

Dreams Becoming Reality

By Abbie Gentile

Ever since I was in second grade, I envisioned myself attending Michigan State University and becoming an elementary school teacher. I had teacher and student desks set up in our living room, which I used to play school with every chance that I got. Growing up, I loved to babysit and even tutored and worked in an elementary school while in high school. I loved children and I loved teaching others. Despite my determination, my mom tried to convince me to pursue a nursing degree instead because the job market for nurses was better than it was for teachers. However, with my habit of cringing at the thought of veins, I did not give nursing another thought. I knew that I was meant to be a teacher and I only hoped that I would become an effective one.

My journey at Michigan State University was challenging, yet stable. Unlike my friends, my majors of child development and elementary education never altered. I was committed and excited as to what the future would hold for me. After completing my teaching internship in 2010, I was fortunate to obtain my first teaching job two weeks before the new school year began. Full of nerves, I was eager to begin the next chapter in my life and strive to be the effective teacher that I always hoped to be.

After a lot of personal and professional growth throughout my first year of teaching, I decided to go back to Michigan State University to pursue a Master's degree in educational technology. Since technology is so prevalent in our 21st century society and will remain powerful in our future, I figured that this program would be the most beneficial in making my teaching more effective while preparing me for what is yet to come. I also chose this program because I hoped that it could help me reach more of my students by increasing engagement and motivation.

Already in the first semester of the program, I was overwhelmed with the number of resources that I had learned about that had the potential to improve my teaching and my students' learning. Some of these resources I was familiar with already, but I had no idea how Facebook and Twitter could be utilized in the classroom. During this semester, I took both CEP 810 and CEP 811 simultaneously. CEP 811, *Adapting Innovative Technologies in Education*, was especially powerful and set a firm

foundation for my knowledge of educational technology and how it can be used in the classroom. It was in this course that I realized that I can't just add any technology to my teaching to make it meaningful, but instead I need to consider the content and pedagogy to determine if a particular technology fits, which is more difficult than it may seem. This is known as TPACK (Technology, Pedagogy, and Content Knowledge). In application of this concept, I applied Universal Design for Learning into a simple grammar lesson to incorporate technology and pedagogies that would further differentiate my instruction to better meet my students' wide array of needs. Now, two years later, applying UDL like added audio or visuals to my lessons seems like second nature.

I also created a stand-alone project to help my 3rd graders learn about fractions. This stand-alone project was the first creation of many that encouraged interaction with technology. I was surprised that I could use Power Point, a program that I was already familiar with (or so I thought), to create such an interactive resource. By using stand-alone resources, my students can be in control of their learning while navigating an interactive Power Point. These Power Points include assessments with immediate feedback and different approaches embedded within the resource depending on the student's responses. As the end of CEP 811 drew closer, I was eager to continue the program and get my feet wet with other technologies that I could use to make creations for my students that would have a positive impact on their learning and my classroom atmosphere.

Not to be disappointed, the next course that I took challenged my pedagogy and technology integration even more. CEP 812, *Applying Educational Technology to Practice*, pushed me to look at a problem in my classroom and try to fix it with the use of appropriate technology. During this time I was teaching 2nd grade and many of my students had the decoding part of reading down, but struggled with comprehension. Many just could not seem to recall what they had read and if they could, it was in very little detail. Therefore, my "wicked problem project" involved using video and digital storyboards to develop oral reading comprehension. After reading a story as a class, small groups of students would retell and act out the story while I videotaped them. This was very engaging and my students became very involved in making props and wearing certain clothing on recording day to portray the story that they read. It was amazing how much I could assess by observing my students throughout this process and viewing their final videos instead of just grading a test on each story to assess understanding. I continue to use videos as an engaging way for students to show their understandings of a particular story or concept. This school year, my 4th grade students acted out skits

that I videotaped to show their understanding of different core democratic values. By watching these videos, students could relate to and understand the vocabulary of the core democratic values much more easily than just reading definitions on a piece of paper.

In addition to these videos, I also learned about podcasts in CEP 812 and how easy they are to create with the use of Audacity. I later used podcasts not only for my own reflection, but also to record student understandings, which makes it easier to go back and assess student learning when their thoughts are orally recorded. This course genuinely opened my eyes to using technology as a form of assessment in a way that is engaging to both my students and myself. After all, it is much more exciting to grade student videos than it is worksheets! Plus, videos can capture so much more than a hand written piece of paper can!

