Michigan State MAET Synthesis Essay: A Retrospective
Nate Piper, 7/2020

As Henry David Thoreau famously wrote in *Walden*:

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

I went to graduate school with a similar mission: to immerse myself in the world of education, engage as deeply as possible, and, putting aside all of the things that consume work hours but distract from the work, discover whatever I could about the core meaning and importance of education, teaching, and learning. It was important to me that I continued in my full-time work during the academic year, and I was therefore not interested in a fully online program, as I knew that immersion in a program would be impossible if I was also negotiating the demands of concurrent professional and family commitments. The [Hybrid Online option at Michigan State](#) stood out to me due to the summer-only face-to-face intensive option.

Thoreau goes on from the earlier passage: "I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms…"

As I anticipated, the online courses that I took were engaging, informative, thought-provoking, and enjoyable, but reliably challenging to balance with other the demands on my time. The face-to-face time, for me, was the "marrow" of the program, and allowed me to live truly "Spartan-like" (I know, not quite what Thoreau intended) in East Lansing for two weeks in each of the summers of 2018 and 2019. Due in large part to the people with whom I connected, the Hybrid Online program changed me as a learner, teacher, and educator. The people of the program - my instructors, advisors, and classmates - expanded my awareness, challenged my thinking, pushed me to dig a little deeper, and exposed me to a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. The face-to-face weeks allowed for spirited discussion and debate, close collaboration, shared intensive experiences, and meaningful relationship-building, both during class and after hours. The broad themes and common threads of the program are the ones that will stay with me throughout my career, particularly the common threads of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), the Technology, Pedagogy, and Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework, and creativity in technology education.

I work in a small independent boys' school in Boston, and have only ever worked in this school. Our student population is talented, our faculty and staff are sharp, creative, and deeply committed to the success and the character of our charges. We are well funded, and while still expensive, we are far more accessible to lower income families than most of our peer schools. One of the first and ultimately most lasting lessons I have learned through my graduate work is that this is simply not the reality for the vast majority of students across the country. I attended a

big (though high-quality) public high school in Michigan, and I knew that this funny little Hogwartsian school in Boston was different, and that public schools broadly speaking were struggling, but I had been in my bubble for too long and I knew too few colleagues and friends that worked in public schools. Michigan State helped to bring me back to Earth in important ways: through exposure to a diverse swath of educators from around the world, and through the curricular threads of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), which were touched upon in each course I took. As we all tend to do, I had developed certain critiques of my institution over my ten years there, some more worth dissecting than others, but I quickly realized that the "problems" I faced paled in comparison to the real, pervasive, tangible, every-day challenges that teachers, students, and administrators face in many public schools. I often found myself sitting bashfully at the edge of discussions, as I realized just how fortunate I was to be living and working largely above the fray. Importantly, however, rather than making these discussions irrelevant to me, it motivated me to expand my awareness of the American educational landscape, and to imagine how I might be able to become a greater ally of a greater number of educators outside of my previously small bubble. It also made me more aware of the individual challenges that many of my students face that may be lurking just beneath the surface, and may be easy to miss in an institution full of kids that are generally talented, motivated, and if taken at face value, "doing great."

Many of the lessons presented across the program gave me structured, well thought-out, and intentional ways to think about elements of teaching and learning with technology that I had only ever considered in intuitive and informal ways. The Technology, Pedagogy, and Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework (introduced in [CEP 810: Teaching for Understanding with Technology](#) but regularly revisited across the curriculum) was one such model that helped me to shift my thinking from an intuitive perspective to an intellectual perspective. It formalizes the ideal healthy interconnectedness of technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge, and clarifies the role that each plays in designing holistically engaging lessons and activities for students. As a common thread through many of my courses, I was continually reminded that technologies are tools, and most often a means to a larger end. Educational technology should always be considered in careful collaboration with specific pedagogies and the desired content knowledge outcomes.

