

Moving Towards Perfection

By: Jed Johnson

Sometimes teachers are the worst students. I was afraid of that; afraid that I would not find a rhythm in my studying. Let's face it, 8 years has passed since undergrad and life happens. I'm a husband now, I run a farm with my father and brother on the side; I have responsibilities outside of my teaching. Oh and the teaching, now that takes up plenty of time on its own. At this point I am almost positive I don't even recall how to study. No matter what excuses I can come up with the State of Ohio does not care. I have a certain amount of time from the date I started teaching to earn my masters degree. If I want to continue teaching, I have to do this. Through all of that I find the constraints we place on ourselves to be interesting in how they guide us through our everyday life as well as life changing decisions. Almost like Boolean logic, my constraints of time, field of study, and availability within any given university led me to Michigan State University's Masters of Educational Technology Program. I found the MAET to be directly applicable to my current teaching assignment. In addition, it offered a class schedule that I could make to fit whatever was happening on a week to week basis if needed, plus short of moving, an online course was the only way I could make any of this happen due to distance. I felt like I was standing on the starting line of a race waiting for the starter's pistol to sound. I had been filled with an anxiety that makes the butterflies in the pit of my stomach quiver. I knew this would be a lot of work, and I was not convinced I was ready for it or even willing to take the first step off the starting line. But I am unable to drop the ball, I have never quit anything I have started, and I will complete this as well.

I chose this course of study because it applied directly to my most current teaching assignment, 7th and 8th grade Technology. That's what I wanted from the beginning, to be able to use the education I so dearly worked for in a practical way. I have no desire for my masters to be a placard that hangs on the wall behind my desk and nothing more. Initially I thought this course of study was all about the technology. However, through the MAET, I found technology to be only a piece of the bigger picture in teaching. And, as I write this, I begin a new journey as I endure the involuntary participation in a reduction of force. Not knowing where I will teach again, or what subjects I may be teaching, I am able to say this for sure; the skills I have acquired and my refined ability to contemplate technology in education will be employed wherever I land. My new found thoughts and approaches to technology integration in education can be applied in any subject, any grade level, and even shared with my future staff members.

The ability to apply technology within any subject is a common thread throughout the MAET Courses in which I participated. The premise of that common core is to; integrate, apply, and use technology without technology becoming the focal point. Stated more simply, do not allow the medium to become the message. Yes, the novelty of technology used in a lesson, even student's interest in technology, can draw learners into a lesson. That in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. However, allowing the medium to become the focal point loses our educational purpose; a lesson then becomes no more than entertainment. As part of the process in determining what technologies to integrate into a class, one must first find a "problem of practice," otherwise technology use has no truly defined purpose.

Finding a problem of practice is one thing, researching how to solve that problem is another. Learning to research in CEP 822, Approaches to Educational Research, yielded some of the most intensive work that I have produced as a student in the MAET Program. I developed a research proposal for determining the value of continued vocational skills based teaching in the State of Ohio. The amount of detail that was involved in writing that proposal still astounds me. I discovered new resources, places to find high quality professional research that took me beyond a simple Google search. That research provided the foundations upon which my proposal was based. I was not able to present half baked ideas either. Every part of my presentation had to be well laid out in a fashion that made sense, whether it was research facts, or my personal ideas. Each idea is integral with the next; alone they would have little meaning, but together they formed professional literature. Professional jargon is not what defines professional literature. It is the well laid plans, with countless hours of insight, research, and thought that define the value of this type of writing. With a potential new teaching position on the horizon, I have plans to put my improved professional writing skills to use. By researching the school district and the position I am seeking, I am developing ways to integrate technology in the class where I may find myself. I expect my ideas to be looked on favorably.

