

## **Just the Next Step: A Synthesis Essay by Annie Blaauw**

Learning was my first love. From a young age I have always wanted to know more, learn more, understand more. From reading on my own to taking classes in an academic setting, I have always found joy and comfort in learning. What this meant for me early on was that I loved school, and I didn't want it to end. I believe this played a large part in my becoming a teacher—staying in school, and (hopefully!) teaching others to love learning. My desire to continue learning meant that I always knew I would pursue a Masters degree. The question really was what I would get it in. As a social studies teacher, I considered seriously a degree in history, before turning my attention to technology. While my interest in history runs deep, I decided I wanted my degree pursuit to fill what I saw as a hole in my own knowledge base as an educator—teaching using technology.

As a teacher in a school that was constantly trying to be innovative but lacked solid understanding of new tools for education, I thought that learning more about technology would be beneficial not only for me, but for my school community as well. I had noticed, even in two fast years as a teacher so far, that my students, while “digital natives,” lacked some basic but crucial knowledge when it came to technology. I hoped that by joining the Masters in Educational Technology (MAET) team at Michigan State University, I would be able to remedy that problem.

I went into the program in the summer of 2012 thinking I would learn ways to use technology in my classroom. I certainly learned that, but I learned so much more as well. While I knew I would need to take classes primarily online due to my teaching schedule

and where I lived, I chose to join the intensive summer hybrid of in-person and online classes for my first experience in the MAET program. I soon realized this would be the most intense learning experience I had yet experienced in my life. I consider the first course I took, CEP 810 (Teaching Understanding with Technology), with Jodi Spicer, Alison Keller and Craig McMichael to have been a crash course in educational technology. I realized perhaps an hour into the first day that there was a world of technology out there that I had NO idea about!

CEP 810 had immeasurable value for my understanding of educational technology. I learned here that education plus technology does not necessarily equal a valuable learning experience. I became acutely aware that while technology has a great many affordances, it also could have severe constraints. I feel that this course allowed me to begin my education in the MAET program with eyes open. Importantly, this course also made sure that I knew that I was going to have fun learning about educational technology. I think this is crucial, because the reason I love learning is because it is enjoyable—and that is what can make it enjoyable and engaging for my students as well. This course, and particularly my three excellent instructors, encouraged me to have fun with my learning; they wanted me to explore, discover, mess up and try again. While this could certainly be frustrating, it was also critical to my ongoing engagement with technology throughout the rest of my courses.

After the intensive in-person course was over after two weeks, we students went our separate ways, and I spent the next five weeks more or less glued to my computer, completing two more courses before the teaching year began. The second of these, CEP 812 (Applying Educational Technology to Issues of Practice), was incredibly valuable to

my own personal application of technology this past year. The goal of this course was to look at what we had learned previously about evaluating technology tools and resources, and being to think of how to apply what we had learned directly to the classroom. I found this course so valuable because it was not particularly theoretical—the goal was to be of immediate use to me as a current teacher. This course helped me learn how to walk myself through “wicked problems,” or tough issues in my school that needed solving. By learning how to frame academic and professional challenges in ways that encouraged brainstorming solutions through technology, I was able to gain the confidence needed to take steps to address those problems in the real world.

As a teacher, one problem I honed in on early in my career was a lack of communication and availability outside of the normal classroom. My students were often expressing an interest in easier ways to communicate with me, as well as requesting online resources to help them with my course, and those of my colleagues. While I was all for helping my students out in this way, before the summer of 2012 I would have had no idea how to start. But particularly because of the tools I learned about in CEP 810, and the problem-solving skills I developed in CEP 812, I felt confident enough to launch a trial website, using Weebly, for my students in the fall of 2012. I credit CEP 812 for giving me the confidence to do such a thing, as I would have never felt able to maintain a class website before this.