I am a creator at heart, and as the director of the Invention, Design, Engineering, and Art Lab (IDEA Lab) at my school, I am deeply and passionately involved with the creative application of technology toward problem solving. In my opinion, technology in education is at its highest and best when leveraged as a tool of creation, rather than simply as a tool of data consumption. The theme of creativity was widespread throughout my coursework, and I benefited from taking time to carefully consider what creativity really is at its core, what we mean when we say that we want students to be more creative, how we should (and shouldn't) and can (and can't) teach creativity, how to integrate and foster creativity in diverse content areas, and how to assess creative artifacts. Elements of [CEP 810: Teaching for Understanding with Technology](#), the maker project from [CEP 811: Adapting Innovative Technologies in Education](#), and the entirety of

[CEP 833: Creativity in K-12 Computing Education](#) were particularly consequential in my thinking about creativity.

While the cohesive experience of the program was most consequential for me, there are three courses that had a particularly significant impact on me and my practice; two that I could have predicted ahead of time ([CEP 810: Teaching for Understanding with Technology](#), and [CEP 815: Technology and Leadership](#)), and one in particular that was far more consequential than I imagined it would be when I first signed up for it ([CEP 820: Teaching Students Online](#)).

[CEP 810: Teaching for Understanding with Technology](#) is the first and the foundational course in the [Master of Arts in Educational Technology (MAET)](#) program, and since I didn't arrive at professional teaching through an undergraduate education program, it was my first formal education course. The course expanded my ideas about what it means to be a technology educator, and gave me a grounding in learning theories and philosophy to which I had never explicitly been exposed. It introduced much of the language and many of the ideas that I would subsequently dig into in future courses, sparked many curiosities, and whet my appetite for what was to come. Particularly useful to me and my teaching practice were the theories of learning and understanding. I was able to return to the classroom with a new perspective on what was happening inside the minds of my students, to introduce meta-cognitive strategies, and to be more intentional about pursuing evidence of deep learning and understanding.

From 2014-2020, I served as the Director of Technology at my school, and while I've transitioned away from IT management, I continue to serve in an academic leadership role. I was thrust into a leadership position at a relatively early point in my career, learning on the job about educational leadership. [CEP 815: Technology and Leadership](#) helped to clarify for me what positive and supportive leadership should look like by emphasizing the importance of small acts of leadership, and the value of interpersonal relationships and mentorship. Healthy and productive leadership is ultimately more about people than it is about specific ideas or vision. The course provided practical and actionable ways to connect with, engage with, support and guide those with whom we work - both students and colleagues.

When I signed up for [CEP 820: Teaching Students Online](#) as one of my elective courses in October 2019 for the Spring 2020 semester, I imagined that it would be the least immediately applicable course that I would take in the MAET program. Online teaching was simply something I felt I should know about as a technology leader in my school. Nobody could have predicted how timely and useful it would prove to be. As our school (along with most of the country) shut our doors and moved to remote learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the content of the course could not have been more relevant. The course themes of clear online communication, virtual community building, and synchronous vs. asynchronous instruction were extremely helpful in guiding my (suddenly online) teaching and in shepherding along our faculty, most of whom had never taught (or taken) an online course. While the content was most directly applicable, it was also immensely instructive to be enrolled as a student in a high-quality,

intentionally constructed online course. Gaining the student perspective on online learning enabled me to shape my courses from a position of empathy with my students.

The final overarching idea that permeated all of my courses was that good teaching *with technology* needs to be grounded in good teaching. While my courses exposed me to new technologies, tools, workflows, and schemas, the underlying emphasis was always on how the technology can be used for the fundamental goal of educating our students. If education is about building knowledge, skills, understanding, empathy, perspective, creativity, confidence, and expressiveness, then technology is only useful in the ways that it helps to bring students toward those goals. Understanding how people learn, how and why they're motivated, what roadblocks they face, how to effectively communicate, and how to appropriately challenge or accommodate is foundational to good teaching, and therefore must be foundational to good teaching with technology. As our world continues to evolve and change, students need to learn to make effective use of technology, but not for its own sake. Just as hammers and nails are best applied toward providing shelter, technological tools are most powerful when applied to the fundamental needs of the people of the world. As educators, we need to continue to evaluate technology tools not by their flashiness or entertainment value, but (at least) by their potential for helping our students in our fundamental goals for education, and (at best) by their potential to help our students build a better world. Thanks to my courses, instructors, and colleagues in the MAET program, I am better equipped to move my teaching toward these ideals.