CEP 891, Special Topic in Educational Psychology and Educational Technology, began by making me crazy. My own short sightedness made it frustrating. My first assignments were to make audio visual recordings of myself reading random articles, on line of course. The point was not to read out loud so much as it was to voice my initial thoughts about what I was reading as they came to me. I was not readily finding a connection to reading online and annotating. My problem was that I had never marked up the pages in a book. It seemed to me that it was a sin to deface a book, even in practical use. Now, as CEP 891 continued on and digital annotations took different forms, the concept was coming to me, especially in the form of a Web 2.0 tool, Diigo. Diigo, a form of social networking, allowed me to mark up a digital text with a highlighter and post it notes. Seeing annotations this way really made an impact on me. I suppose it was the visual representation versus Jing's audio representations of

collecting my thoughts as I read. Whatever the case, seeing it made a light bulb turn on for me. Due to a laptop switch some time later, I hadn't downloaded the Diigo tool bar again. Though I am not using the Diigo tool bar now, I continue to contribute to the deforestation of the Amazon Rain Forests by printing off my digital reading material. For me, I absolutely have to have the physical page in my hands. I print off everything from MAET assignments, to commentary on the latest commodity's market trends, or even the newspaper, and I pore over them with a highlighter and pen in my hand. I suppose it seems so little, this annotating of the written word, but it has impacted me. My study skills have improved, and those skills have aided me throughout the larger half of my course work at Michigan State. I never realized the power of tracking my thoughts as I read. Emerging ideas formed more clearly as I was able to retrace my steps while working on cumulative projects. It may be that each individual finds their own way, like myself, in becoming comfortable with annotating their reading material. Whether it is printed text or a digital format, I believe there is substantial importance in encouraging, guiding, and training learners in these skills as the benefits in comprehension are outstanding, as noted in my personal experience.

Who would have ever thought of something so simple and obvious affecting how and what we learn? Those preconceived ideas that I brought to class as a learner, and that my students bring to class now, greatly steer how we think. I guess something as seemingly insignificant as the rudder of a ship can make huge impacts. Lev Vygotsky's, Social Constructivist Theory, that I studied in CEP 800, Learning in School and Other Settings, also made an impact on my teaching. Learning is an active, ongoing process. Many times we are learning without even realizing it. The setting where learning takes place can be anywhere, not just at school. And learning is a socially mediated process. This means not only do people learn through their physical experiences but also through their social experiences in conversation, interaction with others, and cultural impacts. Where all of this leads is here; what you and I learn outside of a classroom, and what our students learn outside of a classroom will affect our understanding of course material both positively and negatively. Interestingly, these preconceived notions have the ability to affect learning and interactions in all areas of life, not just the classroom. As a teacher my focus is, of course, on the classroom interaction with new course material. My concern is combating ill-fated preconceived notions that adversely affect a student's ability to comprehend new course material. I realize this takes an extra class period or two out of our already limited class time, but I think the net results in a game of give and take far outweighs the lost time. A short survey or a basic test is all that is needed to determine the perspective students initially bring into our classrooms. This gathering of data acts as a gauge in which the teacher will use to level the playing field.

Through all of this, my expectations for my own students have grown. My idea of acceptable work changed. Just as I was expected to be able to articulate

my thoughts, understandings, and emerging ideas, I also began to expect the same thoughtful work from my students. This came gradually, until I was crafting a rubric for a new assignment I had designed for an 8th grade class. As I considered my goals and desired outcomes for the lesson, I saw the finger print of the MAET on me, a change so gradual at first that even I had not noticed it in myself. I find myself less content when not encouraging my students to push the envelope for deeper comprehension and connected thoughts. Through the MAET Certificate Courses (810, 810, and 812) I learned to articulate the expectations of my student's work through rubrics. Now, I had used rubrics before the MAET, and had some background experience and familiarity with them, however, through the MAET, I brought my rubrics to a new level through vastly improved specificity. No more shot gun spread patterns to my rubrics; they are now governed by rifle like accuracy.

Despite my initial fears of being a poor student, my educational experience through Michigan State's Master of Arts in Educational Technology has stretched and molded me into a better learner and a better teacher. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Most of the shadows of life are caused by standing in our own sunshine." I have a great sense of pride that I have not only finished something which at the start felt insurmountable, but that I am finishing well. This essay has allowed me to reflect upon what I have experienced these past two years, and I appreciate the insights I might otherwise have overlooked. I may have doubted my abilities at first, but I have gained a new respect for what perseverance and hard work can accomplish. I am excited to utilize my newly polished skills as I not only continue on as a lifelong learner but as a teacher with a renewed sense of passion for preparing my students to be lifelong learners as well