I quickly discovered that my students loved the idea of this online resource, and used it frequently. I relied on them to tell me what would be useful for me to put on there, and the site grew through the year from a simple announcements page to quite detailed resources for the four preps I taught. Crucially, it became a much-needed link between

my students and myself when, in December, I was in a car accident that took me out of work for nearly three months. I suddenly became my own “wicked problem,” and the website became a key link between my students, my long-term substitute, and me.

Without the timely real-world preparation CEP 812 provided me with, I would not have been able to deal with this unexpected bump in the road as well as I did.

Where CEP 812 gave me the confidence to tackle the big task of introducing a class website to my teaching routine, CEP 800 (Learning in Schools and Other Settings) helped me develop needed skills in developing valuable technology integration into smaller, everyday lessons. I felt this course deeply connected what I was learning at the moment to my own teaching in my own classroom, every day. By using my own courses and lesson plans to guide my learning, this course was immensely valuable for helping me evaluate my technology decisions in my own classroom, which was one of the stated goals of the course.

Beyond the individual ideas CEP 800 wished to teach however, this course allowed me to examine and explore many of the theories and concepts I had learned over the course of the prior year in the MAET program. By asking me to focus in so closely on my own classroom, I was able to evaluate my own teaching strategies, both including and excluding technology, and apply what I had learned through my own classes. This was a great experience for me. This course forced me to examine my own practices extremely closely, which served to help me improve as a teacher, and as a teacher using technology.

This past summer marked a year since I started the MAET program. In that year, a lot had changed in my life. I spent a third of the year “teaching from a distance,” collaborating with a long-term substitute, and my husband completed a PhD from MSU

and accepted a research position at Rutgers University in New Jersey. As I approached my one year anniversary with the MAET program, I found myself reevaluating what I wanted to be doing with my life and if I wanted to stay in the classroom, something I touched on in my Future As A Learner essay.

As my life began to shift and I prepared to move to New Jersey and leave my family, friends, and classroom behind, I was also enrolled in CEP 815 (Technology and Leadership). This was coincidentally a very timely course to take, as it addressed the concept that not all technology leaders need to be teachers, per se. My own idea of what I wanted to do with all this knowledge I had gained was shifting, and although the path still is not all that clear to me, this course resonated in ways few others have for me. This course helped me realize that I can take this passion I carry for education and technology, and apply it in a nearly endless variety of fields and locations.

I believe that a main reason this class felt so significant to me was that the language of the course was different than that of the other courses in my program. The majority of what I learned throughout the MAET program was geared specifically towards classroom teachers. This course, on the other hand, was geared towards anyone with a passion and ambition to be a leader in educational technology. This different orientation meant I was reading articles by educators and theorists I had not been exposed to before, thus experiencing new and different ideas about leadership. I feel that this course provided me with some tangible “real-world” skills I can use if I do choose to step away from the classroom and seek a new path for myself, perhaps as a technology leader or director in a school or library setting. These newer and different skills include problem-solving, memo writing, and project development. By asking me to explore these

areas through a different mindset, I feel I was able to enhance and grow in my own understanding of the role of leaders in any field. This has helped make the possibility of a transition away from the classroom less intimidating, and more exhilarating.

As I have reflected on my experiences in the MAET program through this current capstone course, I have been pleasantly reminded of the often hectic but usually rewarding year and a half I have devoted to the idea of educational technology. If I look back at my initial goal in joining the MAET program, to fill a perceived hole in my students' and my own understanding of technology in education, I can honestly say I have been successful. Ironically, the way I see this working, though, is that the hole has only increased in size—I am now more aware than ever of all there is still to learn in this field. But I have successfully started on the path of learning, and am now properly equipped with the right tools and skills to continue learning without formal coursework as a guide.

If I continue as a classroom teacher, I have learned many skills to help address technology challenges for my students in significant ways. And if, as I have mentioned is a possibility, I choose to take a new road, I feel I am equipped with skills and knowledge to help me be a leader in technology wherever I may end up. Because I love to learn, the earning of a degree does not mark the end of my exploration of educational technology. Whether I continue the academic path and continue my professional education, or simply explore the possibilities on my own, I know that I am more than capable now of creating meaningful experiences through technology.