Learning to Grow and Growing to Learn

I think it is fair to say that finding the Master of Arts in Educational Technology (MAET) program at Michigan State University was a combination of curiosity, the “unknown”, and luck. The path I took to where I am now was not your “typical teacher” one. I always had a passion for working with others, and for a long time I thought it meant that I needed to be a teacher. However, when the time came for me to find a teaching job, a voice in my head asked me if I wanted to go right into the classroom. I was sure that I wanted to be in education, but I was curious about what other opportunities were out there within the field. I decided to take the leap and experience a role in education that was not directly in the classroom. I spent a year working at a data analytics company that worked alongside administration to disaggregate their data. I was able to train and work with educator roles that I had never known existed. It was eye-opening to experience how decisions are made at a level that trickles down to the classroom. I soon realized that my heart was in a place where I wanted to see the direct impact, and get into the classroom.

Each year of teaching has brought on a new beginning. As I entered my second year I strived to take more opportunities to learn, and that is where I unexpectedly found the MAET program. What striked my interest was that first was that I had never heard of a program like this for educators. Second, I was curious about how my previous job in technology and how that would relate. And to be completely honest, what really caught my eye was that there was a study abroad opportunity in Ireland, so I was hooked! There was a lot of unknown going into this program, but I was excited to learn about what the future held in technology. Once I was accepted into this program, I was immediately thrown into practicing what I was learning in real life! I was asked to be a part of the Code.org curriculum training for our district, which allowed me to explore new technology platforms and the value of computing skills at the K-5 level. As luck would have it too, I also met Dr. Aman Yadav at this training, who is the director of my master’s program (really going full circle!). Only dipping my toes into the MAET program and my district opportunities was the whole world thrown the ultimate curveball. As COVID hit our world and a pandemic kept us home, teachers were asked to flip their own personal and professional world upside down as we had to learn how to teach remotely and through technology. I would definitely NOT call a pandemic “luck” by any means, but having started this program gave me the support I needed to harness my knowledge of technology and learning to get us through the school year.

As I embarked on my Master of Arts in Educational Technology courses, I was overjoyed to find courses that not only focused on the technology integration aspects,

but more importantly how that directly impacts the students. How can we build equitable opportunities for all our students? How can we utilize technology as a powerful tool, and not just as a replacement for pen and paper? How can we design computing experiences that engage what our students already bring to the table from the community they live in? The courses I have taken truly prepared me, and most importantly challenged me, to think deeply about the impact we make each day as educators. As I complete my master's degree and move forward in my career, I am truly excited to carry my new knowledge and experiences with me.

Earlier I mentioned that this program started with curiosity and a lot of the "unknown". In my district I have utilized technology in my classroom, and we are fortunate to have one-to-one resources for our students. I felt competent in the use of our regular applications, and comfortable using them with my students. However, I wasn't branching out to new ideas or resources...and I knew that. With so many subject areas and standards, how could I? The district didn't give us professional development or training on how to use all the capabilities of our Chromebooks. So I suppose I followed the status quo and only used our district curriculum online tools and some subject area games. It wasn't until my very first course in the MAET program that my new mindset was set in motion. We learn that technology should never be a replacement for the content or pedagogy used in the classroom, but as a tool alongside it. When I started this program taking CEP 810, Teaching or Understanding with Technology, I finally understood what true technology integration meant.

Acting as an introduction to the program, we dove right into our own views and ideas of technology integration. What was powerful about this course was that it opened up learning beyond what I had learned in previous years. It felt like a puzzle, and I finally found the missing piece! Once we were introduced to the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework, the "unknowns" I had started to fade away. Understanding teaching through the lens of TPACK was so intriguing because as educators, it was a way to make sense of how technology knowledge is an entity that can stand on its own, but learning happens when it's combined with content and meaningful pedagogy. This was a great jump start to the course for the fact that it pushed us to look at ourselves as technology users as well. We were introduced to new applications and old ones. One of the features that was most powerful was the use of social media tools to engage in our professional networks and demonstrate our abilities to connect to technology in a variety of ways. I reactivated social media such as Twitter and my personal blog to engage with other professionals, and to experience technology in our own hands as a means to transfer that knowledge to our students.

