

## **Reflecting on my Journey: A Synthesis Essay**

Reflecting on what has brought me to this point in my education, I realized that I have always wanted to be a teacher. Teaching comes natural to me, I want to help people understand and be able to do things they were unable to do before. By being a teacher, I am able to work with learners to impart the knowledge and skills I have honed from experience and my own education. I have always pictured myself teaching eager minded high school students but now I could see myself teaching other educators how to use technology with purpose in the classroom.

This realization began after attending two technology conferences. The presentations of teachers, principals and leaders in the field provided me with ideas and strategies to enhance my classroom. I wanted to be a technology leader and to share what I learned with others in education. At these conferences, besides vendors and presenters, I was able to explore different universities that offer programs in educational technology. I began researching schools and selected Michigan State University because it provided the best program in this field. I applied and was excited to be accepted into the program that was starting in less than two months.

My first day of class, I arrived on the campus of Michigan State University, unsure and nervous about what to expect. It was over 15 years since I had stepped foot in a classroom as the student. Did I still have the skills? Would I be successful? This fear was alleviated when I learned about the concept of growth mindset. (Dweck, 2016) The ability to learn and fix mistakes or shortcomings has helped me to become a better student and teacher. Transitioning to this mindset did take some effort because during all of my education experience as a student and teacher, you earn the grades you get based on what you turn in. But once I was able to embrace the concept, I realized the value it had as a learner. To be able to learn from mistakes you make is beneficial for learning as opposed to just having the mistakes pointed out after the fact. Very similar to the concept of creating a rough draft in writing, you receive feedback and adjust the writing to remove mistakes. Feedback the other students and instructors gave was another component to enhance growth in your work. The program's use of the growth mindset has impacted my learning so considerably that I have brought this same idea into my classroom. I allow students the chance to improve on the work they have completed to help them grow as a learner.

Just as my view of classwork and learning changed, so did my definition of technology. I always looked at technology in terms of computers or computer aided. But after reading *Too Cool for School? No Way! Learning & Leading with Technology* (Koehler & Mishra, 2009) I realized that everything around us is technology not just things digital. Selecting

the best technology for the lesson is important to having an effective lesson. Pencils, papers, calculators - all these are technology and I had never thought about it this way.

As I continued with the summer classes, I learned a valuable concept that technology should be used with purpose and not just replace the current practices with something on the computer. I have been using the TPACK framework, "Technology, Pedagogy and Content Knowledge" (Koehler & Mishra, 2009) to guide how technology is being incorporated in my classroom. Instead of finding and using the newest apps, I assess the merit of each tool I am using and only select those that will enhance the learning experience. This has allowed me to create lessons that are strengthened by technology instead of just using technology to use it.

Now that I am reaching the end of my Master of Arts in Educational Technology, I am reflecting on what I have learned during the program. I have taken many courses that have allowed an exploration into how people learn, theories on types of learning, creativity, design and leadership. The courses showed how a degree in educational technology is not just the use of computer programs in the classroom but the best practices surrounding when and where to use the technology. By understanding not only how to use technology in an educational setting but how learning impacts the perception of that technology.

All the courses in the curriculum taught me valuable concepts to use both with my students and in future leadership roles. However, there were three classes that I found most impactful - Learning Technology Through Design, Teaching and Learning Online and Technology and Leadership.

Learning Technology Through Design was one of the courses I found more beneficial and applicable to both my current position and any future positions. Stanford's design process can be applied to problems that might surface within both an educational and business setting. Often when faced with a multifaceted problem, people tend to either solve it without thinking about all aspects or get discouraged and shut down. I know this has been a natural reaction for me over the years. Having the skills taught in this class allows me to tackle a problem with a guided process that will yield a comprehensive solution.