It was not until CEP 820, *Teaching K-12 Students Online*, when I truly stepped outside of the box and used technology in a way that I never thought was possible. At the beginning of this course, I was overwhelmed and thought that it was a terrible fit. I thought that I would struggle with the expectations since I taught 2nd grade. To me, it seemed that this course was geared towards those who taught at the high school level and I never imagined my seven year old students being able to navigate an online course without me right there scaffolding their learning. To my surprise, it was a success and it was possible to create a course that my students were able to navigate! Once I learned about the course expectations, I dug deep into the creation of my course using Haiku Learning Management System, striving to do well. Referring back to what I had learned so far in the MAET program in terms of TPACK and UDL made my course creation more meaningful and manageable. I chose to focus my course on basic multiplication up to 5x5 because I knew that I would be teaching this at the end of the school year around the time when my course needed to be complete. I included notes, videos, songs, drawing tools, images, and links to online games for my students to practice multiplication. Discussion boards were used to encourage student interaction with me as well as their peers. The last portion of the course included an assessment that tested what the students had learned as well as a poll to promote student self-reflection. The one technology that truly made this course all come together was Jing and the use of screenshots throughout my online course. These screenshots enabled my students to listen to my voice as I guided them through the tasks on each page. Students were able to replay these screencasts as many times as necessary in order for them to be successful.

After a lot of hard work, I was very pleased with my creation and the finished product of my course. Ammon Wilcken, my assigned TA, gave me a lot of confidence throughout this journey because he said that his seven-year-old daughter was able to navigate and enjoyed my course. I believe that it was in CEP 820 when I developed the most as a technology leader. Creating this course that I once saw as impractical was very rewarding and I have since made it public and passed it along to my colleagues. It was in this course when my doubts of my abilities disappeared and I gained more confidence in my knowledge of effectively utilizing technology into my teaching. With the additional time that I will have this upcoming summer, I look forward to creating another online course to support my 4th graders and the social studies curriculum.

Then at last, CEP 807, *Proseminar in Educational Technology*, came along! I cannot believe how fast the time has passed and how much I have grown as a technology leader and educator. Compiling my Capstone Portfolio has made me realize the wealth of knowledge and resources that I have gathered over the past two years. I was able to reflect on what technologies I have used, how I had used them, and how I can build upon my past work to use in the future. The goal reflection helped me realize what I have accomplished, while the looking forward essay helped guide where I want to go after completing the MAET program and what resources I have acquired through this program to help me get there. Even though the program is ending, my learning will not. I have added many resources, like MACUL, MERLOT, and *21 Things for 21st Century Educators*, to my Personal Learning Network that will guide the journey that lies ahead of me. I also have met many people in this program through group work and discussion boards that I plan to keep in contact with as a resource. The great amount of self-reflection that I have done throughout CEP 807 while completing my online portfolio gives me encouragement to continue to keep up with the ever-changing technologies in order to provide the best education to my students as possible.

I am so grateful that I decided to pursue my Master's degree in Educational Technology. I truly do not think that I would be the teacher that I am today without being a part of this program. One thing that was so beneficial in this program was how applicable all of the courses and assignments were to my students and classroom. The hands-on nature of the course assignments and everything that I learned can be applied to my job and my goal of becoming a more effective teacher. Others often thought I should have been much more overwhelmed than I appeared when teaching full time, planning a wedding, and taking Master's courses.

However, I did not feel the extra stress of these courses because they fit so well into my daily routines and lesson plans. There was much less “busy work” and much more application based learning in this program than in classes that I had taken in the past. I did not have to create lessons based on what a professor wanted me to do, but instead I could be creative and adapt assignments to my own students and curriculum. This made learning much more motivating and meaningful. As a result, I have carried this teaching style into my own classroom by giving my students more choices on how to apply concepts to make learning meaningful to each individual. More than anything, this program helped me to better make connections for my students between content and applying their knowledge and ideas to every day life. Now, more than ever, I am thankful that I pursued my dream of becoming a teacher and hope to continue to develop as my own learning continues in the years to come.