

Principles to Live and Teach By: A Synthesis of My Master's Program

By: Katy Jain

Finding a Fit

True growth and learning are the products of thoughtful cogitation and reflection. Throughout the Capstone class in the MAET program through Michigan State University, I have been given plenty of opportunities to reflect upon my journey through the program and my growth as a learner and a teacher. I look back now and see my former self as that person you run into in the grocery store: someone strangely familiar from your past, but different enough that it is hard to recognize them. I have grown and changed as a result of the Master of Arts in Educational Technology program, so much so that when I look back, I hardly recognize myself.

When I began looking for courses to renew my teaching certificate in 2010, I was juggling twelve different preps, eight of which were online classes using a program called Compass Learning. I was struggling to find ways to keep my at-risk students engaged in these new online classes (which I could not edit or change), I was worried that I could not take on more responsibilities. I also had plenty of colleagues suggesting programs that they had been through at local colleges and universities like Wayne State, Eastern, and Madonna. While each program seemed like the right fit for my colleagues, I longed to return to my alma mater, Michigan State University. The teacher education classes I had taken during undergrad at MSU were truly priceless. They were practical and filled with a wealth of knowledge and ready to use, applicable techniques. Had I not gone through the teaching program at MSU, I do not think I would have survived my first year of teaching six different preps of both middle school and high school classes in an urban school. I have always been thankful to the preparation MSU gave me and I longed to return. But driving an hour to campus for classes was not feasible for me and I began to lament that I would have to choose a local school.

That was when I remembered taking classes online through MSU during my summer semesters. I went back to the MSU website and the clouds parted: not only did MSU offer online courses, they were courses in technology. It was like a scene from TV or the movies: the clouds parted, a beam of light was shining, and a choir was singing harmoniously. The certificate program comprised of three courses (CEP810, CEP811, and CEP812) seemed perfect for me as a way to learn more about effectively using technology all the while testing out whether MSU's fully online program would work for me and my schedule. At the time I had no intentions of completing my Master's just yet. Little did I know that I would find the courses so interesting in helpful that I would not consider it to be work to complete an entire Master's program.

Synthesis of a Program

I have to admit that when I started in the Educational Technology program at MSU, I had a limited set of expectations for what I wanted to accomplish. I wanted to learn how to make a class website and learn to use technology to become a paperless classroom. Having completed the program, I now know that I have learned four guiding principles that will continue to guide me well into my future:

1. We as educators must choose technology because it will help us accomplish a larger goal rather than choosing technology just for the sake of using a new technology.
2. We as educators must strive to be creative and remain innovative.

3. We as educators should use technology as a tool to break through restrictions such as time, distance, and finances, to collaborate with others, share ideas with colleagues, and continue to expand our working knowledge and skills.
4. We as educators should stay up to date on educational research and conduct our own research within our classrooms to continue to grow.

Even in my very first class, CEP 810, I have been exploring the idea that technology should not be used just for the sake of using technology. In fact, educators can make better decisions concerning technology by identifying TPACK, Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge, when creating lessons and curriculum. Teachers should always be thinking about where Technological Knowledge, Pedagogical Knowledge, and Content Knowledge overlap or intersect. By thinking about TPACK, teachers consider technology, pedagogy, and content to design the best instructional units with authentic tasks. Thus, when considering which technology to integrate, teachers may even consider thinking about it as a problem that they need to solve and where those three areas of knowledge intersect is the solution to that problem.

In all three of the certificate courses (CEP810, CEP811, CEP812) as well as CEP 815, Technology and Leadership, I worked on projects that helped me gain a better understanding of TPACK and developed lessons based on the TPACK model. These courses helped me to come to the understanding that technology should not be used simply because it is the latest and greatest thing. It should be used because its integration helps teachers deliver the content in a meaningful and engaging way. By understanding the principles of the TPACK model, I now view technology leadership in a new way. I now see that it is important for technology leaders not only to procure the technology and show teachers how to use it on its most basic level, but it is also important to show teachers how they can effectively use the technology within their teaching. For example, if I were to train teachers in my building on using VoiceThread, a technology that allows users to post pictures and comment on them in multiple formats, I need to go beyond showing them how the website works and how to upload and comment on pictures. I would also need to show them ways in which they could actually use the program in class such as using it to assess students orally in a foreign language class or by creating a timeline in which pictures and comments are used in tandem to explain a sequence of events.

Another important class that taught me a life changing principle was CEP 818, Creativity in Teaching and Learning. In this class, I learned tools to help me become and stay creative. This class was a character defining class for many reasons. First of all, I learned tools such as abstracting, patterning, modeling, etc to help me become more creative and stay more creative as an all around person. From there I was able to make the connection that having that creativity is vital to a classroom and essential for engaging students. I also had the epiphany that by looking at things through a different lens, I can find new and more creative ways to integrate technology into my lessons. I instantly thought back to CEP 810 in which I learned new ways to use Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, and realized that I could find new ways to use many other technologies if I was creative. Finally, CEP 818 also taught me a lot about online collaboration. I learned to use Skype for the first time and learned to edit documents in real time using Google docs. I faced the struggles that online collaborating can sometimes cause and worked through the problems that online communication through email can sometimes cause. I also met a wonderful colleague, James Rolle, whom I still communicate with outside of class.

From James I have learned that you do not have to be forced into group work to collaborate with a colleague and share new ideas.

Finally, another important class in my program through MSU was CEP820, I learned the importance of educational research. Through the mini research projects, I learned just how easy it is to conduct research in your own classroom to analyze your teaching and its effectiveness. By doing so you are acknowledging that you are not perfect and that there is always room for improvement. While doing my research project proposal focusing on the effectiveness of online learning with at-risk students, I learned that there is very little research on the use of online classes with at-risk students. Having worked in Alternative Ed program that was becoming more and more online based, I was able to see that there was not a strong research base for the use of the online format. I was able to see that while it did allow more opportunities for credit recovery, it should not be our only focus of the Alternative Ed program. As a result, I became a leader on the program's School Improvement Team and led discussions on how to effectively use the computer labs to engage our students. I had planned to conduct some action research before the program was closed at the end of the year. Though I may not focus on this exact topic in the future, I learned from this class that conducting my own research and building upon previous research is an attainable goal from me.

A New View

If you had asked me what goals were three years ago, they would have been vastly different than they are today. I would not have mentioned earning a Master's degree, nor would they include becoming a technology leader in a building or district. The MAET program at MSU has given me new interests, a desire to increase my creativity, and the aspiration to teach more educators how to effectively integrate technology into their classrooms, school buildings, and districts. I have truly learned valuable lessons and principles that will influence my thinking and actions throughout the remainder of my career and for that I am thankful. I have obtained the knowledge and skills to help me continue to grow as a teacher and as a learner. As a result, the possibilities for me are endless.