

## **A New Direction**

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It is often difficult for me to express my learning in the MAET program in words. On several occasions, I have been asked about the program and have tried to answer questions in a clear manner. Yet, I often struggle to succeed in this aspect. I have often wondered why this is the case and I think, upon reflection, that there are a few reasons for this. First, there is a lack of understanding in the general public (including the education sphere) about what “educational technology” truly is. Some people chalk it up to smart boards in the classroom. Some people think of laptop computers or iPads. The truth, however, (and this is the second reason why it is difficult to explain) is that educational technology is a very broad term covering various theories and questions along with practical, tangible, and physical items. The term “educational technology” also continues to expand as new technologies and new research become available. The Internet continues to expand and brings new ways of reaching students through technology. These ideas, in essence, explain educational technology to me. At its core, educational technology is about using technology to increase student learning in the classroom.

I began the program on a trial basis. My thought was to complete the three certificate courses (CEP 810, 811, and 812) and decide at that point if I would like to continue in the program. I had really enjoyed my undergraduate educational technology class at Spring Arbor University but hadn’t realized how passionate I truly was about technology in the classroom. From the beginning of my first MAET class (CEP 810: Teaching for Understanding with Technology) I was encouraged by how much I was learning and how much I truly enjoyed this learning. From CEP 810, I was introduced to blogging. I knew what blogging was before, but had never really thought about its significance to teaching. In CEP 810, we used blogs as a reflective tool to share our learning on different assignments and readings. This opened my eyes to the idea that blogging could be a wonderful reflective tool, and by extension, growth tool for me in my educational journey. I learned that I could gain more ideas for my classroom by reading other educator’s blogs as well. This was the beginning for me as far as using the Internet as a professional development tool.

CEP 810 also introduced me to the concept of a PLN (Personal Learning Network). Through the course, my eyes were opened to the many resources available online for educators through social networks (like MERLOT and Twitter). Before this course, I was often overwhelmed with the resources available on the Internet for teachers. This was because I didn’t know where to go or where to start. I would often just do a Google search for topics and then have to sift through the many items that popped up. Through CEP 810, I learned how to build a network of trusted sources that I could go to for information. This really narrowed down the Internet for me and made it an even more valuable resource. I continued to develop my PLN throughout the program and now my PLN is my “go to” for professional development, rather than traditional PD (classes to sign up for). With my PLN, I know I have hundreds of wonderful educators to connect with whenever I need and I am always learning from them.

CEP 810 was also a significant course for me because it introduced me to the TPACK framework. I had always known that different types of knowledge were needed to effectively integrate technology in the classroom, but had never heard this idea explained quite this way. Through TPACK I saw how truly complex effective teaching can be because

it involves the intersection of so many different kinds of knowledge (technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge). This framework helped me to see that integrating technology into the classroom does not just involve finding something students might be interested in. On the contrary, integrating technology in the classroom involves critical thinking and planning as well as knowledge of one's subject area and sound educational practices.

Overall, CEP 810 drastically expanded my view of education and educational technology in a short time period. Prior to the course, I was not really sure about the value of educational technology and whether the program was going to be the best thing for me. After the course, my journey as an educator changed direction. My eyes were opened to the possibilities of integrating technology further in my classroom and I discovered that I truly had a passion for this area of teaching. The final two certificate courses only helped me further my passion for educational technology and continued to help me develop my PLN. I also was able to practically integrate technology in my classroom through projects like the StAIR (Stand Alone Instructional Resource) project and Wicked Problem project. By the end of the certificate courses, I was ready to follow this new path and apply for the MAET program.

Probably the most impactful courses that I took in the MAET program were the courses I completed in the Year 2 Summer Cohort with Dr. Punya Mishra (CEP 800, 815, and 822). It is difficult for me to separate the coursework into three separate courses since I took them concurrently. Instead, I will explain my learning and experiences in all three courses combined. The first thing that greatly impacted me in these classes was Punya's teaching style. His thoughts and practices in this area really resonated with me and this created a wonderful learning experience for me. In addition, he also inspired me to take some of these ideas to my own classroom and therefore became a model to me for the type of educator I would like to be.

The first thing about Punya's teaching style that made an impact on me was the fact that he integrated Twitter and Facebook into the class. He used Twitter as a backchannel and encouraged students to look up additional resources for information that was presented. This really helped me to stay engaged in the learning because I was always actively doing something. The fact that I was allowed to "multi-task" by having my computer open during discussions and posting to Twitter only increased my learning. I had thought about doing something similar in my classroom and the idea of harnessing social media and using them as an educational tool really inspired me. I'm not ready yet to use a Twitter backchannel with my middle school students but have looked into things like "Today's Meet" to do something similar. This idea is still something that I would like to integrate in the future.

The second thing about Punya's teaching style that worked for me was the variety of tasks in every class period and his use of project-based learning. Whenever possible, Punya would have us discussing things in small groups and then sharing with the larger group. Or, he would have us out of our seats taking pictures or shooting videos. We did a lot of "learning by doing". This helped to keep students interested and created many opportunities for growth.

