Changing the way I think, the way I teach, the way I use technology

by: Mary Wever

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A few years ago, I was talking about Master's degree programs with a colleague with whom I also went to high school. Josh and I were selected by our district to be on a math committee because we were doing cutting-edge things in our classrooms by incorporating a lot of technology into our lessons. During our conversations, I was extremely surprised to find out that Josh had not yet chosen a Master's degree program. I thought this would be a terrific opportunity to "sell" the MAET (Masters of Arts in Educational Technology) program at MSU for two reasons. One is that MSU is in the same town as our district. And the other is that Josh likes to be creative with his teaching and try new things. I thought he would be the ideal candidate for the program. Well, I talked up the MAET program and everything it has done for me just to be slapped in the face with this comment. "Hmmm... that sounds really interesting for you, Mary. But you see, I'm already really good at using my SMARTBoard, so I really don't need those classes." I tried to come back and explain that we do more than just learn about Interactive Whiteboards, but Josh had already moved on. My heart sank. Do people really think that my Master's program is only about learning to use techie gadgets?

That's when I thought back to before I started the program in 2009. Like Josh, I thought the MAET program would be a place where I could learn about Interactive Whiteboards, document cameras, and snazzy new gadgets to use with my students to both engage and motivate them. After all, those were the most obvious tools that teachers were using in their classrooms at that time. It was not until I started taking the MAET courses and meeting others who were in them that I realized that I was in for learning about a lot more than just technology. As I reflect on the experiences I have had through the courses I have taken, several reflections emerge.

It's not about the technology. It's about the kids!
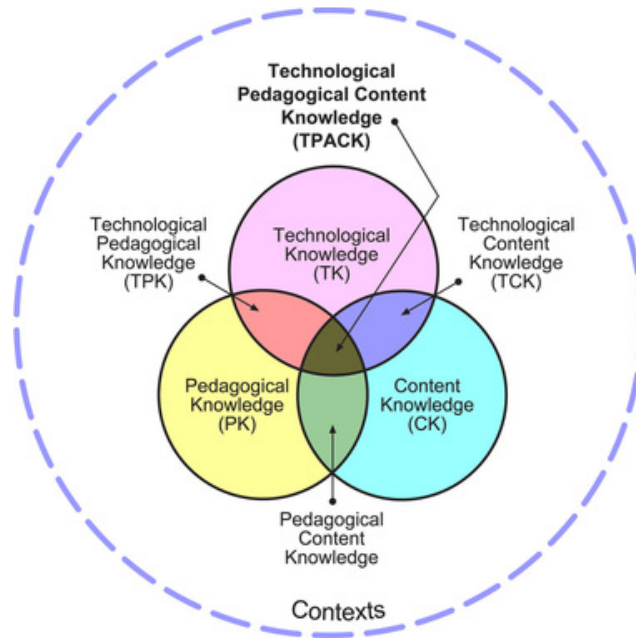
With the click of a mouse, we now have access to just about any information we could ever use to teach and learn. From videos with online tutorials to databases, lesson plans, and learning games, our students are exposed to a whole different world than anyone who came before them. But just because those resources are available does not mean that they need to be used for every lesson or learning opportunity. Sometimes it is best to use old fashioned paper and pencil to accomplish a task. I have learned that technology is just one tool of many that I should use as a teacher. It should never be the focus of a lesson.

Every instructor I have had the pleasure of working with has made a theme in his/her class about the importance of this concept. But it was during CEP 820 that the theme was especially present. Leigh Graves-Wolf and Andrea Zellner gave us the opportunity to choose a CMS (Classroom Management System) that worked for our teaching style. Though I had prided myself on trying out new tools every semester to push myself out of my own comfort zone, I ultimately chose to work with Wikispaces because I felt comfortable with the platform and it made sense to use that program to do the most important thing: effectively communicate ideas to my students. So, I could have chosen to push the envelope, but I felt confident with my decision because I was doing what was best for my students.

