

Unfinished Business: A Road to Leadership

A Synthesis Essay by Lindsay C. Earnest

In 2004, I became a Student Ambassador representing the United States due to my dedication and love for learning. In the next two years, I traveled to eight different countries, working in schools, orphanages, and hospitals, while also getting to see and experience historical sites and meet important figures. My passion for learning only continued to grow through these wonderful opportunities. I grew to appreciate and celebrate other cultures, languages, and ways of life, knowing that I could make a difference by sharing my own experiences with others and encouraging them to learn about the diverse world that we live in. It was due to my involvement in this program that I developed a love for teaching in order to help others learn about and understand cultures different than their own.

My undergraduate experience at Michigan State University only continued to encourage and promote my love for teaching and cultural appreciation. However, it wasn't until my senior year that I even considered continuing my education in something other than a foreign language. My classmates and I were approached about graduate degree programs offered through Michigan State University and the opportunities we had to complete them after our internship year. One particular program caught my attention immediately: the Master's of Art in Educational Technology (MAET) program. I loved technology and therefore was extremely excited about the chance to explore another aspect of education that I hadn't even considered before. In 2011, I graduated from Michigan State with a degree in Spanish and a minor in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and therefore pushed the thought of a master's program to the back of my mind because I was excited to begin teaching the following fall.

Although I didn't formally recognize it at the time, I officially began my journey in the MAET program in 2011 when I began my internship year teaching Spanish. The master's courses I completed during this time, **TE 802** and **TE 804**, specifically helped me learn who I was as an educator and how to grow and reflect on my experiences. I strengthened my planning techniques and teaching strategies and also learned how to reach even the toughest of students. I continued to learn throughout the process and truly fell in love with all aspects of teaching. I knew that after my internship year I would not be done learning and I couldn't wait until my next opportunity.

The following year I taught high school Spanish in South Carolina but I did not continue taking classes towards my master's degree. Throughout the year, I knew that something was missing. I wasn't done learning yet and knew that I was doing both my students and myself a disservice. As much as I loved teaching Spanish, I felt that I needed to be a more well rounded teacher and immediately thought back to the Master's of Art in Educational Technology (MAET) program offered through Michigan State University. I already included lessons and projects that required the use of technology and my students were constantly using their own technologies on a daily basis. This was my opportunity to make sure that I was being both an effective and inspiring teacher to my students while also teaching my students, and community, how to use technology safely and efficiently.

In Spring 2014, I officially began taking classes in the MAET program while I was working as an Educational Consultant for a technology company. I was excited yet didn't know what to expect because I had never taken a course fully online and I was also taking a step back from focusing my teaching on foreign language. I began by taking **CEP 810: Teaching for Understanding with Technology**, which is the first course that is required for the Educational Technology certification. This course set the tone of what it means to take a course completely online: how to communicate effectively to both peers and the instructor, how to manage one's time wisely in order to make sure that the coursework was not left until the last minute, how to balance work and school work, and how to maintain one's work and share it online in multiple facets. This course also challenged me to explore technology in different manners and to acknowledge that technology may not always be beneficial in every learning scenario. Therefore, it posed a lot of questions and challenged many preconceived notions that I may have had about education and technology.

By learning how to manage my time and prioritize coursework effectively, I was able to apply these same strategies to the rest of the courses in my program. The next two courses that I completed, **CEP 811: Adapting Innovative Technology to Education** and **CEP 812: Applying Educational Technology to Practice**, were set up in a similar manner and also served as an introduction to the MAET program. They continued to set the stage for future courses and introduced the idea of repurposing technology as well as TPACK, Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge, which is really the center of everything related to educational technology. I was also challenged with adapting lessons to meet the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) model to make sure that the needs of each and every student were being met. These three courses fulfilled the requirements for the Educational Technology certificate program but I decided that these courses were not enough and did not allow me to accomplish my goals of why I came to the program. They were very introductory and only scratched the surface on a lot of topics that I was very interested in learning about and I was excited to continue in my journey as a life-long learner.

One course that I was very intimidated by, but ended up being one of the best learning experiences for me personally, was **CEP 822: Approaches to Educational Research**. The name alone intimidated me from the start because I had never taken a course in research, nor was it something I was particularly excited about. One of the first things we learned in this course was that educational research is an ever-growing and ever-changing field--if this was the case, then weren't we being set up for failure from the start? Although I was skeptical, I was continuously pushed, and encouraged, by my instructors to keep reaching for more. Through my DreamIT summative assessment, I created a research proposal, analyzed and critiqued research about my subject matter, wrote an annotated bibliography and literature review about this topic, and consequently came to my own determinations. By the end of this project, which I thought would be extremely difficult, I was actually excited about my writing and what I had accomplished and I actually didn't want to stop with my research. This was an extremely difficult course that challenged me every step of the way but it helped me improve my own writing and become interested in a topic, educational research, that I had purposefully strayed away from in the past. This course made me aware of the importance of educational research and how necessary it is in the field of education and specifically the field of foreign language with the implementation of technology.