The last thing about Punya's teaching style that I really connected with was his philosophy on grading. We didn't have any grades throughout the course except for a final grade at the end. The interesting part was that I didn't even notice this until about halfway

through the class. I was so immersed in the learning that I wasn't even concerned about what kind of grades I was getting. Instead of grades, Punya and his assistant focused on giving students meaningful feedback on assignments. I have often wrestled with thoughts about grading as a teacher. I personally don't like giving number or letter grades on assignments because I believe that written feedback is much more valuable. However, written feedback is very time consuming for a teacher with over one hundred students. In addition, parents, students, and administrators at the middle school level expect graded assignments as feedback. After Punya's class, I really saw how grades, at least for me, were not as much of a motivator as I once thought. Instead, as long as I was doing my best and meeting my instructors' expectations, I was happy. I am still not sure how this would play out at the middle school level (I at least am leaning more toward standards-based grading rather than traditional grading systems) but it is always in the back of my mind. Punya's class was the first class in which I was able to see this theory played out in the classroom and it created a very meaningful experience for me.

The assignments in the Year 2 Summer Cohort were also meaningful for my journey with educational technology. We completed many small assignments throughout the class, but the two main ones were our "Dream IT" project and our "Understanding Understanding" project. For the "Dream IT" project, we were challenged to dream about the future of technology in our classrooms. The idea was that if we had the ability to get the technology we dreamed about, what would we do with it? If a teacher wanted some technology that his or her school did not have, he or she could use the project as a grant proposal. Fortunately, the school that had just hired me was about to transition to a one-to-one laptop program. This gave me many possibilities for integrating technology into my classroom.

For the project, I chose to focus on making history relevant for my students. When teaching eighth grade U.S. History, students often ask me why they need to know the material. Through reflection, I came to the conclusion that for history to be relevant to my students, it had to "come to life (focus on the human aspect), be engaging (be told like a story with conflict and an element of the unknown), and have application (give my students something that they can take away to use in their current lives or in the future)." Through the project, I was able to hone in on these three areas and explain how technology would allow me to achieve them. This assignment allowed me to take my experience and expertise in the area of educational technology to the next level by connecting research to the tools I had available. The project opened my eyes to how my classroom could look and the level of learning that my students could have if I followed this plan.

The second major project that I completed during the summer cohort was the "Understanding Understanding" project. This was a group assignment and I really enjoyed working with my group. The first thing that I learned from this assignment is how misconceptions can affect learning. As an introduction to the assignment, we watched a video that showed Harvard graduates explaining what causes seasons. This was my first real experience with seeing how misconceptions can be so widely accepted that even very well educated people can have them. This made me think about the misconceptions that my students have when they enter my classroom. This is a challenge to overcome because in order for my students to learn, these misconceptions must be exposed and corrected. It is easy for educators (myself included) to focus on teaching students new concepts in creative ways. However, it was so important for me to be reminded that my students do not come to

me as blank canvases. Even more important, for students to remember learning, they must connect it to prior knowledge. This was another idea that had great impact on me during these courses.

During the “Understanding Understanding” project, I took on the role of iMovie editor. This was a challenge for me because I had never used iMovie before. The experience was very valuable because I was able to learn how to use the program quickly and for a purpose. In a sense, the project forced me to try something I would most likely not have tried before. My experience with iMovie helped me as an educator because when my students did a project using the program that year, I was able to understand how to help them. Therefore, this project gave me both practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge that helped me become a better educator.

Another influential course for me was CEP 820: Teaching with Technology Across the Curriculum. I really enjoyed my learning experience with Dr. Rand Spiro. He gave very meaningful and encouraging feedback on many assignments and therefore helped me to solidify my thoughts about myself as an educator and my perspective on how well I was integrating technology into my classroom. I also was challenged by the readings such as Will Richardson’s *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*. This book spurred me on to integrate blogging into my eighth grade computer technology classes because it gave me the background research and inspirational stories that I needed to make this decision. I am so glad I chose to do this because having my students blog this year has been one of my success stories as my students develop their writing skills by publishing to a wider audience. I am also glad I introduced blogging because it gives me a window into my students’ lives and allows me to feel a greater connection to them, which helps me be a better teacher.

In CEP 820 we also completed a final research project that challenged me to go deeper and think differently about research and learning. The assignment was to dream again about our classrooms but also to follow paths in the research process (looking for any connections and expanding and narrowing research at the same time). The process was called “non-linear research”. This assignment showed me how truly valuable Internet connections can be and how much one can learn if one takes the time to explore and follow different leads. The project was inspiring for me because I was able to dream again about a topic that would have direct application to my classroom (student blogging). The information I found encouraged me to integrate student blogging at the eighth grade level.

Looking back on my journey as an educator, I can now see that the MAET program changed my direction in a great way. Because of caring and inspirational professors along with key assignments that expanded my thinking and had direct application in my classroom, the program gave me a true passion for educational technology. I am very happy with my decision to embark on this journey and am committed to continuing my learning in this area of education whether in a formal or informal setting.