When I took the summer cohort classes in 2010, I learned about a concept called TPACK. It stands for **T**echnology, **P**edagogy, **a**nd **C**ontent **K**nowledge. This is the framework upon which I based my thinking during the remainder of my courses. With TPACK, it is important to remember to balance the technology equally with good pedagogy and relevant content knowledge. During that course I planned to "focus on 4 areas to develop into a well-rounded and flexible teacher who considers context along with TPACK." Those areas were technology, leadership, communication, and differentiated instruction. I will say that my plan has remained consistent through the years.

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Motivation is key!

R E W A R D S
Making smaller, better smelling horses.

While doing a lot of really hard work during the 2010 MAET summer cohort, I really got to thinking. I felt like I was working harder during these classes than I ever had before, but most of the assignments did not have actual grades. Instead we were given participation points for completing the work. And some of the assignments had us using technologies that I had not even heard of the week before. Finally, at the end of the course, Punya Mishra let us know that he purposely did not grade the more exploratory projects because he did not want us to take the safe road just to get a good grade. Instead, he wanted us to play around and explore different tools and resources that we may not have otherwise tried. This was extremely life-changing for me.

As I said in my final reflective paper, "I have reassessed how I will be giving out grades and rewards in my classroom. I was intrinsically motivated to complete all the assignments for this class for a variety of reasons. The first is that we were put into groups. I felt a real accountability to my group mates, as well as the rest of the class, to put my all into every assignment. It didn't matter if they were graded or not. Another reason I was motivated was because the assignments were, what we elementary teachers like to say, at my "just right" level. In other words, the content and technologies I learned about were challenging but achievable. They fell into my zone of proximal development."

I decided after the summer cohort that I would do many "safe" ungraded assignments where my students could feel free to play around and explore their creativity. Though my curriculum is pretty rigorous and does not lend itself to a lot of movement, I still want my students to feel the same intrinsic motivation that I felt in Punya's class. I want my students to feel free to ask questions and dig deeper by thinking critically. Additionally, I make sure that I praise the effort of their work rather than the finished product so my students try their hardest while having fun learning. If I can provide a safe environment for my students to learn to take chances, then I feel like their intrinsic motivation to take their learning to the next level will follow.

I don't know as much as I think I do!

Just when I think I have the hang of this MAET program, the technology world turns on its head and I have a lot more learning to do. When I first starting taking CEP 810 and 811 in 2009, I remember looking at the syllabus and kind of chuckling. One course was going to be focused on using Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. Since I had been using those programs for years, I thought my classes would be a cinch. That was definitely not the case.

From taking the certificate courses, I learned that I can dig deeper into a program to learn about features that I did not even realize were there. I learned more about the Microsoft Suite that summer than I had in all the years I had used it in the past. I pushed myself to create projects that I could use with my classroom for years to come. And I still use many of the projects, or a variation of them, five years later.

I also learned that I can repurpose programs and tools to use for educational purposes as long as they fit the lesson I am designing. As a matter of fact, I have one small example that has had a huge impact on my classroom climate. A few years ago when *Just Dance* came out, I got the Wii game for Christmas. After playing and having a blast with my friends, I remember thinking that it was too bad there was not a similar game for teachers to use with their students because it was a fun, physical activity that required coordination and promoted following directions. That is when I thought about checking out YouTube to see if anyone had video recorded the game. Bingo! There were a few songs on there. So, I projected the YouTube recordings onto my board for my students to dance along with the songs. They absolutely loved (and still love) this activity, and so do their parents. I have had numerous parents thank me for allowing their kids to express themselves by dancing in school. Other parents have liked how I have integrated more physical activity into the day while PE class times have been cut, and one grandma even remarked that she was grateful that her grandchild was actually learning how to dance because she could not think of anywhere else she would learn that skill. Even though the kids do not know the original reasons I looked into repurposing *Just Dance* in my classroom, they do know that they like to dance and have fun with their friends. The learning and physical activity is just a bonus!

I'm an interpersonal learner. What are you?