Continuing in the program, I was now back to teaching which I was thrilled about because I could now start putting a lot of these ideas into practice in my classroom! I started teaching middle school Spanish at a charter school in Orlando, FL as of January, 2015. At this point in the program, I was getting more and more excited at the completion of each course and not because I was closer to being done with the program, but because I was accomplishing my goal: I was learning and not just learning “filler” information, but information that was applicable to my current field and information that also inspired me to do more at my school and reach for new opportunities. The next two courses I took, **CEP 800: Psychology of Learning in School and Other Settings** and **CEP 815: Technology and Leadership**, did exactly that. Both of these courses challenged me to think about common misconceptions in learning and they challenged me to put myself in leadership roles that I never thought possible. After completing CEP 800, I now look at idea of student learning styles completely different and don’t immediately jump to the conclusion that I must adapt my teaching to accommodate every student’s learning style. It’s important that I recognize and can check for student understanding of the material rather than measure that the student is using the learning style properly. Ideas like these make me rethink my own teaching strategies to make sure that I can reach all students while providing multiple ways to check for understanding of the given material.

In CEP 815, I was challenged with putting myself in a leadership role, outside of being a teacher, and how I could effectively implement educational technology in my own school. For as long as I can remember, I never wanted to be in administration or do anything else other than teach. After this course, I now look at leadership opportunities differently. It’s not something that I dread being a part of, but rather it’s something that I aim for and hope to accomplish sooner rather than later. I realize now the difference that I can make in my school, in addition to my classroom, and how taking on these responsibilities are both exciting and extremely important for the success of the teachers, students, and administration. I am able to recognize the impact of relationships as a leader and how important it is to both lead and manage well. I not only learned about successful professional development strategies, but also project management, application, and evaluation of technology related projects in education and what qualities I would need to be a successful and knowledgeable leader.

The last two courses required to fulfill the MAET degree really brought my entire experience in the program full circle. The main focus of **CEP 820: Teaching Students Online** was to examine the many opportunities, as well as limitations, that teaching a course online can provide for students. Given that my own program is entirely online, it seemed only fitting that I examined and experienced creating an online course management system to see how the possibilities and restrictions would apply in my own teaching practices. I was able to create a hypothetical hybrid course that would best address my student population and the learning goals that I maintain for my students. Throughout this process, I had to address the implementation of universal design for learning and importance of collaboration and social presence in an online community. Furthermore, it was my responsibility to make sure that all of my course participants understood digital citizenship and safety on the web. Again, all of which have been addressed throughout the MAET program but in previous instances we have been the students. Now, we are the teachers having to apply and teach the same principals that we have been learning all along.

My final course, **CEP 807: Capstone in Educational Technology** is what really tied all of the courses together. This capstone course has been an opportunity for me to really use all of the information about educational technology that I have learned in the past year and a half and allow it all to come to fruition. This portfolio is a place where I can compile and display all the work that I have completed throughout my experiences during the Master's of Art in Educational Technology (MAET) degree program. I have been able to examine my initial goals coming into this program and how they have evolved over the past year and a half. I have also looked ahead to my future as a learner and how I hope to apply what I have learned in this program to my future career as both teacher and educational technology specialist. This comprehensive electronic portfolio is a permanent way to display my learning, both past and present, my teaching philosophy, and coursework from the MAET program. Throughout this course, I also collaborated with other students to ensure that all students created the most effective professional teaching portfolio possible in order to showcase our individual talents and strengths as both teachers and learners.

With the help of my instructors and the encouragement and feedback that I have gotten from my peers in each one of my courses, I have been pushed and challenged to accomplish things I never thought possible. I am able to realize that I have been holding myself back in restricting my role as only an educator when in reality, through my accomplishments in this program, I know that I can and that I will achieve greater things. I came into this program wanting to better myself as a teacher in order to make sure that I can help my students to the best of my ability. In addition to bettering myself as a teacher, I am developing my role as a leader that will not only benefit my own students, but also the teachers, students, and administrators at my school.

Completing the Master's of Art in Educational Technology degree at Michigan State University has opened doors and brought forth many opportunities, both professional and personal. I am extremely grateful for what I have learned in this program and know that my own learning is not going to stop after this program is done. My initial goal when beginning this process was to continue learning with the help of the MAET degree program. However, with the help of the MAET program, my goal leaving this program is to continue my own learning and exploration in educational technology now that I have all of the necessary tools and opportunities that I need to continue learning on my own, a journey I know will never end.