of practical and useful content that I am using in my teaching now and will continue to use in the future. However, I think that the class that taught me the most and will help me to eventually reach one of my long-term goals of moving into online teaching is CEP 820, Teaching K12 Students Online, which I took in the spring of 2013. In this course, we had the opportunity to explore and learn about many different learning management systems for hosting an online class. In addition to learning the

technical aspects of designing an online class, we also learned about all administrative and organizational aspects of online teaching. We covered everything from good website design concepts to productive communication with both parents and students to thinking outside the box when it comes to designing activities and assessments in an online arena.

The major assignment for this course was to actually develop an online course module, which could be used in our current teaching situation. For me, this meant developing an online course for second graders. I thought this was a crazy idea at first! How could second graders possibly take an online class? I soon learned that my definition of an online class was too narrow. I was thinking about the way I had been taking my master's courses through MSU in an online format. A second grader certainly would have difficulty with technical issues and possibly content issues as well. I felt that such young students would need an adult to be physically in the room with them during online class time. What I learned from CEP 820 is that while there might be situations where the above scenario would work (i.e., under the supervision of a very responsible and committed parent), an online class for young students is probably most successful in a hybrid format. Once I knew that it was an option to design my course module to be used in conjunction with in class discussions and activities, I knew just the direction I wanted to go with my module.

I chose Haiku LMS as the learning management system for my course. Because of the heavy emphasis on basic math concepts in the Common Core Curriculum, I

wanted to create a course to help our second graders become more fluent in math facts. This project was very enjoyable for me, and I think that it will be useful in my classroom as well. I designed a course which is intended to be used as a companion to our established math curriculum and would provide students with lots of opportunities to not only practice math facts, but to reinforce strategies and skills that were taught in class. You can view my Math Strategies online course module at www.myhaikuclass.com/msgerth/math.

In the summer of 2012, I very reluctantly signed up to be in the Year 2 cohort of the MAET program. The summer cohort is a hybrid experience, combining three courses (CEP 800, CEP 815, and CEP 822) and spanning only about 5 weeks. I say I was reluctant because it was quite a large step outside of my comfort zone to return to campus as a student after so many years. I thought I would be extremely uncomfortable and, at 46 years old, probably the oldest student in the class and would thus feel very much out of place. I am happy to say that I was wrong on all accounts. Of course, I didn't love sitting inside for seven hours a day for two weeks straight during the summer, and the 2.5+ hour round trip commute from my mother's house where I would be staying for the two weeks to campus each day wasn't the highlight of my day either. While the workload, both during the face-to-face sessions and the online time, was challenging, the entire experience was one that I value and will remember with great fondness.

I think the most valuable part was actually being able to sit in that room with about 30 other like-minded students along with three instructors for seven hours a day for two weeks. There was always someone there who knew something about any subject we covered. People were so willing to help with technical issues, research questions, and general brainstorming. Of course, being able to pick the brains of three very knowledgeable instructors each day was invaluable also! Many times, I felt that I was one of the least knowledgeable people in the room. These people had had incredible experiences and so much information to share! However, as I think back, I can recall a few times when I was the one sharing a tip or a technological tool that no one else had heard of. It was a great feeling to be part of that group and be able to engage in conversations and projects with such a diversified group of peers.

During the course of this cohort session, we covered multiple topics and produced more projects than I thought humanly possible. We learned to edit videos and photographs, repurpose organizational tools for the classroom, write a grant proposal, investigated common misunderstandings, and learned how technology can be used to develop creativity and critical thinking skills in the classroom. We also studied behaviorist theories and did an in-depth study and discussion of Daniel Willingham's book Why Don't Students Like School? This book explains how people think and learn and how understanding this can help teachers improve their teaching skills. I think that the concept that impacted me the most from this book comes from the very first chapter in the book. It is the idea that "people are naturally curious, but we are not naturally good thinkers; unless the cognitive

conditions are right, we will avoid thinking.” In class, we discussed this idea and the importance of it in an educational context. This basically means that new information is very difficult for people to process if it has no meaning or relevance to them. This is an idea that all teachers should understand and it should change the way we teach.

When I was thinking about how I would complete my Master’s Degree, having the option to do it online was very important to me. I live in a small town in northern Michigan, so commuting to classes is difficult. I needed the convenience of being able to do my coursework according to my own schedule, in my own home, and without having to worry about long commutes on snowy or icy roads. Obviously, I have gotten over the anxiety I felt before taking the first couple of classes with my friend Becky. I now prefer online classes to the traditional face-to-face platform. I took more time than many to complete the degree due to financial and scheduling issues, but now, four years later, I am so happy that I took the plunge. In the past years, I have spent many hours at my computer (first at my old Dell PC, but I am now a proud Mac user!); I have communicated with instructors and classmates via email, video chatting, Skype, screencasts, Google docs, and the Capstone “Coffee House.” I have created PowerPoint presentations, wikis, videos, and countless websites for various purposes. I have tested out many of my projects on my second grade students, sometimes successfully and sometimes finding that I needed to make revisions. There have been many successes and frustrations along the way, but I wouldn’t trade any of it for the world.

This journey has not only given me a new credential to add to my resume; it has changed me. I am a more confident teacher. I have taken more of a leadership role when it comes to technology in my school, though I still hope to do more. I have reevaluated my future plans. Perhaps I will not always be a second grade teacher, as I once thought. I now feel that I have the knowledge, skills, and confidence to pursue another path one day, whatever that may be. I know that my learning will not end with this degree. In fact, I think that it is just beginning. I will continue to seek learning opportunities and technologies to meet the needs of this digital age we live in. Technology is constantly changing and improving. Armed with the skills and knowledge I now have, along with the personal learning network I have developed through the MAET program, I know that I will continue to change and improve as well.