When I first started taking courses for my Master's, I was extremely nervous because I had only taken one class online for my Bachelor's Degree (and it was yeeeeears ago). I remember having a really hard time keeping up with the calendar, I hated not being able to ask clarifying questions, and I remember worrying that I could not find what I was looking for on Angel. If I had only known just one other person who was also taking the course, I would have felt a lot more confident. But no, I was all alone. And now I was planning to work on almost an entire degree online? Had I gone nuts?

Boy, have things changed since then! All of my MAET courses have been extremely organized, and my instructors have gone out of their way to be personable. I have even met a few of them in person, and it felt like we had known each other for years when we talked.

After taking the summer cohort classes in person on campus, again I was nervous about taking courses solely online. After all, I had just had a ton of fun learning about amazing resources and ideas in a site-based course working with other people. I even wrote about loving the face-to-face section because I missed working with people. However, I am so glad the next courses I took were CEP 812 with Chuck Commeret and CEP 812 with Leigh Graves-Wolf and Andrea Zellner. The way each of these instructors ran their course made me feel like I was part of a learning community. The formats of the course made sense, and each instructor promoted learning communities by assigning online groups. We were not only in groups, but we also used several modes of communication to work on group projects. This was amazing since we did not even live in the same time zones. From using Vyew to collaborate to RSS feeds to follow each other's blogs, I felt like I was a part of a learning community that cared about my work as much as I did. Even though the rest of my courses have been online, I feel like I have met people with common interests who have pushed me to achieve more than I could have alone. I definitely owe it to my online instructors for showing me some amazing models of how collaborative online learning can be.

I am a writer!

You may be wondering what writing has to do with an Educational Technology degree. Well, let me tell you. I had to take two elective courses for my Master's degree. The one that I thought I would never take is ATL 842 (otherwise known as the Summer Institute for the [Red](.) [Cedar](.) [Writing](.) [Project](.)). Though I have a degree in English, I never really enjoyed writing. I wrote for the simple tasks of completing papers, emails, or classroom newsletters. Never in my life had I ever written for enjoyment or shared my personal writing with others. So it was a huge stretch for me to take a course where the main focus and goal was to write.

To be honest, I really wanted to be a part of the Red Cedar Writing Project because I wanted to learn how to be a better writing teacher. I was not concerned at all with becoming a better writer myself. I thought I would take the course, share ideas, and learn from all the other extremely qualified teachers how to teach kids to write using [Lucy](.) [Calkins](.). I wanted to be a good writing teacher, but I did not really think of myself as a writer. It wasn't until I was half-way done with the Summer Institute that I finally looked at my writing and realized that I was, indeed, a writer myself. This was a huge shift in beliefs for me. I had never quite had confidence as a writer, and now I was defining myself as one. Wow! How powerful!

Another thing I learned from my courses and from attending the MACUL conference for the past few years is that I can always revise and edit later. I need to just think of an idea, do it, and share it quickly before I start overanalyzing everything. I tend to be a bit of a perfectionist. While this is generally not a bad quality, it can sometimes block what I do with my students because I feel like I need to have a polished finished product. What I have learned is that it is more about the process of producing than about the finished product.

As you can see, I came away from the MAET program with a lot more than just cool techie ideas to use with my students. While I did learn these skills too, it was definitely a byproduct of the program and not the focus. The past few years have challenged me to think about my role as an educator as I integrate technology and promote creativity. This change in my way of thinking is infinitely more valuable than just learning a set of skills.

Creating my portfolio has been awesomely rewarding, but it has also been a bit sad. I have been taking courses for 4 years, and now my time at MSU is coming to an end when it feels like it is really just beginning. I cannot imagine not taking classes anymore. They force me to push myself to learn new things, and I have met amazing people who collaborate on Twitter, through email, and in person. Even though I have mixed feelings

about finishing a chapter in my life, I know I can continue to update my online portfolio to reflect who I will become. That is motivating and rewarding at the same time. So, thank you to all my instructors, group members, classmates, and friends I have met along the way. You have helped inspire me to always be striving for new and better things. I love the experience I had with the MAET program at MSU, and I am proud to be a Spartan! Go green!