As I progressed in my master's program, I also branched out to other courses that fostered my joy for literacy instruction. As educators especially at the K-5 level, reading and writing instruction is an essential foundation for students. I was eager to take TE846, Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners, to deepen my knowledge of learners in diverse communities.
In this course I started to expand my understanding of literacy development, focusing on early literacy learners in bilingual and multilingual settings. During this course I spent a lot of time reflecting on my own experiences working with bilingual students in my classroom. I had just finished a school year working with two students who only spoke their native language, and did not know English. It was remarkable to see the progression of learning and comprehension of language learning as they learned literacy throughout the year. More importantly it was important to continue to celebrate their language, and highlight that knowledge within my classroom. I reflected on my own pedagogical practices as I gained an understanding of how to design literacy learning that is accessible for all students.

Notably, the piece that truly shaped my thinking and practices was the text that I chose to study over the entire course. "Cultivating Genius" by Dr. Gholdy Muhammad is a book that completely challenged not only my professional ideologies of teaching, but also my personal experiences as a student and learner. I engaged in conversations with my professor on equity frameworks in my classroom, and what I strive to do to build a more inclusive learning environment. Dr. Muhammad's work on fully integrating culturally and historically responsive literacy practices reflected from Black literary societies is remarkable and inspiring. As an educator, it is my responsibility to create a literacy culture that brings out the knowledge and skills that our students bring with them from the outside world. Muhammad (2020) states, History from Black communities tells us that educators don't need to empower youth or give them brilliance or genius. Instead the power and genius is already within them. Genius is a brilliance, intellect, ability, cleverness, and artistry that have been flowing through their minds and spirits across the generations" (pg. 13). This framework applies to all aspects of the MAET program that focuses on equity among learning and teaching practices as a whole.

The most surprising impact that I had from this program was forming a new desire to explore computing practices and computer science tools in the classroom. When first entering the program, my idea of technology integration mostly subsided in tools and platforms that were "common" in the classroom. It was not until CEP 833, Creativity in K12 Computing Education, that I saw computer science as an essential practice to bring into my classroom. This particular course challenged me the most in stepping into the "learner" role. Each week we learned a new computing application, and it was at times beyond difficult. I soon came to realize that this was the exact feeling that my students

experience at times that they are learning something new as well. Creativity can be difficult, and at times impossible when we have not had a chance to engage in the play and exploration of new experiences for most of our schooling. I was amazed at the growth and mindset change I experienced by practicing computing skills and participating in authentic experiences. I found joy in the learning I was doing, and more importantly got a firsthand look at the benefits of integrating computer science learning into everyday learning.

This course also pushed my thinking in regards to equity practices among the computer science field. Along with giving students authentic skill sets through technology, I learned it's equally important to recognize the culturally relevant content that is presented and explored to allow accessibility for all students. According to K-12 Computer Science (2019), "Equity is not just about whether classes are available, but also about how those classes are taught, how students are recruited, and how the classroom culture supports diverse learners and promotes retention." Understanding the communities I service is a gateway to designing culturally relevant instruction. In the world of computer science, there is already astounding statistics of the race, sex, etc. of most members in the field. My students need to see themselves as capable of pursuing CS careers by incorporating their prior knowledge and passions into the technology that is being used.

The beauty of the Master of Arts in Educational Technology (MAET) program is we get the chance to experience being the learners and teachers at the same time. We are then able to directly transfer this to our classroom. Learning about our students to better connect and engage with them. Creating learning spaces where students can celebrate their diversity, and push themselves to be their best self. This program has given me the tools to create a new type of learning space, and maybe new roles in education, that will continue to push me to grow personally and professionally. I have found new joys and reignited old ones. It's an incredible experience to learn among professionals, and evolve our thinking and beliefs. I can say with pride that I have bettered myself as an educator as I end this program, and will continue to pursue and foster my passion in education.

References

Equity in Computer Science Education. (2019). k12cs.org. Retrieved from https://k12cs.org/equity-in-computer-science-education/

Muhammad, G. (2020). Cultivating Genius. Scholastic Inc.