

Reflections of a Lifelong Learner

In education, one must reflect in order to succeed. All educators, from teachers to administrators, should have the best interest of students in mind. To do so, they must think about their teaching, their student's learning, and the environments in which both of these things occur. Education is not a stagnant field where teachers can simply do what has worked in the past. Students change and educational practices should change with them. In order to do so, teachers must understand the learning styles of their students and continually improve upon their teaching through research and an ever-expanding professional learning network. In addition, teachers of 21st century students must recognize the powers and potential limitations of technology when used with their students. When each of these ideals is taken into account teachers can help lead their students to greatness. Teachers must make careful decisions about what they have taught, what they are teaching, and what they will teach. The reflection that effective teachers utilize helps to form the global citizens of tomorrow. For me, each of the courses in the MAET program has helped reinforce this belief. The world is changing, and educators must assess their practices- past, present, and future, in order to best help their students.

CEP 800 is a course that introduces students to various learning theories and teaching strategies. Prior to my time in this program I believed that I was a suitable educator who taught my students the material. What I did not know, however, was that my students were being put at a disadvantage by my incorrect approach to learning. There were many times when my students would perform group activities and when they would uncover the content through simulations and guided activities. CEP 800 helped me to realize that this piece-meal approach to teaching is not nearly as effective as I had assumed. In the course we learned that good constructivist teaching occurs when educators guide students towards an understanding of the content through exploration. Not only do good teachers help students understand the content, they actually help students discover methods of learning content on their own. Prior to this course I knew that I wanted to help guide students towards mastery but I did not have a clear path in how I would achieve this goal. Through the theories of social constructivism I have been able to modify my teaching so that my students are discovering the material. I have found over the last year that my conscious effort to create lessons that are more student centered has resulted in better student understanding. I have learned that I need to reflect on lessons that I have completed in the past in order to modify them for the future. The process has created a paradigm shift for my students that has not always been easy. Through thoughtful reflection and persistent action I have begun the transition to a teacher who always answers the question, "How can I teach my students to uncover this concept". This mindset has led me down pathways that I would have never imagined before I started the MAET program. Not only do I create lessons that are more engaging to students, but I have begun to think about each of my educational choices and the outcomes that they create.

As an undergraduate student of Michigan State I knew that students needed a variety of learning experiences in order to succeed. Technology was something that was used to differentiate instruction and make lessons more engaging. Through my first three years of teaching I used technology with this mindset as a cornerstone of my approach towards instruction. While not necessarily bad, it failed to take into account the important rationale behind the use of certain types of technology. CEP 815 taught me that all technology choices must be made by asking the question, "How will this technology make

the teaching and learning process more effective?” If the answer to this question is positive, and learning will benefit, a technology should be used. If not, the teacher could simply use a more simplistic approach without the tool. This missional thinking is different than the instrumental thinking that I utilized before the MAET program. Technology cannot be used for “technology’s sake” and must be used in ways that make us better educators. This reflection on the teaching and learning process has allowed me to create lessons that only incorporate technology when it is beneficial. With this in mind I have found that I am still using technology with the same frequency but with a more refined focus. This ideal, combined with my push towards constructivism, has helped create classroom experiences where I can guide students through complex tasks. Projects seem more natural and students have a better grasp on the material which they are learning.

The use of technology and constructivist thought blended together in CEP 820. This course taught me that good learning can occur in any setting. Prior to CEP 820 I believed that some online learning environments were simply glorified e-mail systems. This had been the case with previous courses that I had taken and I had very little faith in online courses. CEP 820, however, helped form a paradigm shift in my thinking towards online learning. I found that learning can occur in any setting and that good teaching is just that, good teaching. When a qualified teacher uses constructivist thought, and develops lessons that enhance the actual learning goals of a course, then the outcomes are no different than face to face settings. Lessons must be created that are engaging and that ask students to collaborate, analyze, and create content based upon guiding questions. It is this same ideal that makes good classroom teaching so powerful. Teachers cannot simply provide readings and games for students to read and play. In my own classroom I was able to blend an online environment with my face to face setting. With this “flipped learning” students explored content, talked in discussion boards, and created items that would be used in class. Students could work at their own pace and were provided with a variety of pathways for each different type of learner.