Over the course of the semester, I went through each step of the design process. In the beginning, I was tasked with defining the problem, student engagement in the at-risk population. I then looked at the problem from different points of view. This gave a better

picture of the different factors that go into creating the problem. Because the model encourages looking at not only the root cause but also the views of other stakeholders, this allows for a more well-rounded solution. Because of the process, I was able to create a class that allows students to explore English through tangible real world applications which answered one of the main root causes I identified during the course. It also taught that focusing on an issue incessantly could impede the depth of understanding and hinder the ability to find a solution. Instead, you need to step away from an issue and do something else, a practice that I have adopted into my problem-solving strategy.

The design process is not a one and done thing either, by going through it multiple times using the outcomes of previous solutions you will end up with better solutions. With the skills I learned in this class, I know that when I am faced with a problem as a teacher or a technology leader, I will be able to use the methods from this class to find potential solutions. Overall, this course helped me slow down and examine a problem through a structured process which allows me to create a more comprehensive solution. Teaching and Learning Online might not have been as high on my list previously, but I was a few units into the course when the entire state went into remote learning due to the pandemic. This course and the lessons covered are ones that I have referred back to multiple times as I taught all of my students virtually at the end of last school year and have been teaching face to face and virtually this school year.

When this year began, I found myself revisiting my lessons to identify the elements of online learning I needed to include in my virtual classes. I used the lessons from this class to create a structure that students could easily navigate and find the materials needed for the assignments they are being asked to complete. Before this course, I did not really think about how to communicate with students and create an online presence for virtual instruction and engage students in learning. The way the class is structured is different from a traditional class especially when it comes to creating meaningful engagement opportunities in the virtual setting.

Besides the basics of online teaching including structure, communication, navigation and lesson content, I realized that teaching online was not just teaching my classroom material in a video meeting. There are different aspects of engaging the student in the lessons both asynchronously and synchronously and how a teacher addresses them can change how students perceive the course. Student engagement in the virtual setting has to be thoughtfully planned to be successful. Considering not only how the material is presented but also how it fits into the best practices for online instruction.

Technology and Leadership gave me insight into who I am as a leader. Becoming a leader in the district for education technology is a future goal and this course helped identify areas of weakness I have in my leadership style and ability but also guided me to find resources and materials to help strengthen those areas.

This class helped me the most when it comes to my future goals. It gave me practical applications of what different types of leaders do and how they approach solutions. I had practice in writing letters, analyzing problems to present to stakeholders and the difference between instrumental and missional thinking. Being able to verbally express the concepts to others is an important skill to have as a leader.

I was able to design a professional development (PD) experience that used not only my experiences as being a participant in school PD but the leadership skills from this class. I also was able to create a vision based on the problem of practice I have been exploring for a majority of my program, student engagement with the at-risk population, with actionable ways to address the problem.

This course helped me define my leadership beliefs and create a plan to become a better leader. During this course, I was also part of the return to school virtual instruction planning committee and the lessons in this class gave me the tools to be a leader for my school in the district meetings.

Since this degree is about educational technology, you would think that I am a technology for everything person, but over the course of this past year and a half, I have learned that the use of technology for education should be mindful. I participated in a program at my local intermediate school district for blended and online learning a few years ago and created a project on how to create a paperless classroom. What does this have to do with this degree? I realize now, because of what I have learned in this program, that it was an error in my thinking, technology is a wonderful tool that should be used appropriately but it does not replace other strategies and tools that might be a better practice for the activity or learning experience. I have also listened to teachers within my district during professional development talk about that cool new app or extension, which was me before my coursework, and asked if it was following the best practices for what they were trying to accomplish.

This program has made me more conscientious about how and when I use technology and what type of technology I use. I examine the objectives for each lesson and then select the best tool for the job. It might be paper and pencil or it might be a website. I am also more aware of how I present new technology tools to my coworkers and look at the ways it will help or hinder the learning. Being a leader in technology is modeling how and when to use it.

Resources:

Dweck, C. S. (2016). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Ballantine.

Mishra, P., & Koehler, M. J. (2009, May). Too Cool for School? No Way! *Learning & Leading with Technology*, (36)7. 14-18. [PDF download].