Regardless of their success, proper reflection is required to perfect these online learning environments. If an activity flops, then it obviously needs to be revisited. I found that I needed to ask myself the following questions when assessing my online learning environments:

To what extent did students understand the material being presented?
Could students answer the guiding question(s)? Why or why not?
Did the technology make learning better (and easier for the students)?

During my initial teaching after CEP 820 I found that many of these questions were not answered positively. I had created a course with my LMS that worked, but not to my expectations. After careful reflection, through surveys and data analysis, I have been able to change the types of activities that I place on my LMS. The MAET program has shown me that constant reflection and evaluation is necessary in order to best support my students. While the next iteration of my course may be better there will always be room for improvement. The opportunities that I was exposed to in CEP 820 have made this never-ending progression much easier to perform.

CEP 812 introduced me to Professional learning Networks. Prior to the MAET program I was always hesitant to utilize tools such as Twitter and Facebook. While I understood that these devices could be beneficial, I was always skeptical of my own ability to effectively use them for educational purposes. Because of this, I had always spurned their use. What I learned, however, was that these tools are powerful devices that can be used to drastically increase teaching performance. Using Google to search for lesson ideas is always a good start, but social networks such as Twitter allows teachers to connect to millions of educators with a wide variety of experience. In addition to other educators, Twitter accounts such as the Harvard Business Review and Marketplace Money Report allow teachers to pull in strategies and ideas from fields outside of education. After CEP 812 I find myself checking Twitter daily to see what lesson ideas I can create based upon my findings for the day. There is hardly a day that goes by where I do not find something that will make my teaching better.

My PLN helps me to bounce ideas off of other colleagues and teachers at home and around the world. In addition to Twitter, services such as MERLOT are great utilities that introduce teachers to ideas that are reviewed by other educators. The reviews and reflections that others give are instrumental in helping to better my lessons. Just as in the classroom, each and every lesson should be assessed and reflected upon. It is through this process that lessons are perfected. The use of PLNs helps teachers to explore new ideas and reflect upon old lessons.

While individual and group reflections are both valuable, equally important is the research that is completed at the collegiate level. In CEP 822 I was asked to look at current research of a variety of topics. Through this exploration I was surprised to find a great deal of helpful information. As a classroom teacher I rarely used services such as JSTOR to find current research on topics that impact the classroom. As part of the course I was asked to look at a topic that interested me. Due to my own experiences I chose to assess college readiness and the things that make students ready to perform at the collegiate level. In the end I found that students succeed best when they are taught a challenging curriculum that is personalized to their own desires. While these findings were helpful, what the experience really showed me was the importance of continued research and reflection of practices. As a teacher I often looked at these big issues and wondered what I could actually do to make any real difference. The findings that I made showed me that there is a plethora of good research to help teachers perform better for their students. In order to discover this, however, teachers must be willing to first, realize that there is a problem, and then second, look for solutions in the research. I found that this part can often be the most challenging in the “soft sciences” as no real solution is guaranteed to work. Because of this, teachers must be willing to attempt solutions and then reflect on their results.

The MAET program was a challenging experience that helped me to grow in a variety of ways. I learned that as teachers, we must continually work to improve our craft. Students will be forever changing and we must learn to adjust our teaching accordingly. The days of making dittos and giving purely multiple-choice tests are over. Students need to be challenged, provided with differentiated instruction, and given the opportunity be taught with best practices. Technology helps make all of these goals attainable. Whether it is through the use of social networks, innovative online classrooms, or unique presentation methods, technology can help all students learn better. We must recognize, however, that technology is not the “end all, be all.” Teachers must use research-based methods that challenge students to critically

think about, and construct meaning of, the content. Once this teaching has been implemented we cannot rest upon our laurels. We must continue to reflect upon our successes and failures. It is through this process that we can best help students succeed. The MAET program has taught me that teaching is a process and that technology is not the only answer. Good planning, teaching, and reflection, combined with the thoughtful use of technology, will forge classroom experiences that will change the lives of students around the world.